Up-Ending

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We have reprinted Nancy Bourne's story "Somewhere a Phone Is Ringing" in this issue to honor the extraordinary life and work of our friend and former fiction editor.

UP-ENDING: Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Anthology
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FICTION

Somewhere a Phone Is Ringing

Nancy Bourne

My grandmother's in the mirror. Thin white hair, pulled back in a knot. Sunken, floury-white cheeks, round blue eyes staring out of puffy pouches and a skeletal face. When did it happen that I turned into her? My mother's mother, Grandmother Alice, the whiny, selfish one. I hated her.

Of course, I know how it happened and when it began. My two sons and I were on our traditional New Year's Eve hike on Mount Diablo. Ever since my husband, Fred, died of a heart attack ten years ago, we have hiked together, just the three of us, every December 31 to put an end to the old year, celebrate the new. Dick, lean, fit, always on the move, jogging, mountain climbing, backpacking, cooking, talking, talking, and Daniel, tall, blond, quiet, thoughtful. They had flown here with their wives and my two grandkids for the holidays, Dick from Oregon, Daniel from New York.

No rain on New Year's Eve, although the three of us had done this hike in the rain many times. It's part of the tradition. But this year sunshine flooded the valleys and hills, sparkled drops of water on blue oak leaves, lit up red toyon berries. We chose the Mitchell Canyon Trail because of the waterfall, which plunges down the mountain, spewing white froth over coyote bush and the brilliant blooming manzanita, a specialty of winter.

Flat trail at the beginning, thick sludge, mud boots. Pine forests on either side. Chaparral everywhere. Two of us talking, talking. Daniel listening, smiling.

"So what's Grace's first choice?" I asked Dick. My brilliant granddaughter, Gracie, who was waiting to hear from colleges.

"I don't dare ask," Dick said. "She's done the whole thing herself. No help from me."

I laughed. Must have been hard. Dick has always been in everybody's business, asking questions, making suggestions.

Up went the binoculars. "Quick," he called out. "Flicker. On that live oak, Mom. Left side, bottom branch. Oops, he's off. See the red shaft?"

Too late. The flicker was gone.

While Dick searched the skies, calling out red tails and Cooper's hawks, Daniel strolled along at my pace, catching me up on his son Julian's reading difficulties. Sweet Julian who at nine years old always beats me at Monopoly but struggles to read the cards. Daniel, a history professor who reads for a living, was unusually patient with his boy.

"I tell Joanie reading has nothing to do with intelligence. He's really bright."

Daniel's wife, Joanie, a lawyer, worried. She didn't understand how a child of hers couldn't read.

"I still hate reading," Dick said. He didn't read until fourth grade and now he is an orthopedic surgeon. Always was good with his hands. "Quick, Mom. That raptor, way up there. I think it's a golden eagle."

I couldn't see it.

Suddenly it wasn't flat anymore. We were climbing up the Eagle Peak trail, a narrow, rocky path, on the dizzy edge of the deep canyon. I didn't dare look down. In spring, this path is rich with golden globe lilies, shooting star, the spray of white blossoms of virgin's bower. But now in winter it was green and fresh and soaked with spray. Alive in the sunshine.

I was straining, each step up to the top an effort. Dick had gone ahead to pick out a large rock for our picnic. Daniel was behind me, steady, silent.

My sons.

Once on the rock, we stared down at the waterfall below us, eating egg salad sandwiches, talking about the children, my grandchildren, Grace and Julian.

"Look how the sun's sparkling on the water."

"What did you say?" Dick asked me.

"The sun is sparkling on the water."

"Say it again."

"Why?"

"Your s sound is different."

"Sounds fine to me." But it didn't. I tried to say the word sun again and it came out fuzzy.

"I've been noticing your speech the whole hike," Dick said. "It's probably nothing, but we need to check it out."

"What do you mean, check it out?"

"Emergency room, I'm afraid. I'm sure it's nothing, Mom, but I don't want to take a chance."

"That's crazy," I said. "Daniel, have you noticed it?"

He nodded. "'Fraid so, Mom."

So on to the New Year. Test after test, cat scans, MRIs, EKGs, echograms. Which meant Cancer. Lung cancer metastasized to my brain. Luckily not the smoker's lung cancer; you don't get many months with that one. Luckily not glioblastoma; not much better than smoker's cancer. But nothing fixable, like a stroke or an abscess that can be drained. CANCER.

I am indignant. How could a healthy 80-year-old get cancer? I'd never been in a hospital before, except to have children. I'd never been sick. I've hiked up and down Diablo, and all over Marin County. Ridden the rapids down the Grand Canyon. Climbed the dunes of Mongolia. Snorkeled in the rough water of the Pacific Islands. All in my 70s.

CANCER?

But it's real. And it's radiation, chemotherapy, pills, more pills. My heart races as liquid fills the sac around it. The pounds melt away, the cheeks sink in, the white hair thins. Six months later, still alive. But Grandmother's in the mirror.

Somewhere a phone is ringing.

All those awful years when she lived with us. In my bedroom, my large bedroom with the shelf of shells I'd collected, my high-fidelity record player, my records, my posters, Elvis, Buddy Holly, Elizabeth Taylor. I had to sleep in the double decker above my eight-year-old brother, Brent, in his shoebox of a room.

"Why does she have to have *my room*?" I asked at least once a week. "It's not fair."

And Mother would explain again that our house had only three bedrooms and that Grandmother was sick and old and needed privacy and comfort. Brent's double decker was out of the question.

She lived with us six months of the year, because she was alone and weak and needed help taking care of herself. My grandfather had died years before. So she shuttled back and forth, twice a year, between my Aunt Mary in Kentucky and our house. As soon as she arrived, she would beg to go back to Aunt Mary, who reported that Grandmother begged for us when at *her* house.

But it wasn't just the sacrifice of my room, my things, my due as the oldest child. It was Grandmother. I didn't like her. No, I actively disliked her.

"It's cold in here," she'd complain.

"I don't feel like eating a thing."

"I'm weary today."

"Nobody ever writes me."

"I want to go home."

When I turned sixteen and got my driver's license, my job was to drive her to the doctor, to sit with her in the waiting room, to hear her compare our family doctor with "my man Frost" in Kentucky.

"This one doesn't know his business."

I'm being unfair, of course. Grandmother had been a beautiful woman; the photos were in the album. And she still had, even in her emaciated form, a touching fragility. She kept herself clean and sweet-smelling, wore soft cotton dresses in summer, tailored

wool dresses in winter, navy blue with white linen collars. The neighbors would remark, "Mrs. Rawlings always looks so fresh."

When I complained about her, as I so often did, Mother would say, "I wish you could have known her when she was younger. She's not always been like this."

"But she is now," I would say.

I think what I held against her the most was her indifference to me. And to Brent. But to me. Grandmothers are supposed to be interested in their grandchildren, supposed to love them, give them things, knit sweaters for them, show an interest. I could have been the hired help for all the attention she paid me.

"She *is* selfish," Mother would admit. "But she wasn't always like that." And then the dreaded words. "If you're not careful, Judy, you may turn out just like her. You do complain a lot and you're not very generous."

"Never!" I would reply.

And now I look in the mirror and there we are.

A phone is ringing. Where?

I'm in the hospital. For surgery this time. Fluid is flooding the sac around my heart, squeezing my heart. It's been drained twice now, but the fluid keeps coming back. Every time I breathe it hurts. So back to the hospital. The surgeon, who looks like a lumberjack, stout, with a belly and a sense of humor, is going to cut a "window" in my pericardial sac, where the fluid is. The idea is that it will drain permanently into the lung, which has plenty of room for extra fluid. But it's surgery and I'm on a blood thinner and I'm thin and sick. A glance in the bathroom mirror. Grandmother Alice in a hospital gown far too large for me with tubes and plastic cords tacked all over my body, my white hair too long, sticking out at angles. I'm a mess. Not even tidy and sweet-smelling like Grandmother.

In comes Dick. He's flown down from Portland. Smiling, laughing with the nurses, sneaking me a cup of coffee which is forbidden on the cardiology ward where they've stuck me.

"You can't concentrate on anything serious in a hospital,' he says as he pulls a P.D. James novel from his backpack. "And they won't let you sleep."

I laugh. I'm so happy to see him.

"I want to hear what the doctors say," he tells me. "And I may have some questions."

When the surgeon comes in, Dick does have questions. Good ones phrased to make sure I understand what's going on.

"How big is the window?"

"What keeps it from bleeding?"

OK. He's thinking about my blood thinner.

"Where exactly does the fluid drain to?"

The surgeon explains that he's using laparoscopic surgery.

"What size is the camera?"

The surgeon explains how the camera is inserted and how it works.

"How long does it take?"

I'm amazed at Dick's quiet, respectful manner. He usually talks fast and asks too many questions. Thank God he's here.

The phone is ringing. Where am I? An empty room. No. A hallway. A small hallway. Doors leading to bedrooms. The phone is ringing. It's one of those phones attached to the wall with the receiver hanging off it.

The fog clears. A face hovers over me. It's smiling.

"You're in the ICU. You're doing great, Mom."

It's Dick.

"Daniel's up in your room waiting for you," he tells me.

"Daniel? He's here?"

"Of course he's here."

"Are you in pain?" a voice asks.

"I don't feel a thing," I say.

The phone is ringing. I close my eyes. There is a woman I don't recognize. I see a cotton print dress clinched with a blue belt. Brown spectator pumps. Large round blue eyes, blurry, washed. White hands reach for the phone. Screams like something out of nature. Something wild.

Up the front steps, one at a time, holding onto Dick. The door opens and there they are. Daniel, Joanie, Julian, Gracie on summer break from UVA. Laughing, hugging, popping champagne corks. Blinis and caviar and sour cream, scampi. More champagne. I nibble a blini, too tired to eat, too happy to go to bed. They repeat the family stories, laughing at me, at each other. The time I rolled the car down an embankment, blinded by the sun, and climbed out the window, called a cab and AAA from a neighbor's house and took off for work. The time the middle school principal brought our model student, Daniel, home roaring drunk after he sampled some "juice" a kid gave him on the school playground. The time six-year-old Gracie made a bouquet from tulips and roses she cut from a grumpy neighbor's yard and the irate lady called the cops claiming vandalism.

"Remember 'Duncan will flunken'?" I say, laughing.

"What?" Julian asks.

"Some smart-ass teacher wrote it on Dick's report card when he didn't do his homework."

"But why Duncan?" Gracie asks.

I smile. "That's your dad. We named him Duncan, but he hated it. So in high school, he changed his name to Dick."

"I never heard that," Gracie says. "Duncan's a funny name. How'd you come up with that?"

"My uncle," I tell her. "My mother's favorite brother. I did it for her. He was killed in a plane crash a long time ago."

"He was flying the plane, right Mom? He was the pilot?" Dick asks.

"I think so. I know he was in the army and it was a small plane . . . " Why was he flying? I can't remember.

"What happened?" Gracie asks.

It's coming back. "He was flying to see his brother." Is that right? "His brother was dying."

"Oh my god. I didn't know that part." It's Dick.

"He never made it. He crashed into a mountain somewhere. They found the body . . ." I was so young.

"Mother always said . . ."

I can't stay awake. "Mother always said . . . Duncan was full of life . . . talking, laughing . . . ."

The phone's ringing.

Mother's crying. My daddy's crying. And the woman I don't know, the one in the print dress, is crying. I'm crying. Mother takes me to her bedroom. How old am I? Three? She tells me Uncle Nelson has died from cancer. I don't know Uncle Nelson. Mother's crying. She says Uncle Duncan was flying an Army plane to visit his brother. Because he was dying. The plane was a two-seater. They found it crashed on a mountainside.

I can't . . . Who is that woman talking on the phone? I ask Mother.

Don't you know?

One phone call.

Nelson. Duncan.

Two sons.

She's there in the mirror, Grandma Alice. Looking at me. It took you so long, she's saying. What have you been doing that it took you so long?

Accumulator

Frank Diamond

Rodney McDaniels pushes open the kitchen door enough to be able to crane his head out and scan the bar. He spots the guy Lisa Cassavetti's talking about, then pivots back into their conversation, door closing behind him.

"He is not going to bother you, Lisa," Rodney says, in his graveled voice. "He'll probably tip you, but good." As he speaks, Rodney replaces the scrap accumulator tray that he'd just rinsed clean back into the dishwasher. He slaps the machine, eliciting a hollow bong, then turns back to Lisa.

"It's ready for takeoff," Rodney says.

Lisa's working the bar, including the tables. No seating in the restaurant section yet. That's dinners only and besides, the new waitress is late again.

"He already freakin' bothers me," Lisa says. "Just the way he…"

"Leers?" Rodney offers.

"Bingo," says Lisa, pointing to him as if he'd just answered a gameshow question correctly.

"Hazards of the job," Rodney reminds her. "Shut him down. You do that. I've seen you."

"But he's not exactly saying anything wrong, Rodney. It's just … I don't know. This way about him."

Rodney reiterates: "He is not going to cross the line, Lisa."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? I just know, that's how I know."

Lisa is Rodney's age — 40. In fact she's about two months older, because Rodney turns 40 this very day, though that he keeps that to himself. Rodney looks like the life he's lived: 50 or maybe even older. Lisa doesn't age; she could pass for 30.

Her blue-black hair rebels against constraints — scrunchies, clips, bandannas — exploding in curls and waves that accent the vitality of her face, the raucous inclusiveness of her laugh. She

could play a flower child in a movie about the '60s, but Rodney knows that the hippie persona masks steely discipline.

Lisa eats healthy, exercises often. Her regimen nurtures a body that defies gravity. Her delicate necklines pedestal a smile that advertises life's adventure, and her steady green-eyed gaze makes men stammer. Lisa gets hit on often — as much as the 20-something recruits — but like any seasoned waitress/bartender, she straight-arms come-ons with one hand, while reeling in tips with the other.

Her innate dynamism masks a gift for patience — Zen-like stillness even — that makes it seem sometimes as if she's tranced out.

She's very much here at this moment, though. Lisa waits for Rodney's explanation, but he doesn't tell her why Mr. Creepy won't bother her. The guy is made — mob — and those characters don't like causing too much commotion. The dude shows just enough flash to let anybody who'd know about such things — somebody like Rodney, for instance — know what he's about. There are give-aways. The watch, ring, leather jacket, and arrogance he sports tell the story. Rodney can spot racketeers from since his boxing days.

"How do you know?" Lisa asks again, arms akimbo.

"I'll keep an eye out," Rodney promises with a shooing motion.

"I hate this job."

"Me?" Rodney says. "I am living the dream."

As she glides toward the other end of the kitchen, Rodney consciously avoids staring at her in that way, reminding himself that they're buddies. Nothing more. He's come to appreciate the friendship of women, something that he'd never thought possible in his younger, wasted years.

Platonic, my ass, he used to think.

Lisa's good people. Too good. He once caught her writing a check to that famous hospital that helps kids with cancer. Bending over a table, designing her signature. He'd been walking by, and Rodney can read upside down, one of many tricks he'd learned in his outlaw life. He stopped, hovered for a moment.

"What?" Lisa asked, not looking up.

"Lisa," Rodney explained, "someday you might be in a better position to do something like that. You've got your own kids."

Still not looking up, Lisa had said: "Thanks. I forgot."

"Right. None of my business," Rodney acknowledged.

But before he continued, Lisa explained: "If I wait until I can do it, I'll never do it. And someday both of my girls will be able to make much bigger contributions."

Her children are her life, the story of which Rodney assembled with bits of info grabbed here and there, pieces of a puzzle strewed across months of casual exchanges in the hurly-burly of a restaurant's kitchen.

Lisa had delayed college to marry and put her high school sweetheart through law school. Someone had to earn money. She delayed college again when two babies — surprise! surprise! — came. Then she caught the stupid husband cheating, and he then became the stupid ex-husband. Except he's not so stupid. He and his woman disappeared, hiding somewhere in Europe to avoid paying alimony and child support.

"They'll catch him someday," Lisa says.

Maybe, but for now Lisa's stuck. No time for college. She makes more in tips here than she could starting out in any office job. Plus it's close to home, close to her kids' school. She walks to work.

Rodney walks to work as well, but for him that entails going down two flights of stairs. Squire's Hotel Tavern and Restaurant, had once been a real hotel. Now it's a rooming house. Rodney — broke from a second divorce, a third bankruptcy, some hassles with cops, the IRS — boards here, living two flights of stairs up from where he works. Talk about a short commute.

And Squire's owners and managers always know (well, not always, but mostly) where to find him. That proximity puts him on call. He's said "no" to extended shifts sometimes, but always worries that turning down extra work too often would stop the hours from being offered altogether.

He needs the money.

Forty-stinking-years old, and washing dishes. But that's the here, Rodney reminds himself. That's the now, for now. Speaking of which…

Rodney goes to the bar, pretends to inspect the supplies. All good, but he already knew that. He glances over to where Lisa talks to the gangster.

Look how she hugs herself.

If she were any more closed, she could high-five herself behind her back. She smiles professionally, shoots a quick glance Rodney's way. She wants no parts of this guy, and even though he's behaving himself, she thanks Rodney for keeping tabs with a barely perceptible nod. The guy's tall, solidly built. Good posture, but there's now a distracted air about him. Lisa's just not interested; he begins to realize this. Most likely the guy's hatching schemes. Gangsters got to gangster.

Rodney heads back into the kitchen.

Lisa Cassavetti would have kicked ass in college. Rodney just knows it. She'd been a scholar/athlete in high school. But you can tell she's smart just by talking to her, even though she tries to hide it. Lisa's the one who told Rodney about Squire's past. The building's an historic site, certified as such by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

"You noticed the plaque on the wall outside," Lisa said on his first day.

Actually, no, Rodney hadn't.

"Do I need to take notes or something?" he joked.

"Customers do sometimes ask."

"Customers," he responds.

Rodney had stated that he wanted a job in which he had zilch-zero-nada interaction with patrons.

But plowing along to get his GED during those few years in prison he'd spent for beating up a would-be tough guy who "simply looked at him the wrong way" (that's how the judge put it during sentencing, but it had been more than that — the guy owed him drug money) had turned the young boxer into something of an

autodidact. Rodney had discovered to his surprise that he liked learning.

He also knows that if he were to keep on track in this job that he'd like to hold on to until he can come up with the plan for the rest of his life, then an alliance with Lisa Cassavetti needs to be cultivated. Plus, he admires the way she teaches. He admires a lot about her.

Squire's, located in a Philadelphia suburb, had been built in 1703, before any of the 54 signers of the Declaration of Independence had even been born. During one renovation in the 1920s they'd discovered a hiding place under the basement. Turns out that Squire's had been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

"Pretty cool," Rodney had said when Lisa had pulled on a rope, opening a floor hatch in the storage room to show him the mini-dungeon where the runaway slaves had taken shelter. Entire families had hidden out in a space half the size of Rodney's room.

Now Rodney squints into the steam coming out of the dishwasher as the conveyor belt slides another rack through the blue splash-shield flaps.

Forty years old.

"Not giving up," Rodney growls as he pulls the basket out along the draining counter. Yes, he talks to himself sometimes and doesn't much care what people make of it.

Vapor curls off the works before dissipating. When they've cooled enough, Rodney will stack the dishes onto the cart and settle the silverware into containers. When the trolley's full, he'll pull it out and park it near Boris the cook's table in the kitchen. Every once in a while he hits the switch that stops the machine and dumps the scraps collected in the accumulator into the slops can. It's really a two-man job, this, but Manny and Banger both called out, and Toke can't be found.

As he works, Rodney sometimes bends his wrists, making the muscles on his forearms expand and shrink the faded tattoos he'd gotten back in his boxing days. Rodney "The Dagger" McDaniels, had been his billing. Sharp powerful left jabs, his trademark.

He'd been climbing the ranks in the light heavyweight division, but then lost to the champ. He lost the next two, and decided enough already. That's when he accelerated his marathon of self-destruction that stopped not too long ago when he finally chose life over extinction. He'd found the 12 steps.

Rodney still exercises. A lot. It's an addiction that replaces all the other addictions he'd shaken off, and through the years he'd carried a lot of monkeys on his back: meth, blow, horse and, of course, alcohol, the keeper of the gateway. Always alcohol and he's always on watch because addiction never clocks out for good. Booze, totally legal and totally everywhere, is especially hazardous.

This job keeps the pounds off, too. He's always moving; lifting stuff here, carrying stuff there, walking miles per shift in an area the size of two jail cells. He sweats profusely at rush times.

Overhead exhaust fans pull some of the hot air out, and they probably help a bit. However, in all seasons, but especially summers, workers need to step away from the job to find true relief. There's a little walled-in area in the air conditioned restaurant where kitchen help can sit when they need it.

Also, there's always outside and the ones who smoke — like Rodney and Lisa — go there, hanging by the employee entrance. Even on the hottest summer days, it's cooler outside than at Rodney's work station. He wears bandannas to keep the sweat from blinding him: red, blue, green, black.

He brings gallons of bottled water that he swigs from throughout the day, holding them up to the back of his shoulder and turning his mouth so that he looks like a woodsman quaffing from cider jugs. He can lose 10 pounds a shift.

The grease fumes from the deep fryers lord over an unruly kingdom of odors. Spices and cooking meat and cut onions and pickles and… The chorus line of food and ingredients that allow a successful kitchen to turn out thousands of meals a month becomes the air workers breathe, the swamp that they wade through.

The noise level climbs and falls throughout the day like an army attacking a fort, being rebuffed, then trying to storm it again.

Rodney's adjusted to this, as well. There's not much goes on at Squire's that he doesn't see or hear.

Now Lisa bursts into the kitchen from the other side, slaps two orders in front of Boris. He holds one up to the light, as if reading hieroglyphics. Makes a show of it.

"Both well-done, Boris!" Lisa calls back impatiently as she walks toward Rodney's station.

Boris's Russian accent amplifies sarcasm: "Thank you, so much! Thank you! Thank you!"

Lisa wheels about, continues walking backwards: "My God, Boris, isn't it too early to be whining? Even for you?"

Boris recently stopped smoking again. One of his jobs is to chalk specials on the blackboard in the restaurant section. He often starts with a quote by some famous person like, for instance: "Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy." — Benjamin Franklin.

Usually, the adages have at least a tenuous connection to what a restaurant does, but Rodney notices that since Boris went cold turkey, some Biblical verses have slipped in. For instance, last night's: "For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

Doesn't exactly work up an appetite.

Plus, as Rodney, who sports a cross tattoo on his right shoulder, pointed out to Boris: "A lot of the eaters aren't Christian, my man. And even those who are want to leave it in the pews."

Boris jutted his chin out.

"Well, tomorrow I quote Mao. Better?"

Rodney walked away. Still, the quotes have gone back to being about food and bits of generic Hallmark wisdom so maybe Squire's owner had also spoken to Boris.

"Will somebody give bitch-boy Boris a cig, please?" Lisa says. "I forget to write 'burn it' on a hamburger order, and he goes full-out PMS."

Rodney asks: "Well?"

Lisa pauses, momentarily searches for the last thread of their discontinued conversation.

"Oh, Mr. Creeper," Lisa says. "You're right. He's calmed down. Still creepy, but controllable."

"See?"

"You should be a psychologist, Rodney."

"I know people, Lisa."

"Or a bartender."

"I don't want to know people, Lisa."

He's always being nudged in the direction of interaction with customers. Never. How many times does he have to say it?

"How did you know the creepiness would stop?" Lisa asks.

"Guys like that don't make noise."

"He asks me if I ever been to Spin."

"Casino?"

"Racetrack. He tells me he owns horses."

I'll bet.

"OK, then," Rodney says. "See. It's too early for assholes. That's why Truck and Dizzy tend bar at nights." Two young studs, big beefy bartenders who handle the occasional troublemakers and, if they can't, the three or four off-duty cops who usually congregate at Squire's will.

Lisa says: "Well, he did throw one border-liner at me."

"Go on," Rodney says.

"He asks me what I think I'm worth."

"Oh." Rodney starts for the door, but Lisa grabs his shirt.

"No, Rodney, it's OK. He's almost done. And it wasn't said like…"

"What did you answer?"

"I joke it off, tell him most regulars tip me a thousand, but newbies can get away with a half grand."

"OK."

"Then he asks…"

"Go on."

"Then he asks if I take risks."

"What'd you say?"

"I told him no. Not at this stage in my life."

"You told him nothing about your kids."

"Hell no."

Boris calls over: "Oh, your majesty!"

"Off you go," Rodney says.

Lisa glares at Boris. Then sighs.

"Off I go," she says.

Last year, when he turned 39, Rodney worked his shift with a hangover after getting drunk for the last time. All day he kept asking himself: "How the hell did I get here?"

This year, he doesn't ask. He's stopped blaming the world, his exes, old bosses, trainers, managers, teachers, family, including Monster Dad — everyone. He'd finally come to realize that he washes dishes for a living (for now) because of his decisions.

"That's a huge achievement, Rodney!" his therapist, who took him on pro bono, had told him. Her gray hair sat like a helmet and light glazed her glasses, masking her expression.

"I always take the blame. The fall," Rodney said, shifting a bit in his chair. "I told you our first time." He glanced at the couch, which he never used.

"That," the therapist interjected, making the "stop" gesture with her hand, "that had been a goal, not a reality. Not at that point. But now, this time, you're saying it because you crossed the finish line, Rodney McDaniels."

"If you say so, Doc. Is this the last session?"

She shrugged. "Your decision."

It was. Pro bono work must get old for a woman who makes $200 an hour from paying customers with insurance.

Well, he had changed. Changed his spots, not being the leopard his old man claimed he'd always be whenever he took the belt to Rodney as a kid.

"Leopards never change their spots, Rodney-girl," he'd mumble between whacks, alcohol-burdened breath fouling the air. "You ain't no son of mine."

His old man was wrong, though. Pain makes you change. That's a lesson Rodney delivered to Monster Dad the last time

he'd taken his belt off to beat his son yet again. Sixteen year old Rodney grabbed it, threw it off to the side, and then flashed a quick one-two to the nose and chin. Monster Dad lay on the living room floor. A flash of lightning.

"Don't even think about getting up," Rodney warned.

His father buried his face in the carpet. Beaten, at last.

"If I hear you touch Mom or any of the other kids, I'll be back. And you're right. I ain't no son of yours. I ain't no leopard, either."

Rodney walked out that day and never again returned to his childhood home, even for his mother's funeral. She loved him in her way, he knew, but not enough to figure out how to protect him. He forgave that, even understood it a little. But he'd parked a good mile or so from her burial on the day of.

Now, Rodney pulls another tray through the machine, the last one for a while. The lunch crowd had gone, taking the lunchtime rhythm with it. Quiet settles over the kitchen, except for the occasional clang of a pot being put away, or a spoon getting tossed into a sink.

"Taking five, Boris," Rodney calls.

The cook waves him off.

"Cigarette break! Join me?" Rodney says, heading outside, before Boris can throw a knife at him.

The late waitress, who wants it known that she's in college and too good for this place, arrives just in time for this lull and Rodney knows that Lisa would be bounding out in a moment.

He sits on the stoop at the employee entrance that leads to the bathrooms, bar, restaurant, and the stairway to the 144 square feet that he calls home. Rodney intends to quit smoking someday, too, but for now it helps fill the emptiness left when he kicked all of his other bad habits.

The trees along Maple Street sport the blurry green of early spring. Some people wander about their lawns and yards making their to-do lists. Pure Norman Rockwell. Leaves stretch toward the sun. Bulbs congregate in flowerbeds near front porches and, on some lawns, mulch has been laid.

For everything, there is a season…

Where did that come from? Rodney guards against becoming a holy roller, which happens to some ex-addicts. Nah, he thinks. Not him. He just dabbles and, as the man sang, whatever gets you through.

Rodney takes a drag, and then along comes Lisa.

"You were right!" she cries.

Her eyes glisten as if she'd been swimming. Her joy matches the promise in the April air.

"That surprises you?" Rodney says.

Lisa unfolds the bill, holds it up like a placard.

"Is it real?" she asks.

Rodney stands, reaches out, and Lisa hesitates before handing it to him.

"Real," he pronounces after a quick inspection.

He hands it back, and she squints as if she's deciphering code.

"Well, hello there Teddy Roosevelt."

"Grover Cleveland," Rodney corrects. "Grover Cleveland's on a thousand dollar bill."

"Do you think it's drug money?'

"I think it's your money."

"But…"

"Lisa, it's your tip. You earned it."

"He only had a cheesesteak and fries."

"You earn it every day."

She leans closer, whispers: "Listen, Rodney…"

"What thousand dollars? I don't know nothing about nobody getting no thousand dollars."

"Yes!" Lisa throws her arms around his neck and he hesitates before putting his arms around her and patting her back.

The door opens. Boris clears his throat.

"If you two lovebirds…"

"Chill," Lisa orders. "We're coming. Why don't you join us for a smoke, Boris!"

Boris slams the door.

A thousand dollars, Rodney thinks when Lisa goes back inside. What he couldn't do with a thousand dollars. Rodney rolls his neck, and snuffs out a flicker of jealousy.

Come on, dude. You're better than that. It's Lisa. Be happy for her.

There's something else though. Rodney had felt it when she hugged him. Not so much their friendship being reconfirmed as a door being opened. No, that's not it. More like a door being kicked open, and him stepping into an unfamiliar room.

Just like that — out of nowhere and everywhere — it hits him. Rodney McDaniels loves Lisa Cassavetti. No. Wait. He realizes that he's loved her for some time, now. Of course, he's always been attracted to her. What guy with a pulse wouldn't be? No, Rodney understands that he's actually, truly in love with her. Her. Her very essence. He loves the way Lisa moves through the bramble of the everyday with such grace.

The inner brake he had to develop in order to get clean holds at bay anything that could become an addiction. What's more addictive than love? That's why in the months he's been working here, he couldn't admit it to himself. Until now.

Shut it down.

Getting involved with someone you work with — even if it's at some rinky-dink-chump-change-earning-disposable-just-passing-through job — is never a good idea.

We're just friends. Keep telling yourself that.

Still, this moment outlines a future that could be. Their future, his and Lisa's. If she would have him. Lisa's good fortune makes Rodney re-evaluate his circumstances on his 40th birthday. Not to the point where he restarts the blame loop. It had indeed been his bad decisions that led him here, about two levels up from living on the street. And good decisions will give him — who knows? — a better life, a great life even. At least a meaningful life. Despite the punishment he'd put his body through, Rodney could conceivably live another 40, maybe even 50 years.

But what just happened to Lisa — her unexpected windfall — forces Rodney to once again test his hard-won self-evaluation.

He hadn't completely forgotten about luck. But he had decided that most of the time we make our own luck. Well, maybe not. Yes, maybe not. Luck indeed figures into his journey, starting with the bad luck of having been the offspring of Monster Dad. He'd been damaged goods, and damaged goods become damaging goods.

Luck.

Rodney continues to ruminate on the subject as he heads back into the kitchen and his work station.

Just do the job. Don't think.

Rodney dumps the remains of somebody's lunch into the slops can. That's when he sees it. Dark marks on a crumpled napkin. He leans over, peers more closely. Ink on white. Some compulsion makes him reach into the can — ew! — scoop up the napkin, wave it open. He sets it down on the counter, leans over. It is writing. A note.

Top line: "Sometimes you need to take risks, Lisa!" She hadn't given him that info; the waitresses all wear name tags.

Underneath, a list. The first item's a phone number (in parenthesis: "not my number"). The next one is the word "accumulator." Rodney glances at the scrap accumulator on the dishwasher, but the rest of the list confirms that's not the accumulator the mobster had in mind.

Then comes the names of racehorses:

Algernon
Sundae Knight
Diamond Dust
Quarterback Sneak
Standing Tall

At the bottom, another phone number (in parenthesis: "My number!!!!").

Rodney gazes at the note, looks around the kitchen blinking, as if something's burning, then reads it again.

Don't.

But he doesn't listen. The realization that he loves Lisa lets the

inner demons — though firmly tethered to the 12 steps — prowl restlessly in their cages. He calls over to Boris, points at the ceiling.

"One minute," Rodney says.

Boris turns his back.

In his room, Rodney takes off his pants, turns the legs inside-out, rips open the squares of cloth he'd sewed into the seat, right behind his pockets. Grabs the money. There are a few other hiding places he raids, until he collects $1,132.

Everything he's saved so far to start over; the first step in his long journey back to the path he hadn't taken.

Rodney clumps downstairs, but before going into the kitchen he makes the call at the payphone, the only payphone that still exists for miles in this era of cells, because down-on-their-luck borders need that phone. Rodney hears his voice waver, as he leaves the message.

A robotic response informs him: "Call at four-thirty for full results."

When Rodney returns to work, he just can't help himself. He glances up at the kitchen clock often even though he knows that's the closest a human being can come to actually making time move backward. When finally — finally! — it says 4:30. Rodney makes the call. Too early, the voice says. Check again… Rodney hangs up.

Stupid kitchen clock.

Rodney struts back into the kitchen (he's always strutted if he thinks he's lost some altercation) and calls over to Boris: "What time you got on your smartphone, comrade?"

Boris, dicing something, doesn't look up when he calls back: "Half past the cow's…"

Rodney pivots and heads back out to the payphone. Drops the change in slowly, hears the rattle in the coin box and tries the number again. This time the voice reads the results. Rodney bows his head as he listens, like he used to do all those years ago in a confessional in which he always asked forgiveness for hating Monster Dad. Forgiveness was never withheld by the priest, but that didn't stop Rodney from continuing to hate his old man.

When he hangs up, gently laying the phone back onto the cradle, Rodney's heartbeat breaks loose; his entire body pulses. His knees nearly buckle, a sensation he hasn't felt since his last fistfight.

He's tempted to run up to his room again, but that would spur questions from coworkers, complaints from Boris. Instead, Rodney feels his way back into the kitchen and the dishwasher, as if someone had turned off the lights. He leans against the draining counter, weak and gasping.

Lisa sees him, comes over.

"OK?"

"Could use some air," Rodney says, and when her eyes widen in alarm he knows that he must look like hell.

"Rodney?"

He slowly walks back outside, sits on the stoop, lights up.

In about a minute, Lisa comes out as well.

"Rodney?"

"Just thinking things through. Thinking. Thinking."

"Well, stop thinking. You look sick. Scooch over."

He does, and she sits beside him, hugging her knees.

"What things?"

"Let me…" Rodney gestures as if he's telling somebody to keep it down.

"Oooooooo-kay," Lisa says.

$254,000? $254,000. $254,000!!!!!!

He'd hit the accumulator — the horse racing version, not the metal part in the stupid dishwashing machine. All five horses listed on that napkin that Rodney betted his pitiful life savings on had won. Now what? Rodney massages his temples.

Lisa pats his back. "When you're ready to tell me, Rodney…"

She rises, twists her cigarette dead in the sand of the standing black ashtray.

When she goes back inside, Rodney's deep breathing takes in traces of Liza's perfume along with lingering smoke.

Rodney already knows what he's going to do with some of

that money. He's going to help Lisa, pay for her college and help Lisa's girls as well.

But wait. Wait.

Something's not right. Since when's a mobster that generous to a struggling waitress, a stranger? Especially to a woman who made it clear she wanted no parts? Was it the thrill of the chase? Was it another bet? Had the mobster's gambling addiction led to this? Had he taken Lisa's measure and knew — just knew — that even if she ever once in her life bet on horses — doubtful — and even if she knew anything about accumulators — even more doubtful — she'd never risk losing $1,000 of found money?

Or had good fellow gone rogue? About to turn state's evidence and figured that this would be a fun way to screw his former compatriots? And what about those compatriots? How long would it take them to find out who'd hit the accumulator?

These practical life-or-death calculations — for suddenly they'd become life-or-death matters — lay rooted in the material world.

There are spiritual considerations, though, and they troubled Rodney as well. Where had this money come from? Think about that. It surely wasn't clean. It was drugs, and sex trafficking, and racketeering, and porn, and probably even fixed boxing matches. Certainly fixed horse racing. The stench of misery clung to it.

It needs to be laundered, freed from its background.

Within the steam coming off the dishwasher Rodney sees the outline of a plan begin to form. He'll help Lisa. That, he has to do. He'll clean the money through her grace. For grace can't be bought. Nothing good can come from this windfall without Lisa's grace.

"I'll help her," Rodney promises the God that the 12 steps had reacquainted him with. "I'll help that cancer hospital for kids that she donates to."

Rodney will do this even though he accepts that he may never win Lisa's love. She won't pretend because he suddenly has money. Not Lisa. But he'll risk it. He'll tell her about the winnings someday.

Soon. This week. He rehearses.

I have feelings for you, Lisa.

"Have feelings for you?" Rodney thinks. No. It's going to be: "I love you, Lisa. I have always loved you."

He'll declare this before saying anything about the $254,000. If she can't reciprocate, he will put her through college anyway, because he said he would and he'd at least always have her friendship.

He doesn't yet vow that he — Rodney McDaniels — will never spend a dime of that money on himself. But that possibility also begins to take shape. Too much of his life had been pulled hell-ward by everything that jackpot represents. But now this accumulation of bad decisions points in this unexpected direction.

Rodney glances about; nobody's near.

He practices, saying softly: "I love you, Lisa."

He'll need to build up to it. He can't just blurt it out from nowhere. However, he presents it, it will be the ultimate gamble, because unrequited love can break you. Rodney's seen that. He looks up at the clock. Time for a pre-dinner rush smoke break.

When Rodney McDaniels steps outside, there's Lisa Cassavetti. She holds two saucers of chocolate thunder cake with a single candle stuck in each. The light from the flickerings gentle her features as she quickly sings a stanza of Happy Birthday that might be the worst version Rodney's ever heard.

He says: "How did you even…?"

"Are you going to make a wish or aren't you?"

Lisa with that smile, a smile Rodney's been seeing in dreams of late but hadn't yet figured out who it belonged to. They sit on the stoop, eating the cake.

"Well?" Lisa says, her mouth full.

"I wished that maybe we can take in a movie sometime, Lisa."

She turns her head, regards him. Rodney stares at his plate. There is no doubt what he is asking, and Rodney has to swallow hard to get a forkful of cake down. It's a moment long enough to squeeze that prayer in.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Lisa finally says: "I think I'd like that very much, Rodney McDaniels."

"Thank you so much, Lisa Cassavetti."

Rodney's smiling when they both rise to go back to work. How strange. Winning $254,000 turns out to be the second most life transforming thing to have happened to Rodney McDaniels on his fortieth birthday.

Recliner

D. B. Gardner

WEDNESDAY

The cat was snoring. It was a two-tiered affair. A perpetually repeating melancholy wheeze, like an accordion with leaky bellows on the intake, the throaty grumble of a chainsaw marking each downbeat on the exhale.

"Cat, tell me your dream stories so I may write them," I say.

He answers with a yawn, widens his emerald eyes, glances at the robin hopping about the terrace. From his windowsill perch inside the majestic townhouse, he turns to me as if to say, "That bird has a mustache," because the mottled white slash in the feathers over the bird's beak does, in fact, resemble one.

"Scraggly bird, the robin," I inform the cat. "Some look like they been in an alley fight."

The cat doesn't reply, doesn't follow me down the marble stairs, keeps studying the bird as a tiger might a crane. I snatch a can of boiled quail's eggs from the pantry, drain the water, take them out to the patio. The cat pretends not to care, sprawled along the window ledge. I make myself comfortable on the lounger and pop the eggs into my mouth one after the other, contemplating the distant rattle of trucks on East 72nd, the mid-morning traffic thinning with the deepening summer.

I deposit the empty can in the kitchen sink, knowing the cleaning crew will pick it up at 3 p.m. as noted in The Activities of the House—posted on the kitchen bulletin board. The routines listed on this timetable are set in stone, and only the baroness could have contrived such a strict schedule. Though I can't help but wonder what the exacting taskmistress might think if she caught me like this, talking to Mr. Beeks?

"Poor, dear Quincy, you're such a bother," she would say with a shrug, one hand on her hip, a carved ebony cigarette holder angled skyward as if sprouting from her neck.

There's a photo of her highness hanging near the private elevator. In it, the baroness—stunning in her twinkling tiara and Jovani ball gown—clings to her husband's arm as he clasps the vice-president's hand, *New Years' Eve 2007,* hand-scrawled on the wall tag below the picture. I slide my finger over the glass, pause at the baroness's refined, sublime face—a true aristocrat—and long to know her. But no one as classy as her could ever fall for a middle-aged fool like me, a watchman. Unless I were some kind of hero, hired to be her watchman. *Her* Bodyguard. Defender. Protector. That's rich. The loftiest title I can pin to my chest would be cat-hero, a label that hadn't been earned but came with the gig.

The list of odd jobs I've tried since leaving the rental car company is laughable. Even tried writing a blog, believing at the very least it would prove therapeutic. But my half-baked pseudo-intellectual rants soon grew stale, so I answered an online ad from a private security company. I was bondable and healthy. And I hadn't caught the virus, so they hired me on the spot. Eight bills a week for twice-a-day visits to this Park Avenue palace where I perform a three-floor sweep of the interior, the terraces, the rooftop, log a report with the security desk. They threw in another hundred for taking care of the family pet, Mr. Beeks: God's gift to catdom.

At the initial walk-through, Mr. Beeks had spurned his favorite lobster-caviar-quinoa-saffron pâté. My trainer, the building superintendent, said Beeks rejected it because it wasn't blended correctly. Edwin, the doorman, provided more background. Mrs. Milton had once tried taking the pampered puss on a car trip uptown, but it yakked all over the limo before reaching Central Park. So, unlike the rest of the Miltons, the cat could not flee to East Hampton to ride out the pandemic with the other well-heeled tribal elites. But their cat problems are no skin off my nose. The way I figure, the extra money I'll earn pandering to this overfed feline will help me get my Broyhill leather recliner out of layaway that much faster.

At nine p.m., the end of my shift, I pick up the kitchen phone, call the concierge for a cab, lock the exterior doors, set the alarm, and leave.

"Your car, sir," says Edwin, gripping the brass canopy pole and opening the cab door, his tangle of hennaed hair flopping to one side like an abandoned bird's nest.

"East Village," I tell the driver, and he takes me to my studio apartment, only blocks from the East River, in Gramercy, a tiny place too small for two that I share with Autumn.

Money's been tight since Autumn lost her day job. She sits on the edge of the bed, more still than the Joseph Ablow painting that hangs in the Milton family kitchen, doesn't say hello, leans forward, parts the blinds with her fingers, and peers down through the blades of the window fan to the locust-shaded sidewalk below.

Eight years we've been together, and I can't recall her gloominess locking in like this. I sit beside her and say, "Blue skies out there. We should take a walk after lunch," holding out a plain brown bag. "I brought you a fish sandwich and fries." I shake the sack, but she doesn't respond, so I drop the food, cup her face with my palms and pull it close. She's been crying again. I wipe the dried tears from her face, kiss each cheek, taste the salt.

THURSDAY

"What say you today, Señor Beeks. *¿Cómo estás?*" I say, coaxing the imperturbable Bombay cat out from behind the arrangement of potted palms in the corner of the library. He's been stalking me all afternoon from station to station as I execute my circuit of the Milton townhome, stealthily waiting out of sight, then thudding into the room like a buffalo as I leave.

I pause in the kitchen, pull a bottle of merlot from the wine cooler, find a corkscrew, pour myself a glass. The kitty bounds into the room, tail up, a quizzical trill emanating from his chest.

"What do you suppose has Autumn so glum these days?" I ask the cat as he coils between my ankles. "It's probably money, don't you think?"

Mr. Beeks flops to the floor, rolls onto his side, stares up as if to say, "Who worries about such things?"

"True," I reply with more than a tinge of jealousy. "But—why would you care, exiled like a prince inside this marble palace?" Beeks blinks in rapid succession as though transmitting his innermost thoughts.

"Well—my question was slightly rhetorical," I tell the cat. "But if you really think I should end my relationship with Autumn, I should hear you out."

Beeks explains himself with a series of long, loud meows as I hoist the glass of merlot, gulp it down to the chalky dregs, refill it halfway, cork the bottle, and stash it inside the refrigerator door.

"Of course, Autumn's high maintenance. But you know what?" I say, squatting down to scratch his head.

Everything I tell him is true. At one time, Autumn seemed quite content in her temporary role as a substitute teacher. I wish she'd go back to that, but she won't hear it. So, I guess part of the reason I took this apartment-sitting job in the first place was to set an example; to show her there's no shame in returning to your roots, to what you know, because I went back to doing security, something I'd done before, as a bouncer, as keeper of the velvet rope at The Box, an after-hours club in a rough section of the Bronx. But my message of inspiration fizzled. Any lesson Autumn may have gleaned from my overt piece of self-sacrifice failed to dent her despondency.

The cat's glittering eyes travel the length of my frame. We lock eyes, and I take a step back. "Another man!"

Unmoved by my outburst, Beeks arches his back, meanders across the kitchen, and crouches next to his food bowl.

"Why would you suggest such a thing?" I say accusingly.

The cat swivels one ear toward my voice as he eats.

"How can you remain so blithe, Beeks. I'm begging you, tell me everything you know."

My face in a pillow, I wake to the patter of bare feet across the linoleum, water pouring into the coffee pot. Autumn totters into the living room and folds herself onto the floor beside the couch. Her hand strokes my head; brushes my hair aside as I open one eye.

"Not like you to nap after work," she says.

I drag my phone from the end table. "Nine-fifteen, wow. Must've been the merlot."

"Drinking with the cat again?" Autumn tugs at my hair in a playful, sadistic way.

"It was his idea," I say, rolling onto my back.

"The furniture store called yesterday," she says. Her smile is strained and effortful.

"Damn," I mumble under my breath. "Is there something wrong with the chair?"

"They asked to schedule the delivery for Saturday."

I raise my fists. "Hallelujah."

"It's going to be crowded in here."

I clamber clumsily to my feet, arms windmilling around. "No—no. It'll work out just like I told you, remember? We're gonna mount the television on the wall over here, turn the bed this way, squeeze the table into the kitchen corner, you'll see."

"All this for a recliner," she huffs.

"It's something I've always wanted."

"Well—I'm happy for you," she says, her face blank and bloodless. "You worked a lot of overtime, taking care of that cat." She crosses the room, raises the blinds halfway, collapses into the folding chair, and gazes moodily between the blinds. Her body and mind may have parted ways, yet I love her more than ever, even when she's not there. Within the cramped stillness of the room, a whimper seeps from her lips, hand over her mouth, staring out the window, trying not to burst. After a long silence, she wobbles to her feet, fists at her side, convulsions shaking her body. "His name is Ethan."

FRIDAY

Mr. Beeks wants to share the veggie bacon I took from the deep freeze and warmed in the microwave this morning. His flank

presses against my shins, his eight-cylinder purr shuddering my bones from ankle to knee. I place a plate on the kitchen floor next to my chair and scratch the cat between the ears. He takes one sniff and turns away.

"Not good enough, Mr. Picky?" I ask, sopping up egg yolk with my toast.

The cat effortlessly leaps onto the counter and settles beside the refrigerator, licking his paw.

I aim my fork at his nose. "You'll get your precious pâté, but first, how about we give you a proper name? Something more befitting the task. Mr. Beeks is so—formal. To me, you represent only one thing. My new chair. A place in the corner of my dingy apartment where I can rest my weary bones after a long day of busting my butt. So—Recliner—let's talk about Autumn? You said she had a boyfriend. Well, you were wrong. Turns out she has a son. His name is Ethan. Had him when she was sixteen. Gave him up for adoption." The refrigerator puckers open. I pull out the fancy cat food, mix Beeks's dish, and plunk it next to his water bowl.

"I know. That's a lot to digest all at once." I begin to pace. Recliner stops eating to watch; his disbelieving look mirrors my own incredulity. "Here we thought Autumn had somebody on the side when truth-be-known, she's been dealing with the sudden appearance of a child she discarded twenty-six years ago." I throw my arms up as if ending a quarrel and stomp out of the kitchen, down the great hall to the photo of the bejeweled baroness dressed in a black, sequined evening gown and matching opera-length gloves, posing majestically at the foot of a curved marble staircase.

"You raised two children," I say, my nose pressed against the framed glass, "and look at you, so elegant. The epitome of grace and poise. How did you do it? I've just discovered I'm a stepfather-type person for the first time, and I'm terrified."

The cat glides silently up the hall, brushes my leg, climbs onto the sofa, purring.

"Why!" I cry in a half-shout.

Recliner tilts his head.

"Why wasn't it just another man? Things would have been so much easier."

Autumn and I prepare lunch together, fried scallops over pasta primavera, our somber silence fractured at random by remarks about the rain, the traffic, the Mets. I want to broach the subject of Ethan, the elephant in the room, to reanimate this woman, to deliver her from this wretched, manic-depressive spiral.

Autumn's fork clangs inside her bowl, chasing a scallop. "The process was supposed to be blind, you know?" she says meekly. "The hospital paperwork said I would be untraceable to the adoptive parents. At least that's what mama said."

"How did he find you?"

A deafening silence ensues. Autumn's black eyes scan the dreary room, assessing every tacky painting and blemished yard sale knick-knack with disdain; a pair of bronze-colored plastic 3D sailing ships, an alabaster unicorn, a grinning gnome, a black and white photo of a 50's dancing couple, a rainbow over a speckled background.

"There have got to be laws," I say, tired of the dead-still, and grab my phone from the sideboard. "Which hospital was it? Washburn Medical? Brookdale? Somebody released that information illegally. We'll drag 'em into court."

Her eyelids descend like a delicate pair of tenement shades, lashes blinking sadly against her pear-shaped cheek. Expressionless, she says, "Nothing can undo what Ethan knows—what I know," her words marbled with a faultless resignation.

"Still, the recklessness of releasing those birth records," I say.

"The real recklessness was believing my family when they took Ethan away."

Her anguished face swells with a pain I could never imagine, for I desire her too much to ever fully understand her. The phone buzzes in my hand. A text from work. The client has decided to return from their self-imposed quarantine—tomorrow. I study her

reaction in the mirror as I share the news. Her sad eyes puncture my soul, and I can't help but say, "Let's go out tonight."

———

Edwin glides to the curb, adjusts his mask, opens our taxi door, glances at Autumn's willowy stems as she climbs out wearing a knee-length flower-print dress and heels. I'm more proud than jealous of his attention, for she is beautiful. He tips his cap dutifully and ushers us into the townhouse.

"Are you sure this is alright?" Autumn asks as the lift glides silently to a halt. The doors whisk open, and we step into the marble foyer.

"The cleaning company is due here tomorrow afternoon, around two," I say reassuringly. "It'll take them about four hours. The infamously decorous Milton family won't dare return until the entire apartment has been thoroughly scrubbed."

"Don't use those uptown words on me," Autumn says in a sullen, dramatic tone. "Decorous! Egad! Save it for your blog—oh, wait. You don't have one."

No bolo knife ever cut like her tongue. She crouches onto the divan for a smoke, ankles crossed, dress strap sliding off one shoulder, bangs in her eyes, and drags on the cigarette. The oval of smoke transforms her face into a sardonic jester from an Edwardian painting. After broiled filet mignon with oyster mushrooms and two bottles of black rooster chianti, we retire to the grand salon with a chardonnay. I loosen the clasp on her anklet, drag the chain up her leg, across her knee, inside her thigh, and lay it on the end table.

"I'll be right back," I say and disappear down the hall to the baroness's powder room, searching for pieces of jewelry left on the dressing table, crystal necklaces, deco brooches, cubic zirconia hairpins. A white leather strap protrudes from among the tangle of bibelots: a watch with a green-red-yellow nylon dial and a gold bee embroidered across the center.

Autumn is at the window when I return, the empty wine goblet steadied against her cheek, more brittle than the glass. I go

to her, gather the shattered pieces wherever they may fall, my hand around her waist, and lay the watchband over her wrist. A smile eludes her ashen face, the ivory reflection of her torso transparent in the window. She leans back as I nibble the base of her neck, my thumb sliding down her spine to a familiar pocket, her skin twitching beneath my fingertips. Her hand falls on my shoulder, and she shoves me away with theatrical flair, turns, crosses her arms, and stares out at the iconic park.

"Beautiful view," I say.

She turns back to me, studying my shoes. "I was a teacher."

"I know. Fifteen years."

She sighs as though venting an ancient tomb. "I once subbed for the same class for an entire school year. The teacher was off on maternity leave. This was—before I met you—before I knew his name was Ethan."

I prop myself up on the couch and shove my hands into my pockets. "All sorts of things happened before you knew Ethan was yours, Autumn. You just found out."

"No—you don't understand." She swallows hard, trying to decode the question mark on my face, her eyes bounding like storm-swept buoys. "Ethan was there, in that class. He was there all year, third desk back, second column from the left, quiet kid, can see his face clear as day." Her voice trails off inaudibly, and she falls to the carpet, sobbing, face buried in her hands.

My mind struggles for a way to help her break free of her worry. I hear the buzz of my phone and answer.

"Mr. Quincy, Edwin here. From downstairs. Sorry to bother you, sir, but there's a package. It's rather large. May I send it up?"

"Sure," I say and abruptly hang up.

Autumn wipes her eyes with her palm. I help her to her feet. The elevator buzzes, and I scramble to the foyer to unlock the doors.

"I felt it couldn't wait, with the rain coming and all," Edwin says, hoisting the gift basket into the kitchen. "It's from Manhattan Fruitier. One of the best, sir. Otis was on lunch, so I brought it up

myself." Edwin sets the package down, laces his fingers, rocks back and forth on his heels awkwardly. After an uncomfortable silence, I pull out my wallet. Across the room, Autumn dabs her finger absentmindedly at the window. Edwin purses his lips, a question forming, but I press a twenty into his palm, tell him what a great help he's been, and lead him to the elevator. As we reach the door, there's a loud pop in the other room. A champagne cork. Autumn has found the gift basket.

"Quin, you're a sweetheart for sending this," she sings, reading the attached card. "Who's your friend? Is he a working man like you? Let's all have a drink."

Edwin breezes across the room. "Don't see what harm there would be. My shift's over in fifteen." Autumn fills three champagne glasses to the brim. Edwin loosens his tie and slides onto a stool beside Autumn. They click their glasses and drink.

I begin to try to acclimate myself to this new development. Up the hall dashes the cat. He stampedes across the foyer like a wildebeest and leaps onto the back of the divan, claws out, scratches lightly at the fabric, and settles onto his stomach.

Autumn coaxes her barside stool sideways. "Mr. Beeks," she says, flashing her wrist, "Thanks for the watch."

"Recliner," I say.

"Yes—and that too."

"A very generous cat," says Edwin. He gulps the rest of the champagne then straightens his cap. "But soon, kind people, I must go. Have to pick up a few things for the wife at the market on my way home."

The champagne is good, and by the time Edwin departs to board the elevator, we're all laughing loudly at nothing in particular.

"Recliner," I bellow to the cat as I sit, "what do you make of my girl? Isn't she gorgeous?" The cat drops into my lap, rolls over languidly, stretches his legs one at a time, an interior rumble quaking his torso like the hull of a wooden ship. In the corner of the nearly lightless room, Autumn slips out of her dress, unstraps her shoes, twirls the wristwatch in her hand, and tiptoes toward the bedroom.

SATURDAY

"Welcome back, Mr. Quincy, sir," says Edwin, his musky cologne drifting about my weary crown as he opens his umbrella and leads me silently inside the building to the elevator, and I go up. Mrs. Milton explicitly requested a private audience with me, and as the doors slide open, I secretly wonder about what is coming my way. A bonus, perhaps, for my ceaseless devotion to their townhome, plants, and pet?

A squat, muscular man in a slim-fit iridescent twill jacket introduces himself as Rupert as I step out of the elevator and into the tastefully bleak, flinty room. He hands me a face mask, says he's Ms. Milton's personal aide, and signals for me to follow, but I can't help wonder what badge he's pinned on me: caretaker, sentinel, spy. The broad-shouldered man trudges ahead, his rugged movements effortless as an ocean wave, leather shoes yelping as though mugged by each bruising step. Even his ankles flex as he glides down the long hall to the office where the baroness awaits.

"Ah, Mr. Quincy, do come in. Sit down," she says. The words slide from her throat like an arrow from a quiver. She points to a pair of pewter chairs facing her glass desk, puffs on her e-cigarette as Rupert plants himself in a winged armchair near the door. Unlike the black-and-white photo hanging in the hallway, dark circles cradle the baroness's eyes, yet her genteel nature brightens the room on this gray, rain-shrouded day. She refastens her custom-fit surgical mask with imperturbable poise, unhurried, crossing her legs beneath her robe, her every move languid, emotionless, impossibly lethargic, as though partially drained of blood. "We—appreciate your cooperation with the face mask. The reaction of some people to this harmlessly unintrusive piece of medical advice is positively medieval. Would you like some tea?" she says in a platinum monotone.

"No, thank you," I say, though she's already waved for Rupert to bring two cups.

"And here's Mr. Beeks," she says, leaning down to greet the oncoming cat. "He's usually not this affectionate. You must have

paid an extravagant amount of attention to my baby." The baroness scratches his head before nudging him away with her heel.

"We got along," I say modestly.

"Yes. Well, we're grateful for that. But—there's another matter, and I wouldn't have dragged you in here except for a slight detail in the inventory. Rupert?" She nods at the assistant.

"A watch," says the suit, "has gone missing, Mr. Quincy." He shows me a photo of the watch on his phone. "Have you seen it?"

Instincts overcome integrity, and I shake my head.

"It belongs to my grand-niece," says the baroness. "She'll be heartbroken when I tell her it's gone."

I freeze in place, eyes bouncing between the aide's phone and the baroness, somehow giving me away. The bee-embroidered wristwatch they speak of had been on Autumn's wrist last night. She might have worn it home. Who knows? We drank quite a bit before we left around 2 a.m., but I'd been careful to put everything back. Or had I?

I study the photo on Rupert's phone until confident enough to sell the lie. "I—don't recall seeing the watch," I say.

"We heard otherwise." The words leap from Rupert's tongue as though sprung from a trap. He saunters to his armchair, folds one leg over his knee, foot twitching maniacally, eyeing the doorway. "Edwin, you may join us now." The doorman walks into the room, hat in hand. "Tell us again of last night's revelry," Rupert asks.

Edwin shuffles in place, a look of remorse across his face as he first glances at me, then the baroness.

"There's no need to be timid, Edwin," she says. "Just—tell the truth—about the watch."

"Let me explain precisely what Mrs. Milton means," says Rupert, leaning forward in his chair. "Mrs. Milton doesn't care about Mr. Quincy's little soiree. Mrs. Milton merely wishes to recover the watch, and nothing more will be said about the matter." Rupert shows Edwin the photo.

"Yes," Edwin says softly. "That watch was on the young lady's wrist when I left the apartment last night."

Rupert's eyes flit like jousting hummingbirds between the baroness and me.

"I swear, we didn't take anything," I say. "Please, I'm not a thief. I would never jeopardize my job like that. I need this referral for my next gig."

"Whoever said anything about losing your job?" says the baroness.

"Mrs. Milton believes you performed your job well enough," adds Rupert. "Mrs. Milton just wants to know about the watch. Do you have it?"

"I'm telling you, I didn't take it."

"And the young lady?" ponders the baroness.

"Is she a prostitute?" says Rupert.

"Didn't seem that way to me, sir," says Edwin.

"And you would know—because?" Rupert asks Edwin, raising a brow.

The collar of my shirt warms. "Look," I say, louder than perhaps intended, "I didn't take the damn watch, and I don't appreciate your comments. Autumn is no prostitute. Who the fuck gave you that idea?"

"Here—here," says the baroness, reaching for her vape. "There's no need for unpleasantries." The baroness undoes her mask and takes a drag, noticing a noise coming from across the room. "Mr. Beeks, what on earth?" she says, gesturing to the cat who has fallen onto his side and is pawing frantically beneath the couch. "Have you caught a mouse? Oh, dear God, I hope not."

"Might be an insect, ma'am," says Rupert.

"Call the exterminator at once."

"Will that be all?" says Edwin. "I should get back."

Rupert waves Edwin away, crouching beside the couch, trying to see what Mr. Beeks has cradled between his paws, tight against his belly. The instant Rupert touches his flank, the cat hisses, flips to his feet, and shoots out of the room. And left there on the floor, beneath the sofa, is the baroness's watch.

———

"I'm telling you, Autumn, I was shittin' bricks. I thought Rupert would call the cops," I say, slowing the car at an intersection and switching my phone to the other hand. "No—I'm on Lexington, a few blocks away." I lower my window because a man and woman, arm-in-arm, are crossing the road against a flashing red hand. "Hey—I got a green light here," I holler at the couple. The car behind me honks, and I wave my middle finger in the rearview mirror, waiting, then stomp on the accelerator just as the signal turns yellow, leaving the impatient pinhead stuck at the red light.

"Bunch of damn tourists," I yell into the phone at Autumn as I motor up to the next stoplight, "They loiter like around that stupid fucking Friends Experience. What? Yeah, I hear what you're saying, they're hyper-caffeinated, dispassionate zombies, but the simile doesn't quite work. Hey—traffic's picking up. Gotta go. Look forward to hearing all about it. See you in fifteen."

I turn onto East 22nd, follow it down to 2nd Avenue, hang a right, and the thought pounces like a tiger into my skull. *Autumn had cracked a joke*. Perhaps the good news I'd shared about my job had lifted her spirits? Maybe now's a good time to bring up California again. A change of scenery would do us both good. Forget the past. My dream was for the two of us to someday live in the Sierra Nevadas, but she was always teaching a class, even in summertime, so we never vacationed west of the Adirondacks.

Autumn waits on the front stoop of the apartment house, knees bent inward, palms cupping her chin. She stands and brushes the front of her jeans, squinting into the clouds as I walk up. "They delivered your chair about an hour ago," she says.

"Sweet," I say as I peck her cheek, listening for a hopeful tune, "That's—the big news then?"

She swings an arm over my shoulder. "There's another surprise," she says. The phantom of silence follows us up the staircase. She opens the apartment door, and we duck inside. She latches it quietly, a hushed look on her face, and crosses the room to a young man in pair of blue jeans and dirt-caked boots, catnapping comfortably in my new chair, recumbent and fully asleep. Autumn caresses my shoulder.

"Is it him?" I ask.

She sighs, her flesh the color of an orchard peach.

I sit on the edge of the bed, grab the manufacturer's pamphlet from the chair pocket, and pretend to read the warranty, gawking stealthily at Ethan's gangly, beggar's figure. Autumn flashes a rare, adoring smile in my direction, and those recently rekindled dreams of California crumble to ruins at my feet as I await my moment in the coveted recliner.

His Heroic Courtesies

Joyce Goldenstern

Snake

"You won't believe this," Laura said on the telephone, her voice rising to a hysterical pitch. Benjie could only think that the call had something to do with his brother Leo — he was drunk again; he had lost his temper. Once before when Laura had called, Leo had wrestled out a torn screen from the kitchen window and was storming through the house chasing mosquitoes with it. Once he had boxed the ears of Jinx the cat. Leo had an alcohol problem, ever since he finished serving in the army, his term in Vietnam. Maybe even before then. Once when his skin had turned orange, their mother had insisted it was because he drank too much, but Leo said he had a craving for carrots and Laura had confirmed this, for at that early time in their marriage she was still on his side.

"There's a huge snake in the middle of the living room, and I don't know what to do," Laura continued. "I was upstairs cleaning and then walked halfway down the stairs when I saw it there, all curled up. Coiled up. It's huge." Evidently Ben had now become her ally of first resort, as he was often his mother Lena's, as he was sometimes even his brother Leo's. Did he invite such dependencies? Did he invite such loyal followings? Evidently, he did. Laura wasn't the first married woman who had called on him to rescue her from abuse or neglect or indifference or infidelity or a tricky household task. She was, however, the first who had called on him to rescue her from a snake. His other brother Randal, who was an "artist" in New York, had told him that he needed to get over his hero complex. Benjie had shrugged: he often thought Randall might just as well have stayed in Sandy Hollow to paint split-rail fences and apples in a bowl, the two motifs of his oeuvre.

"Listen," he said. "Listen, the cat probably brought it in. Did you leave any windows open? "That's not the issue," Laura

insisted. "I need to get it out. I really don't care how it got in. I can figure that out later."

"How big is it?" Benjie asked.

"It's huge," Laura repeated.

"It's probably just a garter snake. It's probably harmless. Could you cover it with a towel and throw it outside?"

"I could never touch it, I just couldn't, not even through a towel," Laura insisted.

"I can't leave right now," Benjie said. He was fitting pipes in a nuclear plant being built outside of Sandy Hollow. "I'm right in the middle of a flare connection. I can stop by in a couple of hours."

"I'll stay upstairs," Laura said. "I'll just pray the serpent can find its way out. I'll just pray the serpent can't climb stairs."

When Benjie arrived, the snake was no longer in the living room. They searched the house and eventually found it in the hallway off the kitchen, slithering its way down some stairs toward the backdoor. Ben picked it up with a broom handle and threw it out on the patio where it slowly humped its way toward some hastas — a bit worse for wear. Jinx sat nearby pretending innocence and indifference.

"Thank, God!" Laura said. "I don't know what I would've done or would ever do without you, Benji. Leo is never home, though not because he works late or a lot. He's been hanging out at the bar with his antiquing buddies. The kids haven't seen him in weeks. Speaking of which, Leo, Jr. was thrilled that you showed up for his softball game. You don't know what that means to him."

Benjie knew the dance that Laura was starting to lead better than she herself knew or would admit: the steps of troubled women blues — complaints¸ unhappiness, gratitude, flattering comparisons. He was glad to be of help, to make the courteous gesture, but best be on his way now. Thanks for the invitation, but for now Benjie would skadoodle.

Garden

Hero complex? Ben considered and reconsidered the accusation, the assessment. He would have to admit that Laura's telephone

calls did not annoy him. He would have to admit that helping women made him feel desirable — more than that — manly and all the more so if his help presented itself in conjunction with another man's failing: Leo's drunkenness, Randal's flight to New York, and all the careless, uncaring husbands whose wives he had known and comforted: credit without commitment, courteous gesture without real responsibility; the intimacy of the peeping tom, second-hand intimacy.

And so Benjie lived alone with a house, a car, a yard, a garden, an orchard, even a swing set, but no family and at the same time too much family.

Benjie tended his garden which included a fruit orchard, beneath whose apricot trees and grape arbors, a future wife would someday find shade and comfort, though as Benjie tended his plants one late summer morning shortly after the snake incident, marriage seemed impossible — How did one do it? How did one go about it? Rustlings in the garden might be clues to answer those questions, but Benjie could not quite interpret them. He could not discern the secrets of stirring vegetables, his ears being as deaf as the ears of corn.

Benjie raised earth worms in his basement in bins with shredded newspaper bedding or coconut fiber bedding, which was considered more ecologically sustainable than peat or sphagnum moss bedding. At first, he raised night crawlers for fishing bait and used the castings as fertilizer for his garden. Later, as he thought about the earth's problems and its overpopulation, he considered the use of earth worms as a source for human food. The main trick was to boil the worms three times — purge them — to rid them of their slime, then chop them up and bake them at 350 degrees. They tasted like clams or, if boiled in chicken broth, like chicken. It was worth noting that people in over 90 of the world's cultures ate insects and worms for protein to good effect. "Probably because they have no choice," his friend Joel said when Benjie confessed his new passion once when they were camping. Joel had said it as a joke. Joel could be funny. He could also be thoughtless. Years later,

after they became estranged, Benjie would sometimes think of his friend's humor and his friend's need always to confide in him, to seek his support, and Benjie would feel a tinge of regret regarding their complicated falling out. They had known each other since before kindergarten. Benjie was best man at Joel's wedding.

Benjie would continue to garden long after he lost the friendship of Joel and long after his brother Leo died and long after his worms escaped from the bins in his basement and invaded his kitchen sink and bathtub, and after he, with the diligent help of exterminators, rid himself of the escaped worms and ceased raising them forever. Benjie and his future wife would start a hasta business instead.

Apple

A month or so after the snake rescue, Benjie is driving to Mineral Point to visit his friend Joel and Joel's wife Nelly. He does this almost every autumn because although he has a fruit orchard, he has not had good luck raising apple trees. In southeast Wisconsin, around Mineral Point, apple orchards dot the rolling hills. Almost any variety of apple you could ask for is grown and sold there. He prefers sweet apples: jonagold and honeycrisp.

Joel and Nelly are his good friends, and Benjie looks forward to seeing them. Joel can be quite humorous and has lots of interests. In spite of his former incredulousness regarding the earthworms, Joel has come around. Joel returned to school in his 40s and studies geography at the university in Platteville. He is learning about the surface of the earth and its needs. When they were in high school together, they were not serious students. They drank a lot. They took drugs. They skipped classes. Joel quit high school when he was sixteen; Benji barely got through but persisted due to his mother nagging and her forever dropping dimes about his drug use. Benjie had actually dated Nelly before Joel had. Well, "dating" might be overstating it. They had gone out once, drove around in Benjie's car until, owing to his mother's prying, the police stopped him and searched his car for drugs. He liked Nelly but had been shy and awkward around girls in high school. It amazed him how relaxed

he felt around her now. They talked and laughed without effort. She seemed interested in everything he had to say. She seemed impressed when he told her he had laid the flag stones around his flowerbeds, perfectly flat with the ground, making it easy to mow.

When Joel and Nelly take Benjie to Hesperides Orchard, an orchard that he has never been to before, it is already early evening. They had whittled away hours talking in the backyard, admiring Nelly's garden and crafts, discussing Joel's geography classes, speculating on Benjie's earthworm enterprise. Hesperides Orchard has twelve varieties of apples — all displayed in bins or (if one preferred a walk around) on the trees. Benjie fills one bushel basket with honeycrisp and one with jonagold. Nelly reminds them that the name Hesperides comes from the labors of Hercules, but she cannot remember why obtaining a Hesperian apple proved to be such a challenge. She is laughing, her teeth and freckles repeating themselves in a beautiful, benevolent way, even more beautiful and benevolent because her face is starting to show soft, friendly lines of age. The sun is setting on an idyllic evening. Nymph of the Evening, Evening Nymph, Benjie muses, inspired, perhaps, by Nelly's allusion to Greek mythology or by the bounty of Hesperides Orchard, or by the generosity of Nelly's kind heart or by the stars in the sky. As he drives back home to Sandy Hollow in the dark, the sweet smell of apples wafts to the front seat from the backseat. *Part of the reason that Joel and Benjie will have a falling out will be because Joel will be unfaithful to Nelly with a divorced, older woman named Barbara who lives in Platteville and to whom Joel will introduce Benjie, hoping for his support — and Benjie will find this behavior not so much unacceptable as incomprehensible on the part of anyone lucky enough to be married to Nelly, and part of the reason that Joel and Benjie will have a falling out will be because Benjie will seize an opportunity (even before Joel makes a decision that would truly allow that opportunity) and will court and marry Nelly.*

But that is far into the future. As he drives home from Mineral Point, he is not thinking of Nelly, but of Laura. He thinks of the day he saved her from the snake and wonders if she would like some apples.

Apple Pie

Nymph of Evening, Nymph of Afternoon. Is it the snake or the apple that brings Benjie here this afternoon? Or perhaps, just the delay at the nuclear plant construction site that means he has a day off? Benjie and Laura are sitting at the kitchen table peeling apples for an apple pie. He has brought over a half bushel of honeycrisps and a half bushel of jonagolds. Laura looks forlorn. Her marriage is ending. Her children are having problems in calculation and comportment at school. Benjie thinks, "Laura is someone who is perhaps more lonely, lonelier, than I am." There is a delicacy to compassion that Benjie knows well and a power and — when one is young, not necessarily very young, but young enough, even middle aged — a tinge of the erotic, all mingled and muddled with heroic courtesy. One might — might not one? — dare to be careless when the afternoon light, burnishing the skins of apples in a bowl, burnishing the gold in Laura's hair, promises such sweetness.

Laura and Leo will divorce. Laura will get custody of their children and of Jinx the cat. When the time comes for her daughter Polly to marry, Laura will urge her not to have her father walk her down the aisle, but to have her stepfather — a burly man named Ralph — do so. Polly and Laura will not even invite Leo to the wedding. The divorce will shake Leo to his core, and when he eventually remarries, he will be less hot tempered, though he will continue to drink and go antiquing. In time, his skin will turn orange again and he will die at the age of 58 before the death of his mother, which will, of course, cause her great and abiding sorrow and will reopen a wound. At the time of Leo's death, Benjie and Leo will have reconciled only imperfectly (for Leo inevitably will find out about the apple pie and its month-long aftermath, as will his mother Lena and his brothers and sisters) and even the limited forgiveness that the brothers Benjie and Leo achieve will take several years and several failed attempts.

But that is the future and a future regret, and Ben does not know anything about the future this forgetful and timeless afternoon: not in regard to Leo, not in regard to Joel, not in regard to Nelly.

For on this afternoon of soft light and melancholy and the making of apple pie, anything unpleasant seems distant and avertable. Laura adds brown sugar and pats of butter to the bowl of peeled and sliced apples. Rolling out the dough shows her bare arms to their best advantage. Benjie and Laura have not kissed yet. The kiss still hangs in the air, only a possibility. But doubt has taken its formal hat and polished cane from a hook by the kitchen door and has left for an afternoon walk. Nothing in life is as poignant as this anticipation. Oh, apple of discord, sweet, sweet apple of delight.

The Roses and the Weeds

Natascha Graham

Ollie talks.

Not that Gillian listens. She's too absorbed in the mundane task of fastening her bra, a simple action frustrated by a twinge of back pain, a lingering stiffness in her shoulder, and her own condemning thoughts: *You're getting too old to shag in a van.*

Apparently, she's not getting too old for Ollie, though, because he keeps coming back for more; she's continually mystified, flattered, and unable to resist. He's too beautiful. He is too close to physical perfection.

Despite this however her interactions with him frequently disappoint, her sexual and aesthetic experience diminishes substantially with the inevitable occurrence of one very simple thing: He speaks.

She wishes that she had kept a written record of all the epic bloody nonsense that has come out of his mouth over the years because she could have gained some kind of minor social media fame and parleyed a book deal out of it to boot: *Shit My Stupid Shag Buddy Says.* It occurs to her that as far as sordid shag buddies go, she has run the gamut from an Oxford graduate to this, the man who thought that when his sister was pregnant with twins, she'd be pregnant for eighteen months rather than nine. It's her typical anti-accomplishment: From the gutter to the stars and back again.

As Ollie blathers about football he leans over to tie his trainers and this singular movement initiates a glorious symphony of muscle and flesh in stirring, magnificent counterpoint with one another. She longs to trace the perfect trapezoid muscles within reach but doesn't, knowing that he would interpret this as an overture for a second go-round, which she's not really up for because of the pulled muscle in her lower back and various other reasons that she won't let herself think about.

So, she lets him go on and on about Liverpool and the proliferation of their bloody stupid fans up North.

"They're everywhere," he says,"everywhere! I don't get it. I mean, there must be a Brazilian of them here."

Gillian successfully resists the urge to bang her head on the side of the van.

"Don't you think?" He gazes up at her.

Aw, bless, he's trying to engage her in conversation; it would be touching if it weren't so pathetic. "A Brazilian," she says flatly. She rubs her aching shoulder and pulls on the hideous yellow work apron; she has to give the cafe credit for picking the one colour that makes all pasty white people look like utter shite.

"Yeah. You know. Like a lot. Like more than a million?" Ollie rolls his eyes. "Know maths is not your strong suit Gillian, but Jesus, everyone knows that."

"It's billion," Gillian enunciates with a certain sarcastic slowness that immediately reminds her of Vita, and that makes her want to slam her head against the van until she is unconscious. "You mean billion. Not Brazilian."

He's sceptical, "you sure?"

"A Brazilian is a person. From Brazil," she forces out the point between clenched teeth,"the country."

The light-bulb goes off over Ollie's handsome head, offering only a bare minimal illumination of knowledge.

"Oh. Right, right," he nods vigorously,"okay. Yeah. That makes sense," slow, graceful, and lazy, he pulls on his shirt, "we doing this again next week, maybe?"

"Maybe," she lies, and ties the apron at her back with stiff fingers, catching a hangnail on the waistline of her jeans; she wore jeans to work today and amazingly Claud didn't call her out on it. Ollie said it was because she looked stunning in them. He rarely compliments her, so she figures it must be true. Again, she thinks of Vita, who once said — *you should always wear jeans, it ought to be the law of the land* — woozily stated after one nap, two orgasms, and three glasses of wine, so she was feeling uncharacteristically munificent that day. And again, she wishes she would stop thinking of Vita, at least immediately after shagging idiots.

Ollie laughs, "it's weird. You're really like a bloke sometimes," he pulls a face. "Shit, that sounds really gay, doesn't it?"

She stares at the abandoned used condom on the floor of the van — flaccid, sad, and inanimate as if it were the eviscerated hydro-skeleton of some strange jellyfish.

"Yeah. It does," she grabs her jacket, pushes at the van's heavy door with her good shoulder, and she's free. For the moment, anyway.

At home, the windows are fogged up with steam from the beef stew she's reheating on the Aga. She's staring at her own reflection, sullied and blurry, hair all over the bloody place, curling about her jaw, slipping out from her poor excuse for a ponytail. An unremarkable colour at the best of times, but in this steam bleached reflection it is even more limp, even more of a non-colour — an insipid pale brown with a fleck of early grey. And her eyes, staring back at her like the eyes of a ghost, almost too pale to see, almost the same colour as the sky.

"What's this?" Her dad pipes up. He's fishing for something in the drawer of the kitchen dresser.

She turns around, "what's what?"

He's holding a champagne cork. "Taittinger's? When were you drinking Taittinger's?" He laughs, his eyes twinkle.

Oh, you — stupid slapper, stroppy trailer trash, foul-mouthed slattern. Who do you think you are? Someone worthy of fine champagne?

It's not the kind voice of her father, but the voice of the past that fills her head so unexpectedly.

It's been said that the past is another country; in Gillian's case, it is more than that. It is an enemy combatant. Any object that could possibly function as a passport into this hostile territory runs the risk of emotional high treason and as such is mercilessly discarded. When she turned 30 (nine whole years ago...) she trashed or burned nearly everything sentimental. Including herself. But there were clothes, photos, keepsakes, a napkin with a heart drawn

on it from a first official date, all consigned to the flames or the rubbish heap. The cork is an emissary from a different part of the past, however, and she should have got rid of it but couldn't. Not yet, anyway. The cork, the same one she absently touched to her lips that night as she stood in Room 503 of the Belgravia Hotel, fully clothed and ready to leave but unable to as she helplessly stared down at Vita, sprawled face down on the bed in a dead sleep.

Oh, you...

Gillian jams a wooden spoon into the dense, beefy glop of stew, which plops ominously like a volcano stirring from a dormancy of a thousand years.

"Don't remember when."

"Looks recent," he turns the cork over in his hand.

"Bloody cork expert now, are you?" She throws him a sideways glance through the steam and he smiles at her, that sweet smile that always gets her right in the chest. You'd better not ever bloody die. She thinks. A thought so often passing through her head that it had now become a sort of mantra, something she had to think daily to save his life.

He gives a vague nod of his head, amusement behind his eyes as he places the cork carefully back into the drawer.

The front door opens, the hall floorboards creak, and for the briefest of moments she feels the gritty unevenness of those floorboards against her bloody cheek, and hears that voice in her head; *God it was fun breaking you, Gillian.*

"Granddad," Ryan drops a school bag down by the leg of the dining table and claps a hand over his granddad's shoulder.

"What's for dinner?"

She feels his presence behind her. She wants to turn and hug him, draw him close and apologise for everything; for the stew, for the bad weather, for not knowing who his father was...for being such a disappointment.

"Thought you ate at school?" she says instead.

She hears him groan, can just about make out his reflection behind her in the window.

"Bloody salad."

He wraps his arms around her waistline and she swats at his wrists with her free hand.

"Language."

Her dad hums sympathetically from the corner of the room.

"What's news?" she asks absently, glancing at him before turning to the washing up in the sink.

"The usual," he shrugs. He's wearing the hoody she bought him for Christmas.

"Sounds fascinating," she says, mouth full affectionate sarcasm as she notices the holes in his cuffs.

"Actually, there is a bit of news, about our hermit next-door neighbour."

She feels the skin just above the veins in her wrist begin to buzz and she plunges her hands into the too-hot water.

"Vita?" She doesn't know why she's asking, they only have one neighbour for miles around.

"So, what's the news?" she prompts while Ryan nods through a gulp of coke from a bottle she hadn't noticed he was holding.

"Looks like she's got herself a girlfriend."

Gillian is glad she's facing the window. She waits for the sky and the land to do their usual trick of calming her, bringing her peace. She studies the thin band of clouds frosting the blue sky, the way the wind presses into the long, faded grass. She squeezes the steel wool pad in her hand. Watery brown gunk from the pot she's been scrubbing surrenders to the drain and she predicts by the end of the week she'll have to take apart the pipes again to work out the clog. Didn't expect her to remain on the market forever, did you? Despite the fact that she was a middle-aged woman.... *a widow, a posh bitch, a recluse...*

Put like that, Gillian asks herself, *why are you so keen on her, you dozy cow?*

She dries her hands with a towel and turns around. Keeping her hands busy always settles her nerves. She can tell by the way Ryan looks at her that he's waiting for her to trot out some smart-arsed remark, some homophobic put-down.

"Good," she says softly. She clears her throat and tries it again — this time firmer and louder, and almost convinces herself, "that's good."

"You met her?" Her dad asks from the dresser. He's left the drawer open. She stares at it, unblinking, while Ryan answers.

"Briefly. She was leaving when we showed up. They were kind of giggly together. It was cute."

Gillian twirls the limp, damp dish-towel into a sinewy rope and attempts fashioning a hangman's noose out of it.

"She seems cool. Didn't talk to her for long but she was funny, smart. Her name is Sacha. Works in finance or something. There was an article on her and her family in the Courier yesterday — Clarissa was telling me, God, I think even Clarissa likes her — anyway, the family's really posh and they set up some new scholarship fund for, you know, 'underprivileged students,'" Ryan employs the good old air quotes around the phrase — a Vita sarcasm speciality, and again Gillian suspects that he has a crush on Vita, even as she simultaneously acknowledges the fierce irrationality of her ridiculous jealousy. At this pathetic moment, she is even jealous of the Cherokee Jeep she sees parked in Vita's drive every morning, jealous of it for its close proximity to its owner, not to mention the front seat.

Oh, Christ, you are bananas.

"Maybe you should apply," her dad says.

"I'm not underprivileged. Right, Mum?"

Gillian hums absently.

"Mum?"

"Yeah?"

Amused, Ryan smirks, "why are you making a noose with the dish-towel?"

Her dad propels himself from the edge of the dresser. "My cue to leave, before she gets any ideas."

Oh, that joke isn't funny anymore.

"I'll join you." Ryan follows his granddad from the room. Gillian hears the creak of the sofa as they sit down in the sitting room, a pause, then the welcome murmur of the television.

She fishes for her phone in the pocket of her jeans, flicks the screen on and hits Google...

This is what she has become.... someone who stalks a former shag buddy with whom you have the grave and stupid misfortune of being in love. It's exhausting. She yawns. After a good ten minutes, she is finally online and hopping to the Courier's website, where the fluff piece on Vita's new woman is found easily enough.

In Gillian's mind, there are two types of English woman: The Roses and the Weeds. Vita, of course, is a Rose: pale and elegant, seemingly perfect, secretly thorny, and bitchily unrepentant when blood is drawn. She herself is, of course, a sturdy English Weed: tough, available, and usually trampled upon by blokes in obsessive pursuit of the Roses. Ollie alone is proof of the paradox. When they weren't shagging, they were drinking and talking about Vita; a shared loathing of the same woman bonded them more than sex ever did.

But Jennifer Elena Sacheverell Easley Parmenter — Jesus Christ, Gillian thinks, what kind of person needs five fucking names? — is a voluptuous variation on the Weed: A bit horsey-looking but well-groomed, well-dressed, and possessing abundant dark locks a la Nigella Lawson. Not to mention big tits. No, she is not a common English Weed, this lady's not for trampling. She's the weed that will wrap with luxurious abandon around everything in a garden till it's hers, that will scale the stone walls of the mansion until her wild garlands smother everything in sight. In the photo, she's smiling handsomely, about ready to burst out of her blouse, and sandwiched between two happy teenagers and a man, whom Gillian is pretty certain she might have shagged.

Gillian reads on. Jennifer is a CEO of a digital music company. Even though she and her fucking ex-husband, a fucking barrister, both went to fucking Cambridge she fucking supported her fucking son when he wanted to go to fucking Oxford. Her fucking father is a fucking marquis and — here Gillian dies a little — her fucking Italian mother is a fucking "member of the distinguished, aristocratic Milanese family" that includes the filmmaker Luchino Fucking Visconti.

Defeated, she leans back in the chair. Sure, great. That's just great. She manages one final, rallying thought: Can Jennifer single-handedly replace a toilet? Plumb in a washing machine or rewire a house? Bet not. Top that, bitch. "Fucking slag."

Gillian does not realize she's said this aloud until Ryan calls loudly from the couch: "Who's a fucking slag?"

"The Queen," she shouts back.

"Too right. Always thought she was a bit tarty with all those hats."

She scowls, realizes her mother was right so many years ago when she still had possession of at least a few marbles; Someday you'll have one of your own, and they'll be mouthing off to you the way you do to me, and you'll be sorry then.

She is very sorry indeed. About a lot of things, but not that.

A Good Stunning

Mary Lewis

Nora pulled her cheese sandwich out of the microwave and sat with Andy and a couple of women who worked down the line on carcass trimming. They wore chain mail so their super sharp boning knives wouldn't gouge them on those pulling cuts. Frankie Jaworski forgot hers one day, and cut right thru her belly into her intestines, which spilled poison into her body. Rafal was still trying to get the company to pay her doctors' bills, never mind any benefits for their four kids.

They had to talk loudly, even in the break room, to be heard over the constant scream of the circular saws cutting the carcasses in half down the backbone.

Across the table Andy chowed down on his salami sandwich. "Hey Nora, when are you going put a slab of ham on top of that cheese?"

They kidded her because of her meatless choices, but she was ready for them. "Really, we butcher pigs all day and you want a ham sandwich for lunch?" She waved her sandwich around. "At least this comes from a live animal."

Jim sat down next to her, so close their bottoms bumped. She didn't move away; he was a decent guy, and reliable. With the help of the restraints, he could make a pig stand still better than anyone she'd ever worked with. And that was what made her job work. She knew just the right spot on the forehead to place her bolt pistol, but it was no good if the head kept thrashing around. Andy was the one who did the actual killing, with his long knife across the neck. Nora just made them unconscious.

Next to Andy, Luisa sat with her cup of tomato basil soup. "If this job doesn't make a vegetarian out of you, I don't know what will." She was on her second baby and looking forward to some maternal time. "And I've got to eat for two right now."

They all concentrated on their food, little enough time to actually enjoy it.

But Andy found another quip for Nora: "Have you told Luisa about your pet pig?"

Jim fake cuffed him across the table. "Knock it off with the teasing why don't you."

Melvin insisted on raising one on their farm, the only livestock since they sold their cattle herd two years ago. Last thing she wanted was to come home and look at another pig, but there it was. Melvin wouldn't have any factory pork. Had to be home grown.

Nora folded her hands around her coffee cup. "Not mine. Melvin's."

Andy was on his energy bar now. The kind that are really candy bars with a few oats in them. "I guess he feeds it and takes it to the vet."

She squeezed the cup for courage. "I have nothing to do with it."

But he'd expect her to kill it of course, since she was so good at it. She took too big a gulp of her hot coffee, and scalded her tongue. By the time she could manage another sip, their short lunch break was over, and she headed back to the killing floor with Andy and Jim.

Andy put his arm around Nora's shoulders on the way in. "How do you keep your apron so clean Miss Nora?"

She put her arm around his waist and pulled him close' to see what he would do. "Dear Andy you do such a good job of draining the blood and I stay out of your way, like this." She pushed him away and he stumbled into the lockers, but he bounced back with a grin and said, "OK, let's do it for real."

The kills went smoothly after break till about eight PM, when one of the pigs had to be re-stunned, and even then it lay on its back pumping its legs like it was trying to run away. Jim tried to joke about it, but they both knew it was to cover up their real feelings. It took three tries with the bolt pistol before it finally stopped moving and Andy could have at it with his knife. It rattled her so much, and Andy too, that blood spattered far and wide. When she finally took her apron off, she couldn't get away from the blood

stains fast enough. At least she wouldn't have to wash it.

Blood is so hard to clean. You have to do it right away with cold water. That's what Mom always did, to get the blood off her blouse where it dripped from her latest beating. Dad's shirts too, because he'd had some brawl at Barry's Taphouse.

Since she had the late shift, it was always dark when she got off work. Tonight was still warm though, even in late November. Every warm day someone would say, this is the last one, but they lingered on. The bed was empty, but she was used to that. When Melvin finally came in to snuggle next to her, she tried to ignore the scent of cheap cologne that wasn't his. She preferred the smell of booze, but it was his choice of course. Everyone should have a choice. She lay sideways as the inside spoon, and took his heat through her back side. Did she have no shame? Too difficult a question.

The sun through the bedroom windows came too soon and entered her eyes through closed eyelids. Melvin's arm hung heavy over her hips, and she slipped away without disturbing his sleep. The beans were beginning to shatter in the field, and he should be out harvesting, but that's dangerous if you've got a hangover. Out the kitchen window the old barn stood empty since they sold the cattle. A big relief really, to pare down to only row crops, but Melvin had to have Wilbur. She couldn't understand why he'd name it and name it that.

Nora had made it very clear: she'd do her job, he'd do his, in his own way. That meant she couldn't tell him it was time to slaughter, or how much they were losing each day the beans kept spilling all over the field.

She was well into her oatmeal and coffee when Melvin stumbled in. "Hi Snuggums, have a good day yesterday?"

"Not as good as yours I'm guessing."

He poured himself a cup of coffee and stood in the sunny kitchen window. He'd kept trim and she could still melt when he peeled off his T. But now he wore a raggy plaid shirt and sweats.

"Thought I'd ask Julio if he has time to help me fix that hole in the barn roof."

"While the harvest is waiting?" As soon as she said it she wished she hadn't.

"Do I tell you how to do your job?" He turned 180 to look at her, clutching his cup.

Nora scraped her chair back and moved to the sink, out of range for now, plus she'd learned not to keep the coffee too hot in the pot. Her didn't come towards her this time but turned back to the window.

It was so good they'd decided not to have children, who might be sitting at the kitchen table right now. That was one thing she could control at least.

"Come and have some eggs and toast."

In the mornings, when he was low on blood sugar, that was the time to watch out for him. Food always settled him.

They sat across from each other, Nora with the latest People magazine, he with a Deere catalogue, paging through the combine section. Bank wouldn't go along that, so she didn't need to say a thing.

"What the hell do you care about Ben and J. Lo?"

He did know the names.

"I need to think about something else once in a while. They're getting back together you know."

Melvin finished his eggs in three bites and stood up.

"Are you trying to make me feel guilty for keeping up the farm? All you do is kill pigs all day. I can't help it if that brings in more money than soybeans right now."

Nora closed her magazine. "I need to get ready to go back to my easy job." She shouldn't have said anything.

"By the way Mel, Barb and Larry are having a euchre party Saturday, and I said we'd probably come," she said.

"Why didn't they ask me?"

"I saw Barb at Fareway, and she mentioned it."

Those evenings in their basement, four people to a table, all those tables. Out would come his stories, of the Gulf War, of hunting, of skating on thin ice when he was a boy. Everyone loved Melvin.

"So can I say we're coming?"

He shrugged, which was the best answer she was going to get. But then he came over and hugged her from behind. It startled her so much she lunged forward against his arms, before settling in. "Sure Nora, we need a night out. I love you so much."

She tried not to stiffen.

Then he said, "I've been thinking, we can't keep Wilbur around forever. Would you be willing to help me out next day you have off?"

Saturday, before the euchre party.

She stroked his arms where they showed under his shirt, downy really, more than hairy. "I could borrow the bolt pistol. But could you do me a favor and not use its name?"

One thing they could still do was snuggle.

Busman's holiday, that's what it would be. Just what she needed, but it was only one pig, and she hadn't consented to do any of the cutting up after the kill. Melvin would bring in Julio to help him with that. Another warm day, in the 50's even on the second day of December.

Melvin was being extra nice to her, even though he'd come home smelling like cologne again, or maybe because of it. "Can I get you coffee? Do you want pancakes?" Did he even know how to make them? And those lovely hugs from behind.

A kill at the plant was no big deal, but at home it wasn't easy at all. She didn't watch while Mel roped the pig's neck and lured it with bananas to a cleaned-up section of the barn. But she had to come in when he pushed it against the wall and nearly strangled

it to make it be still, which of course made it struggle more. Then the worst part, when Melvin started singing to it, the lullaby he used when it came to them as a feeder pig, "All the Pretty Little Horses." The two of them stood there looking into each other's eyes like lovers.

The pig, still now, so it was easy to place the pistol at just the right place on the forehead.

Wilbur fell onto the tarp they'd laid out. It was a good stun, no feet clawing the air.

"Give me that knife damn it. She held out her hand like a surgeon demanding a scalpel. He didn't deliver though, so she had to pick it up herself. At least Melvin had sharpened it. Kneeling against its body, she plunged it into his neck and sliced upward, like she'd seen Andy do so many times, and the blood flowed.

"Mel, where are you? We've got to catch this blood."

He was supposed to be there with a pail, but blood gushed red all over the blue tarp.

She looked down at her hands without recognizing them, so covered with blood.

"How could you leave me with this," she shouted.

He came back with a clean pail. "Here I am."

Nora stood up and bloodied her knees with her red hands. She picked up the bolt pistol and walked towards him. There on his forehead was just the right place. It would stun him, that was all; it wouldn't kill him. But all she could do was wipe her bloody hands across his clean plaid shirt. He didn't move, but she did. It took a long time to get the blood out of her old pair of jeans, which she could have just thrown away the way they were. No, she had to get the blood out first.

Choices

Fabiana Elisa Martinez

I will have to get a new leash for Piper tomorrow. She's almost 60 pounds of strapping force, but that old leash was too long, too strong, and intended for a much bigger dog — one of those massive great Danes, not a golden retriever.

The house is decisively silent. I am grateful for the stillness and the heavy darkness that approaches and which I will not disturb. Everybody is gone at last. Even Piper will be spared this first night in the haven that encircles me with the warmth of its wooden beams and the severity of its stone walls. Next door, she will get from Mrs. Templeton all the forbidden treats that Brenda never approved.

I am glad the girls are gone as well. In sadness or in joy our daughters create too much noise. It would be impossible to savor this imminent peace that, in spite of their fears, I welcome with dry eyes and a wide-open heart. The youngest, Sandra, will call tomorrow from her dorm, too early for me, too late for her first class, without knowing what to say. She will have a deck of excuses to hang up soon, and I will be happy to accept any of them with the same delicacy as if I were selecting a lucky card from the hands of a magician. I am happy she is that busy. She will recover soon. This weekend will collapse under the trembling weight of exams, prospective jobs, and the curiosities of new loves. I know she is the one who swept the kitchen and emptied the trash cans as soon as it was possible. I am sure though that she didn't make the guest room's bed. By the look on her face when she came out of it, I knew Sandra had just realized that her parents had not been sleeping together for a while and they never would. She briskly corrected her assumption that she would stay in that room, where evidently her mother had slept the night before. She dragged her green suitcase too adamantly and announced she preferred to stay with her sister and brother-in-law at the scrawny motel close to the

church. I didn't explain. I didn't have words left at that moment. The gathering was two hours away.

Lindsay was the one who made Brenda's bed. That was the first thing she did when she entered the house. I am sure Sandra had shared her suspicions with her. But Lindsay is smarter and less naive. Since she left us, she never spent a night at this house again. She married early and used distance and calendars like trenches to avoid closer contact with us. Brenda couldn't understand her daughter's disguised evasion of parents who had deeply loved her. I could. Lindsay knew, perhaps even before Brenda and I did, that her mother would adopt the guest room and leave the master bedroom to her father in the generous unannounced manner of all broken marriages. Lindsay's practical personality was my genetic gift to her. She doesn't need to comment on everything nor does she beg for explanations as much as other women do. Our first baby decided to follow her father's steps and be protected by his shadow. She surely loves cats more than dogs, the same as I, but never told her mother, and cherished all those golden retrievers that stained our carpets with daily perseverance.

What I don't know is who tidied the master bedroom. Who made the bed that became only mine while everybody else thought it was ours? I don't remember who helped me to get dressed for the ceremony, who drove me to the church this morning. The only words I remember are Mrs. Templeton's when she took Piper by the collar and walked her sweetly to her house: "Poor little old doggie! Come with me, pup. Your master doesn't need you around tonight. He sure cleaned up fast, though..." She didn't think I could hear her, sinking as I was into my old chair and the tumult of my discovery, but I did. I was not the one who had cleaned up. Correcting her would have been inane.

I am at peace. The night around me is just the big mouth of a fate I couldn't fathom but was about to pounce over us. My new future started last evening when I opened the door of the master bedroom, when I saw Brenda, and when my old life ended. This silence is different, I realize now. It is empty, it is pure, it is totally mine, like our bed. Until last evening, Brenda ruled the silence and filled it with hatred and blame, sparkled it with tears and molded it with the sledgehammer of her desolation.

I imagine this black mouth of tonight's night will regurgitate me at some point. My old age will start along with my widowhood. When Piper dies, I will get a cat at last. Not tonight of course. Tonight I have a more important choice to make. Where will I sleep? Neither of the beds in the house is good for me. One is Brenda's, the other, our bed, is underneath that beam.

I wonder who was the angelical hand who unhung Piper's leash and took it away forever along with my wife's lifeless body.

NONFICTION

Yesterday's Lunch

Rachel Cann

I'd heard that my grandmother was failing. Twice a week my uncle took her from my mother's house, where she'd been for the past two years, to a senior citizen center. My grandfather went to another center. It was best to keep them separated, for although they'd been married some eighty years, my grandmother had violent spells, knocking my grandfather's teeth out with her cane, once, and belting several of the home nurses who helped with her care. My grandmother was afflicted with Alzheimer's.

"What on earth does she do all day?" I asked my uncle. My grandmother was a Jehovah's Witness. Growing up in her house, I had lived, eaten and breathed Jehovah. My grandmother was a fanatic. No blood transfusions, no saluting the flag, no holidays, and no pretty gifts tied up with ribbon.

"This," said my uncle, lolling his head to one side and letting his tongue hang out. "What else can she do at nearly a hundred?"

I had flown in from out of state. There were things I wanted to tell her. Important things. I found her sitting against the wall in a chair, with her feet dangling inches from the floor. The left side of her cranium was distorted and swollen from the pressure of a tumor she'd elected not have removed. Instead, she'd gone to a health farm and fasted for forty-five days until the tumor receded. Years later, it grew back, blinding her in that eye.

Everyone in the room that late fall day was wearing a party hat. Everyone but my grandmother. Some of them wore Halloween costumes. My writer's eye took it all in at a glance: my grandmother's pink cotton dress, ironed and clean, the laces on her shoes, the emptiness in the eyes of the others, aluminum walkers and wheelchairs, the helplessness…. An involuntary shudder passed through me; so this was what we would all come to. I looked into my grandmother's good eye to see if she had lost her senses.

My grandmother's presence beamed brightly. "Satanika," I said, teasing her in Greek, laughing and crying at the same time; I was so relieved. How ironic to have come this day, of all days, the Devil's holiday. In the whole room, of twenty people or more, my grandmother and I were the only ones talking excitedly. I reached for her hand, beside myself to see her looking so well, a little fatter, perhaps, but that was to be expected as she'd become less mobile. "I see that they didn't con you into wearing a hat and that you still have your right mind."

"I never lose my right mind," she answered in broken English. From somewhere came the scratchy sound of a record player. The group leader at the front of the room called one of the little old men with a rubber elephant's nose over his own and invited him to dance. The nose was too heavy for its elastic. With each gentle step, the elastic gave way. It was eerie. Not another single sound but my hysterical laughter.

"I'm so happy to see you," I said, for maybe the fifth time. "I was so worried."

"I'm glad to see you, too. But…. Who are you?"

The little old man was led to his seat, and a little old lady took his place, eagerly grasping the leader's hands and swaying to the music. I was lost to my grandmother, like yesterday's lunch. My uncle had prepared me for this, but still it came as a shock. "Don't you remember beating me?" I asked, hoping to jog her memory. "Calling me names?"

"No," she said, sweetly. "Sorry." The tears…, the anger I'd carried for years…, gone…. It was hard to believe.

"Are you married?" she asked.

"I was but he was too stingy," I said.

"Too bad," said my grandmother, nodding in accord. After thirty-five years of bickering with me, my grandmother had become my ally against my mother, who had disowned me because I had reconciled with my natural father.

"And another thing," I said, rubbing the place over my heart to relieve the tightness. "You were wrong about my being Polish. I found out that my other grandmother was Austrian."

"Austrian?" She could not dispute it.

"Austrian gypsy and a princess to boot." I was 99% certain that my grandmother had known all along. Had not only met my other grandmother, one Mary Bubelnik from a concentration camp for gypsies in Galitzia, but counted every tooth in my father's rapscallion head. Between Alzheimer's and my mother's refusal to talk to me, I would never know, for sure.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Not too good. My hands fall asleep at night from poor circulation, plagued by the aches and pains of a woman twice my age." Being disowned was killing me, inch by inch, a hard price to pay for finding my roots.

"What's that from?"

"Smoking and too many problems."

There had been problems in this family from the beginning. First, my mother married someone who wasn't Greek and my grandparents disowned her. My uncle had a nervous breakdown just last year. My brother was up to 300 pounds, with a couple of nervous breakdowns of his own. Every meal during my adolescence was punctuated by the sound of my mother leaving a strip of rubber in the driveway. It was almost funny.

"What did you say your name was?" my grandmother asked.

My uncle told me she used to wait for him with a big needle on nights he stayed out late, after which he'd take her to Chinatown to eat to pacify her. My mother told me my grandmother caught her stealing a penny and ran a sewing needle into her palm to teach her a lesson. Once, she was stripped naked and locked out of the house! Grandmother had ruled our embattled family with an iron fist. My mother was still on speaking terms with my brother, but my uncle's wife was not allowed in the house, which meant that my cousin Despina had come over to my camp. The interloper to this carnage was my mother's new husband, Clarence: buck-toothed and beer-bellied.

"You should know my daughter," my grandmother said.

"I do know your daughter," I answered. "Your daughter is my mother."

My grandmother rolled the word "daughter" on her lips, wonderingly, patted my hand and said: "You going to be all right."

"I hope so," I said, giggling and drying my eyes. The group leader pushed a lady in a wheelchair to the front of the room, rolling it back and forth to the music. There was not a flicker of recognition in the woman's eyes. A toothless old man wearing a giant plastic bow tie and a Martha Raye lipstick-smeared mouth fluttered by. "Watch out," I teased my grandmother, "that guy is going to ask you to dance."

"I'm not crazy," said my grandmother, shaking with laughter.

"Seriously," I said. "How is Clarence treating you?" As my cousin, Despina said just before I left: "The one good thing about our grandmother, if she doesn't like you, she'll tell you to your face." I wondered how Clarence's ego was withstanding what I was sure was a constant stream of epithets.

"Clarence drinks," said my grandmother. "The bum."

My grandmother and I raked Clarence over the coals, gaining perverse pleasure in knowing that everyone within hearing distance would now know Clarence's true colors. What a sight we must have been, back-slapping guffaws, giggling like kindergartners, bonded forever by our mutual disrespect for the woman who chose marriage to Clarence rather than sleep alone!

The leader in the front of the room lined up the best of the costumed participants for judging. A little old lady in a geisha costume was the hands-down favorite. Feeble clapping duly recorded by the judges. My grandmother's hands were clasped in front of her, encircling her girth. "I got fat," she said, apologetically.

"Me too," I admitted. "But I think my head is on straight." Sometimes it was hard to tell about me. My grandmother had suddenly become very dear to me and I didn't know how I was going to leave her. "I love you," I said, "even if you don't know who I am."

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, radiating love.

"Your other granddaughter, Despina, is beautiful," I said.

My grandmother's eyes lit up. I've touched upon her vanity, I thought, the last thing that goes. The family album is full of

my grandmother wearing monstrous hats, in defiant poses, hand usually on her hip and making a face that would sink a battleship. "You mean, Despina, my son's daughter?"

"She has two beautiful children and is expecting another."

"And her husband?"

"Turned out not to be a bad guy," I said. "Even helps her with the kids."

"I'm glad."

I don't want to bring sorrow to my grandmother but my kid brother is not okay. In his last letter to me, he blamed my grandmother for his faults, for the family that was never a family, the way we'd both wanted. Until they moved in with my mother, my grandfather sat in the same chair for twenty-five years waiting to die. Depression has riddled our family like idiots run in some, but my brother refused to get medication, as had my uncle and myself. "Soft control," my grandmother called it.

"By the way," I said, changing the subject. "My father died last year. He had nothing but good things to say about you."

"He wasn't Greek," my grandmother said, remembering.

"He wasn't all bad, either," I said. My mother would never forgive me for looking him up. He'd run out on a child support order of five dollars a week. Before he died, however, my father's love for me had been unconditional, like balm to an open sore.

"Did you bring him into The Truth?" asked my grandmother.

"I tried," I said. "But he was stubborn."

I was raised in The Truth, baptized in a lake on a mountain top, against my mother's wishes. The only people my grandparents would have anything to do with were in The Truth. To do otherwise meant ex-communication. The Truth was supposed to make us free….

But, where would any one of us be if she had not made that seven hundred mile walk to board the boat at Piraeus, leaving her parent's home among the lemon trees? A home where she herself had been mistreated: hung by the heels over a smokey fire for following her father into town uninvited. A pre-arranged marriage

in Hell's Kitchen, to my handsome, gambling grandfather. The kitchen where she birthed poor immigrant babies, biting off the umbilical cords with her teeth, melodramatic though it sounds.

A woman in a ratty old wig stood in front of us with a birthday card asking for my grandmother's signature. My grandmother smiled and waved her away. Birthdays, in my grandmother's mind, were an extension of the taboo against worshipping graven images. "You sign my name for me," my grandmother said to the woman, surprising me. I glanced at my watch and saw that I'd missed an appointment.

"The next time I come, I'll bring you some candy," I said. I tried to think of the kind of candy she might like but I couldn't remember her ever eating anything sweet.

"Just bring yourself," my grandmother said.

The woman with the ratty wig and the birthday card was standing in front of the toothless old man who was playing peek-a-boo with my grandmother. My grandmother was all smiles. "That lady is a nice lady," she said to me. "I hated to turn her down." I could hardly believe my ears.

"Lunch time," called the leader, followed by the scraping of many chairs. My grandmother's hand reached out for her walker. I didn't want to see her hobble into the dining room with the others. I stood and bent over to kiss her cheek and thought about my mother; how much we resembled each other; how miserable I was. My grandmother looked into my eyes, one last time. "You be all right," she said. "You strong like me."

"Thank you," I said, turning and walking away without looking back. I smiled at people left and right, all the way to the parking lot, wondering which busybody among them would report back to my mother.

Sarah Mullen

Pendant

It has been in my online cart for a month. Once a week I pull up the image of the round pendant. Gold with two flowers etched on the front, a Cosmos for October and a Rose for June. On the back I chose a Water Lily for July. I edit it every time I look, removing and replacing the Water Lily. I can't bring myself to buy it, with or without the third flower.

"I know he is young," I said, "But I see it one of two ways. We commit to five years of complete chaos and have them back-to-back. Or we wait a couple years until just after we are out of diapers. We will have to start all over." Bryan was torn as well. He was thirty-six and wanted to have children no older than forty.

"I don't want to be sixty at their high school graduation" he said. Our son was only nine months old when talks of another child came about. I had just gotten used to stretches of sleep longer than four hours. He was still very much a baby. But when I closed my eyes at night I imagined another child in our living room, in our family photos, in the timeline set before us.

Four weeks after James was born, I tried hormonal birth control for the first time in my life. Whatever cocktail it created with my anti-depressants proved toxic, and I was left spiraling in anxiety, vividly picturing someone taking my baby, my husband cheating on and then leaving me, or driving into a tree while I had our sleeping child in the back seat. As a recovering alcoholic I was used to openly sharing my struggles with depression, anxiety, and all things mental health related. But I could not bring myself to share this flavor of mental illness with my husband, my best friend, or even my sponsor. I repeated my self-prescribed solution daily: *I am a new mom. This too shall pass. I am fine. Things are ok.*

Bryan came home from work and picked up the baby from the swing before walking over to give me a kiss. My heart rate slowed

upon seeing him. I was nervous something had happened on his drive home. He was a few minutes later than usual.

"I am going to start dinner," I told him.

"We can wait a few, or I can start it," he said, bouncing a fussing baby.

"No, I want to do it now." I stood up from where I sat and walked the few feet to our tiny apartment kitchen. I put the rice on the stove and began to prepare the vegetables. For a few minutes we talked about our days and anything new James was doing. Smoke began to fill the room and Bryan looked up at me.

"Damnit," I said, pulling the small pot from the red coil of the electric stove. I opened the lid, adding more smoke to the small space. When I went to stir the rice, I learned that it was rendered solid, black at the bottom, forming a disc.

"Mama burned the rice," Bryan said in a sing-song voice to James. "Let's go see what we can do." Before he could get up, I took the pot and threw it in the sink, turning the faucet on, adding steam to the smokey room.

"Thanks for working hard and making us dinner!" I screamed.

Bryan stared at me.

I began to sob and walked as fast as I could to our bedroom, slamming the door behind me. I sat on the bed, crying, embarrassed and worried, listening to Bryan clean up the remains of whatever I was cooking. After some time, he knocked on the bedroom door before coming in. He sat next to me but kept some distance between us. He was silent for a while. He finally spoke.

"If you are overwhelmed you can talk to me." He paused before adding, "Or we can find someone for you to talk to. You just had a baby. It is normal for your emotions to be on edge. I want to make sure you are ok." He read my face, preparing to weather another outburst.

Instead, I said, "The last few weeks have been so hard. I don't know…" Before I could finish, I suddenly understood the problem. "I think it is the birth control. I know we don't want to get pregnant with a two-month-old. But I really think that is the problem."

"Stop taking it. We will figure it out," he said, sensing my barrier dissolving and closing the gap between us. I stopped taking it the next day, washed the rest of the pills down the sink. Within two weeks I was back to my sleep deprived, emotional, new mom self. No vivid images of catastrophe, just weeping at Gillette commercials and ordering door dash instead of cooking.

For months we went on without any type of medical birth control, but the fear of getting pregnant led to its own form of stress. Another baby became my solution to the constant worry of pregnancy. My anxiety was eclipsed by my need for a healthy sexual relationship with my partner, not only for release and connection, but to feel like a woman, not solely a mother. As the topic continued to surface, we stopped being as vigilant. When I started to feel a different type of emotion stir within me, I took a pregnancy test that came up positive. It was June 26th.

Bryan wanted to tell everyone. Something told me to wait. His family lived in Chicago, and we compromised that we could tell them. After a week of hiding in every interpersonal interaction, we decided to tell my family when we were all together on the 4th of July. We ordered a shirt for James that said "big bro." My father, filled with pride and excitement at the prospect of another grandchild, hung the shirt from an old stocking hook on the mantle.

A week later, we loaded up James and made our monthly trip to Costco. I went to the bathroom, the pregnancy hormones causing me to pee every thirty minutes. When I was done, I saw a single drop of red in the water, sinking slowly toward the porcelain. I flushed and went back to meet Bryan and the baby.

"All good?" he asked.

"Yes. let's go," I said. I told myself it meant nothing. That bleeding happens for all kinds of reasons in pregnancy. We walked through the aisles of food in large quantities, picking out our staples. My mind fixated on a bead of blood flowering in the water.

"Are you sure you are ok?" Bryan asked again, next to a giant bag of popcorn.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I said.

The ride home was quiet, except for James babbling in the back seat.

"I was bleeding a little when I went to the bathroom," I blurted out as we pulled into our parking spot. He paused before responding.

"I am sure it is ok. We had sex earlier. That's probably it," he reassured me. "Bleeding can happen in pregnancy for a lot of reasons." He offered comfort, trying to settle me. I prayed and hoped and wished he was right. We decided if I was still bleeding tomorrow, I would call the OB. The office was not open on Sundays anyway. We went to my parents' weekly dinner, and I was trying to act normal, forcing enthusiasm to answer questions about how I was feeling. Was I sick? When would I stop nursing James? When is my first appointment? Smiling and nodding as the life slipped from me, one drop at a time.

When I woke up the next morning, my pants were soaked with blood. I got in the shower. As I started to get ready for work Bryan woke up. He could see something was wrong.

"I am bleeding, a lot," I said, through sudden tears. It was July 13th. We called the doctor and set an appointment for the next day, for only me. Pregnancy in a pandemic that keeps your partner from appointments is hard. A miscarriage in the same circumstances is even harder. I laid on the table as the doctor inserted a probe to view my uterus. "It may just be early," she said. "Bleeding can happen for so many reasons." That phrase again filled with half-hearted reassurance. When she pulled the wand away it was covered in blood. I was numb. I didn't want to cry in that sterile room. She looked at me, trying to read my response. Face masks help stop the spread of disease, they also conceal emotion.

The next week was filled with appointments and blood draws and false hope. I laid on the couch, instructed not to exert myself for any reason. I ate frozen meals and sat idly by as Bryan played with James in the living room. I watched *Little Women,* my comfort movie, three times. I cried as the sisters put on plays in the attic. I cried as they grew up and their lives shifted. I cried as Jo

put her hand on Meg's pregnant stomach. I knew I was losing this baby. And I knew that if I did have a daughter her name would be Josephine.

I texted anyone I knew who had been in similar situations, needing reassurance. My best friend, my husband's cousin, and my sister-in-law—all of them shared their stories while trying to leave the possibility that my situation might be different, reminding me to wait for the call. I awoke to a text. *Thinking about you today.* Comforting words from someone who had been waiting for the same call I knew was coming. When it did, the nurse confirmed what I knew. After six days the results were conclusive: "This pregnancy is not viable. Debbie wants you to come in tomorrow for a final blood draw and make sure no further action is needed." It was July 20th.

In the office, she again tried to read me. "Do you want to be pregnant?" she asked.

"Yes, I do. It is just all happening so fast."

"The good news is you passed everything. You won't need a D&C. Just to be safe, you can start trying after your next cycle," she instructed. A Dilation and Curettage, the same procedure used for early abortions was used to rid a body of non-viable tissue. She loaded me up with more prenatal supplements than I could carry comfortably. My consolation prize.

I walked through the office doors, tears obstructing my vision. I rushed to the car. I could not make it the 500 steps before they fell onto my cheeks, dampening the top of my mask. I had only imagined this baby for three weeks, from the positive test to the eight-week loss date. It was enough time to gaze into a shapeshifting future. To imagine how they would change everything. Maybe they already had.

I needed to make sense of it. I told myself a pregnancy lost at eight weeks was never going to be a baby, that I needed to move on and try again. I told myself this was the best-case scenario. No medical intervention was needed. We could possibly have a baby right away. I scoured websites for words of comfort but found an overwhelming

amount of unhelpful information. Logic in the light loses clarity in the dark and I cried myself to sleep as Bryan dozed next to me, muffling my sobs so he would not know, though he always did.

Bryan told his family. I never asked what they said.

"Do you want me to tell them?" Bryan asked me about my parents. He was ready to take on their responses, trying to shield me from any discomfort he could.

"No. I should do it," I said.

When I told them the next day, my mom gave me a hug. "I am so sorry, honey," she said.

"The way I see it is there is one more grandchild I get to meet in heaven," my dad assured me, offering the only consolation he knew. I was filled with rage. I distanced myself from the image of an angel child looking down on me. I debriefed my reaction to my father's angel grandchild with a progressive and child-free friend.

"That's dumb! It was a lump of cells," she told me. I was filled with rage. I distanced myself from the image of cells rearranging and dissolving within me.

My best friend found out she was miscarrying on the day I gave birth to my son. I tracked my memories. Replaying every phone call filled with long pauses. Every text exchange. Had I said at least she knew she could get pregnant? At least it was early? She can try again? Or did I tell her, *That sucks! What do you need from me? Space? To sit and cry with you? To laugh and take your mind away from the struggle?* Did I reassure her that whatever she feels is ok? That there is no predestined way one should deal with pregnancy loss? My response most likely fell somewhere in between.

My next cycle started, and so did our trying. For the first time sex with Bryan was robotic and planned. I thought about timing and the best positions. Someone once told me to lay on my back, and though I knew this was an old wives' tale, I found myself making excuses to stay in bed while he got up and showered. His body carried the pressure too. And both exhausted, we fought about who needed to initiate the week I was ovulating. The first two cycles passed without any change.

At the end of my third cycle, I took a test five days after I stopped ovulating, which fertility websites caution against. *You are being crazy, Sarah,* I told myself. I peed on a stick anyway. No second line appeared. Driving my son, I pulled to the side of the road. I cried and prayed to a god I was not sure heard me. And if he did, did he have any say in whether I was pregnant? I gave up the praying and said out loud, *I really want this baby.* My voice triggered a giggle in James, and I laughed as I cried and drove the rest of the way home.

Two weeks later I had not received my monthly reminder of failure. I took a test. I was pregnant. I immediately told Bryan before he left for work.

"Do you want to tell anyone?" he asked. Leaving the decision to me.

"No," I said.

I dropped James off with my mom before work. I found it hard not to tell her. As I drove my thirty-minute commute, all I could think about was withholding. I worried that treating this pregnancy with secrecy might kill whatever was growing within me. The steep calling of transparency told me what I needed to do.

Bryan came home that evening. I told him we should tell our family.

"Let's tell everyone except my mom," he said. She was very upset by our loss. We agreed we would share the news.

Pregnancy after loss comes with many of the same worries as first time pregnancy. Can I do this? What if I lose this one? Did I do anything wrong? Can I do anything right? Every pain is monitored. Every bit of food consumed is cataloged. Every action weighed for impact. Pregnancy after loss comes with waking in a cold sweat after dreaming of giving birth to a beautiful, dead baby. I was afraid to call my now pregnant best friend. I didn't want to trigger the same dream in her. Or my husband's cousin, who was pregnant with her second after multiple losses before having her first. I was afraid to tell Bryan because I was afraid telling might make it real. I was afraid.

We flew to Chicago for Thanksgiving, knowing that any day we could get the call that our baby was healthy and had no abnormalities. They also check the gender.

It came at 10 a.m. and I stepped onto the back porch.

"Your blood test results are in, and everything looks great. Do you want to know the gender?" the nurse said.

"That is the best news!" I replied. "And yes, we do."

"Congratulations, you are having a girl," the voice told me.

I went inside to tell Bryan. "We are having our Josephine," I said. Tears formed in his eyes as he held me. Our healthy baby Jo.

Bryan was born with a rare genetic condition that allows me frequent ultrasounds. Each time I left the office after hearing her strong heartbeat I was allowed reprieve from my days of worry only to slip into anxiety a few days before my next appointment. I carried her past full term. When I had to be induced for this labor, just like my first, on Father's Day, I cried at the remembrance that my body does not work like it should. She was born at 4 p.m. the next day after an uneventful labor. It was June 21st.

When Jo was four weeks old, I woke up to the anniversary of our loss and felt a haze surrounding me. I felt guilty for being sad when I had a healthy baby in my arms. I felt guilty for feeling loss as I played with her rambunctious brother. I felt guilty as I spent most of the day crying while I nursed and played and cooked and read. I sat with the squelched potential of the heartbeat I never had the joy of hearing. Of the child I never had the opportunity to hold. I picked up Josephine and looked into her face, her dark eyes staring at me as she made shapes with her mouth. James took my hand to show me something in his room. I carried one child in my arms as the other led me. They were meant to be.

When I return to my online cart and stare at the pendant, I wonder if I should change the third flower. Should it be their expected due date? If I leave it as the date of loss, does that change the meaning of the other two? I still can't bring myself to buy it. It sits there for me to return to again and again. I wonder what Bryan would say if he knew I wanted the third flower. I worry he would question why I want it with the extra one. But he would probably say to buy it exactly as I want it. That if I buy it without the third flower it may feel incomplete when I put it on. That the third flower is etched in my mind if not in the metal.

Chico

Mary Cuffe Perez

I'm sucking on a Tootsie Pop and my father, who we only know as Sonny, is staring into a paper cup of coffee like he wishes it was something else. It's 1957, Sunday morning, and raining. We're waiting in the Safeway parking lot for Sid. He's going to drive us across the mountains to Yakima to see a horse he has out there that Sonny says maybe I can ride. I don't expect this to happen.

Nothing happens the way Sonny says it will. Something will happen, but it won't be the same thing, or on the same day. You always end up elsewhere. You could be thinking you're headed for the Duckabush to fish for Dolly Varden, or up the Staircase to hunt chanterelles, or digging little necks in Hoodsport. But instead, you will either end up at Pike Market, arguing with a Vietnamese farmer over the price of a head of bok choy, or in some little closet of a store in the back alley of Chinatown while Sonny fights with the shopkeeper over the freshness of his duck; or most likely, you will be stuck in the backseat of the Studebaker staring at the outside of Sunset Tavern, a "quick stop" on the way to somewhere you'll never get to. Sonny's habit of misdirection, Marge says, is how we ended up in the wilderness of Washington State in the first place. My mother would have been happy spending the rest of her life in Tennessee where all her family lived, but I don't guess Sonny ever asked her thoughts on it.

I'm usually the one of the four kids Sonny snatches up for these elsewhere adventures. Maxine is too young and prone to dramas; Lewis is too "Lewis"; Mike is gone so much of the time we don't notice anymore. Sonny calls me his "Lefty" because I'm the only one, he claims, with common sense. That doesn't fool me. Lefty means I'm the one flushing pheasants from cornfields, toting the still warm bodies of shot rabbits and squirrels in burlap bags on hunting trips, or belly-scooching across a log over the Hamma Hamma to retrieve a snagged lure. I've been Sonny's worm digger,

beer fetcher, and, when he's too drunk to navigate, his guide back to the car. And by the way, I don't consider anything about myself "common." I have plans.

A truck pulls up. Powder blue, serious looking Chevy. Sonny sits up, dumps his coffee out the window, gets out of the Studebaker. I figure I should too. There's this guy leaning against the fender of the truck, looking like he just drove in from Montana. Cowboy hat, silver buffalo head belt buckle, boots with swirls of tooling. He's the real thing to me, all cowboy, even though I know he's an engineer who works with Sonny at Boeing. He's tall, with eyes the same gray blue as his shirt, and he smiles at me. Tips his hat. Sandy hair. I might pee my pants.

"You the horse woman I hear 'bout?" he drawls, adjusting the hat to just the right angle over his left eye. I giggle like a goon. I don't know what he's talking about. I'm so completely lovestruck I can only stare at him until Sonny climbs into the other side of the cab, and I know I should get in, too. The truck doesn't have a running board, a dilemma for me that Sid quickly picks up on. He makes a cradle of his hands, which I almost put my butt into until I realize he's giving me a leg up. Even so, Sid has to give my butt one final push so I don't topple backwards. Then I am seated between Sid and Sonny, who have not yet said a word to one another, and we're off to Yakima. I think maybe this might be all right.

Horse woman. I roll those delicious words over in my mind. Anyone can clearly see that, at age 11, I am a long way from "woman," but to hear that word drawled out by Sid in reference to me is thrilling. I know it's just one of those things adults say to kids, but it makes me feel bright as a full moon on a clear night. I may not fit the woman part, but I am a horse person for real. Just like Sonny. Only my horse experience is less actual. My riding had been done on the sly when we still lived in White Center, the first house we rented when we moved here from Tennessee. Maxine and I used to sneak into a pasture up the road from us where an old palomino named Ned was kept. Old Ned would let us climb up on his back all right, but he didn't much like being told what

to do, like move forward. If we got too bossy, he'd part company with us with one quick side step. That pretty much sums up my riding endeavors.

Though I'd never seen him ride a horse — can't imagine it — Sonny had been a horseman. He never says much about those days, but Rie, my grandmother, does. She can suck you right in with her stories. Most of her stories go way back to the days she was married to General Clarence Irvine, who she says rescued her as a young widow from the "backwater" of Fort Wayne, Indiana, and turned Robert Kelso Jr., her ten-year-old son, into Robert Irvine, aka Sonny boy. Thereafter they led a life of wealth and privilege (which Sonny boy apparently grew out of by the time we came along). Rie would end this story with the tagline: "… until, for whatever featherbrained reason, he took that job in Nashville...," then, with a staggering sigh, hand to chest as if her heart might fly out of her, "… and married your mother."

Marge says that no matter where we move, Rie ends up in the rearview mirror. Rie sold the farm in Pennsylvania and moved all the way out to Washington State and now lives just up the beach from us on Puget Sound. She brings everything she collected in the early days from her round-the-world trips with the General — furniture and paintings and huge shipping trunks with lids so heavy you can hardly lift them. Marge says that she can't let go of anything — that includes Sonny boy. There are several photos in wrought iron frames positioned throughout Rie's house of my father as a young man on his thoroughbred stallion, Pete, taking a five-foot jump; my father with his college tennis team, my father playing the piano for an admiring arrangement of women, all in long dresses, their faces eclipsed by big brimmed hats. As long as I have stared at these photos, I can't seem to take the steps from the man in the photo to Sonny.

I find myself studying him now as he stares straight ahead, past the wobbly woman in a grass skirt on the dashboard. The sharp angles of chin, cheekbone, the slash of mouth. He looks like a crow with most of its feathers pulled out.

Sid reaches for a six-pack of Olympia under the seat, which immediately puts Sonny in a better mood. Sonny cracks open a couple with the can opener Sid hands him. Then Sid pulls out a bottle of Coke for me, and with one hand, uncaps it. I'm mightily impressed by this. I suck off the fizz from the top of the bottle and decide life is not bad at all, even though it's raining and I can't see much because the dashboard blocks my line of vision. I drink my Coke and stare down at the amoeba designs on my pedal pushers and wish I didn't have so much hair on my legs which are sticking out in front of me. I admire my almost new Keds and wonder about the horse we are going to see while Sonny and Sid laugh about someone at work who has his head up his ass. I imagine myself riding that horse, and what he'll look like and how he will put his muzzle in my hand and know my soul the way, I've read, horses do.

It's a long way to Yakima. I wonder why Sid and Sonny thought it was a good idea to drive all the way out there. I am old enough to know it doesn't have anything to do with me riding a horse. They just want to spend the day drinking — which couldn't officially be called a day drinking because they had someplace to go. But I try not to think about it. I keep glancing up at the rearview mirror to catch a good view of Sid's gray blue eyes, the way they squint as if in a wind, cowboy-like. Sid isn't like Sonny's other friends — Con, owner of the Blue Ox, where Sonny does his drinking on the way home from work, or Lolibee, his rabbit hunting buddy, or Shag, who he fishes Lake Sawyer with because Shag has a cabin and a boat there. Sid is more solid, more my idea of manly. He doesn't smoke either, like Sonny, who flicks butts of Camels out the window.

Once you pass through Snoqualmie Pass, the country shrugs and becomes something else. It's magical and scary, the way you can be one place one minute and someplace else the next. On the east side of the Cascades the land falls off into long flat golden plains of hops, then cornfields, apple orchards and onion farms.

The mountains, from the east side, seem to be receding, as if next time you look, they won't be there. They always are though. Sonny took me hunting pheasants in Yakima a couple of times where, again, I played the bird dog role. We spent more time in Virgil Curtis' tar paper shack than hunting. Virgil is a black man we first met when Sonny lost the car after hunting pheasants. Virgil's shack sits in the middle of an orchard of King apples and he and Sonny spent the rest of that day drinking apple wine while I visited with Virgil's old hound that didn't have a name.

The air temperature changes as you go through Snoqualmie Pass, and rain turns to snow. You can get caught in a blizzard up here, or an avalanche can come down on you, but we get lucky and there are just these big lazy flakes of snow swirling around like they have no bad intentions whatsoever, just want to dance to whatever rhythm the wobbly woman is swaying to. Sid leans over, his arm extending in front of me to turn on the radio. "Pardon me, little lady," he says in that drawl that sounds like hillbilly music. He stays in that position long enough to lay on me a look that says a whole lot more than I know what to do with. I feel my ears go red. I've never had anyone look at me like that before.

It's country music, the kind Sonny hates, but he's drinking beer and the music is low enough that he doesn't seem to mind. It might be the slow motion of the snowflakes on the windshield, the wobble of the wobbly woman and the softness of the music that puts me to sleep. Next thing I know the truck is parked and Sid is gone and Sonny is looking hard at the side of a cinder block building painted a sick shade of green. We're on the reservation and it's a whisky stop.

Sonny is working on the second six pack, but it's OK as long as it's beer. He quit drinking whisky during the day when he almost lost his job at Boeing. Now, he only drinks whisky at the Blue Ox.

"Where's Sid?" I ask stupidly, knowing of course where Sid is because there is this building and nothing else for as far as I

can see. Sonny doesn't answer, he's still staring at the side of the building. When Sid comes out, he's carrying a bottle in a brown paper bag like that little bag isn't advertising the whisky inside, and walking his cowboy walk and smiling his cowboy smile. He swings himself up into the truck and winks at me, peels down the paper, unscrews the cap and takes a swig of whisky. He grimaces like it's the worst or best thing he's ever tasted, then winks at Sonny, who is still staring straight ahead like he is reading something on the side of the building, but there's nothing there, nothing at all.

Sonny lifts the beer can to his mouth, drains it in two long gulps, then tosses the can out the window. Sid, with a lopsided grin, holds the whisky bottle out to Sonny. Right then, my thinking about Sid changes.

They both take another drink and the two of them stare at the side of that damn puke green building until Sid finally starts the truck up, revs the engine and pulls out like some kind of point has been made. It has stopped raining, but I wish it would rain or do something. I'm trapped between the two. I can smell the whisky hate start to rise.

Sonny and Sid have stepped into some murky current of conversation, and I can't make out much. Except that Sid is talking about a woman, a woman he did something to, and how he never apologizes, not for anything. "If they can't take it, they can leave," Sid snarls. He looks happy with himself and not nearly as handsome. He takes another swig of whisky. I'm watching Sonny from the corner of my eye. I feel some heat coming off of him that makes me want to squirm away. He looks chiseled down even more, every feature sharper, even the down slope of his mouth hardens into a contrary smile. He lights another cigarette although it's already hard to breathe in the truck and I think Sid is about to say something because he doesn't even smoke and before we got in his truck it didn't have a thing in it except the wobbly woman.

"You better get over that," my father says real low, almost like a growl. "You'll be a lonely old fart with nobody to pick you up and put you on the toilet." Then he takes a big swallow of whisky

and stares across me, hard at Sid. "And it will come to that. It will come to that. Apologize sometimes." I puzzle over this. "Apologize" doesn't sound right coming from Sonny. I wonder if Marge ever heard him use this word, but I don't think about this too long because the air is squeezed tight between Sonny and Sid and I'm caught in the middle.

Sid snorts like the whisky might come up through his nose. It sounds like a challenge Sonny will surely take on. The atmosphere in the truck turns thick as the smoke and it feels like the breath is being sucked out of me. Then the truck stops.

This is not a whisky stop. Sid rolls down the window and I grab a long gulp of air. It's a grassland, dazzling in the slice of sun squeezing through the heavy lid of gray-blue clouds. The grass is palomino gold, dappled with pools of intense green that stretch for miles to a low hill dark with cedars, and through a narrow break in the cedars to a higher field of grasses the color of a copper kettle. We pull up to a paddock and shed and get out of the truck. The paddock gate is open. No horse.

Sid comes around the truck, cups his hands around his mouth and hollers "Chico!" loud as a horn blast, followed by a cowboy whoop-pee that I'd think would send a horse, if there is a horse, running in the opposite direction. The sun steps in and out again, the fields shift from dazzle to dusky. Sonny and Sid squint toward the break in the hills like they are expecting a horse, but I can't see any horse coming down from the gold and copper and green fields for a drunk cowboy. Then Sid bends down to me and whispers, "there."

He points to a black speck moving toward us. "Chico," I gasp. And he is real.

And he is here. Blowing like a locomotive, he barrels into the paddock and skids to a stop in front of the bucket of grain Sid has set out. Sid slips around to close the gate, then grabs a halter with a rope attached where it hangs from a nail on the shed. I stare at the horse, already wearing a thick chestnut winter coat, chest darkened with sweat, sides moving like bellows, pumping out heat, power

and enormous energy. He is magnificent and terrifying. Chico lips up the grain and upends the bucket with his nose, throws his head and regards the three of us, ears twitching back and forth, lower jaw grinding the last of the grain. Then he snorts a challenge. I don't think any of the three of us are up to meeting it and Chico doesn't either. He swings his head in a half circle and tears off at full gallop around the paddock, bucking, farting and pretty much confirming his opinion of us.

Sonny turns to Sid who is looking down at his fancy boots. I'm sure Sid feels the force of his gaze because I can as it passes over my head and smacks Sid. A definite challenge. Sid throws the halter and rope over the fence and stretches both arms in the air as if growing bored with all this and ambles over to the back of the shed, keeping his eyes on the paddock. He pulls a horseshoe keychain out of a vest pocket, ponders the keys for a while, then puts them back in his pocket. He turns and walks extra slow back toward us. "Too wet to ride," he announces in a pinched off drawl. "It'll spot my saddle. That saddle set me back much as the truck."

It doesn't rain as often on this side of the Cascades, but it's raining now. The dazzle off the fields. It might have just started or been raining, on and off, all along. I'm so used to rain that I don't know wet from dry anymore. I am too scared to ride Chico anyway, but now I am sure interested in seeing a saddle worth as much as a truck. I would ask, but I see that's not a good idea. Sid looks like he's sliding down into his boots, his handsome features squirming inward. I know then that he is no real cowboy. He's scared as I am. Scared of his own horse. Meanwhile, Sonny doesn't say anything, just watches Chico, a soggy cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth. He's sizing him up.

"Sorry little lady," Sid grunts. He's not looking at me but sideways at Sonny, who is still studying Chico. Then, Sid starts for the gate, to let Chico back up into the hills.

"We'll ride him bareback then," Sonny says real low, picking some loose tobacco off his tongue. Sid stops, slices his eyes at my father. He is mad as hell. Mad twisted into a sickening grin.

"Go on, Bob. I'd love to see it."

I hate Sid for sure now. He's itching to see my old drunk father get run over by a horse. Sonny isn't an old man but compared to Sid he looks it. In fact, he looks like he could probably hold a cup and sit on the sidewalk like the homeless people in Pioneer Square. His black hair is plastered in streaks down his face. He's wearing sneakers instead of boots and some shiny-at-the-ass, tan slacks he used to wear to work. No boots, no hat, no leather vest. But he isn't scared.

He throws down his cigarette, grabs the halter and climbs the fence into the paddock. Chico is still charging around the paddock like it's a miniature racetrack until he sees a rather insubstantial human standing in the middle of the paddock holding a halter with a rope attached. He stops, ears twitching. He has to be curious. Then he pivots on his back legs and bolts into a dead gallop again, throwing up his hind legs so high it looks like he could flip over backwards. Sonny stands there. Chico stops. Nostrils flaring, steam rising from his body. My father walks up to him. The horse doesn't move. My father extends a hand under his muzzle, slides the other hand down the white blaze of Chico's face, his neck, then moves one step closer and slips the halter on. I can't watch, but I do. Chico looks like he's bunching up his muscles for a serious revolt. Then my father is on his back and Chico, perhaps stunned by the lunacy of this skinny human, does not move. My father presses his heels into the horse's sides until he steps forward. He doesn't buck or bolt but breaks into an easy canter around the paddock as if this is what he has been waiting to be asked to do.

Sid and I say nothing, expecting at any instant for Chico to leap the fence and drag my old man off into the high country. But they just canter, the two of them, round and round, sinking into each lap like it cost nothing of either of them, like it is a journey they are on together, and we on the outside can only watch.

Chico finally slows to an easy trot, walks, stops. Sonny slides off, staggers a little as he leads the beautiful dark chestnut toward me. I think I am going to touch him, which, honestly, would be enough, but before I can reach my hand out to the white blaze on Chico's face, my father lifts me up on his back. Flips the rope up to me and walks away.

I don't remember the ride home, only that it rained, snowed, and the wobbly woman wobbled. I had ridden Chico. I still breathed that rank, warm horse smell, felt the heat radiating through my thighs and into my chest, sank into the gentle rocking as he walked the perimeter of the paddock, head bobbing to the rhythm of each stride. Long, red tangled mane. Peaks of ears. I slept on and off on the ride back. I don't think Sid and my father had much to say to one another. I was in my Chico place, hungering for a horse of my own with a white streak down its face and a tangled red mane, when "apologize" rose up again, out of the murk of hours before. I wondered, turning the word over in my mind, when had my father ever apologized?

POETRY

Far Field

Iris Jamahl Dunkle

It was in the far field that we found the cow: belly swollen
beyond recognition. Even though we were young, we saw
how the cow's eyes rolled back and knew the risk. So, we ran

to get the farmer who rushed as if to the beside of a dying child
and kneeled in the wet dirt to gingerly split open the cow's belly.
What spilled out—a universe we'd never known

where life flits just out of sight, a tiny blue butterfly.
The cow did not survive. The grown man kneeling in the dirt
wept openly into his calloused hands. And everything felt different

as if carved into wood. Loss became a braille I could run
my fingers over when those I loved began to disappear. The wet grass.
The smell of earth. The way the blue sky kept on.

Nightingales and Starlings

Mark Heathcote

Let's kiss and hold-hands my darling
There's no sense in alarming our parents
Not whilst we're still only just courting.

When we're older, I'll buy you diamonds
But for now, let's hold-hands my darling
And listen to the nightingales and starlings.

There's no sense in alarming anyone.
We don't want or need any deterrents
Least-not when we've only just started dating.

Darling, let's swing on the porch till the morning
Let's kiss and hold-hands my darling
And listen to the nightingales and the starlings.

There's no sense in alarming our parents
Not whilst we're still only just courting.
Oh listen, darling, all the crickets have fallen dormant.

Oh, listen to the barn owl cooing
I guess it isn't yet quite, morning
Oh darling, listen to the nightingales and the starlings

My Job

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith

In this adventure I have
five minutes to make you feel better
Here unwrap the paleta de fresa
Insert that song about roses, "…lean a little closer…"
(it always makes me laugh)

Let's open that novel to the good passage
When he brings that day old fish
He caught near Prospect Park
Wrapped in newspaper into
His high school friend's
(he's a CEO now) top floor
Windows instead of walls office
They played in that punk band together.

Of course, I won't reheat the menudo.
Or turn on the television news.
Cars crashing into produce trucks
Make everyone sad. We could look
At pictures of small towns
On the border. The quiet streets

And local stores, the vendors smiling
As they hold up an orange, a bait shop even.
Chugging bass lines make me imagine
The world is slowing down. I know
That when you feel better you brush
Your teeth and hum.

Fun Me

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith

Travel me
Paleta me
Coaster us during a summer sunset
On the weekend morning menudo me
Bus me to la playa
Novel me to the end
Muffin and café con leche me each dia
Sing me like Chavela Vargas
Between the sheets me
Sleeping late rarely happens us
The booze on the rocks me
Fly me beyond todo
Nada me
Find me at siesta time
The sun rays on the tile floors
Be me and I will smile
Toss me the ball
Bike ride me with a tailwind
Through tree shadows
Hear me music
Chugging bass line me
Sometimes me forgets to fun

About the Authors

Nancy Bourne's work has appeared in more than thirty publications nationwide. Her stories have been published in *Upstreet, The South Carolina Review, The Carolina Quarterly, Blue Lake Review,* and many others. A short story collection, *Spotswood, Virginia,* set in the South during the Civil Rights era, was published by Stephen T. Austin State University Press in September, 2021. Nancy was a retired attorney who, in addition to writing and volunteering as a fiction editor for this journal, devoted energy and passion to teaching prisoners in San Quentin; voting rights and racial and social justice; and saving the environment. Nancy died on March 11, 2021, succumbing to cancer-related problems after a 14-month struggle, during which she continued to write and publish stories and novellas, including a yet-to-be published novel set in 17th century America. *https://nancybourne.us*

Rachel Cann was awarded an MA in Creative Writing from Emerson College in 1991. She was a semi-finalist for the Katherine Anne Porter Award in 2004 (*Nimrod*). Her work has been published in numerous journals since 1989, including *Spare Change, The Old Red Kimono, The New Southern Literary Messenger, Half-Tones to Jubilee, Harbor Review* (U Mass), *Anemone, Yesterday's Magazette, Passion Press Books on Tape Anthology of Women's Erotica, Blue Collar Review, Fried Chicken and Coffee, The Wilderness House Review, Hippocampus Magazine, Florida English, WhistlingFire, The Write Room Magazine, Mug of Woe, Skive Magazine, Noir Anthology, Work Literary Magazine,* and others.

Frank Diamond's poem, "Labor Day," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize Award. His short stories have appeared in *RavensPerch, Insider, Kola: A Black Literary Magazine, Dialogual, Madras Mag, Reverential Magazine, the Examined Life Journal, Into the Void, Empty Sink Publishing, Zodiac Review, The Fictional Cafe* and the *Fredericksburg Literary & Art Review*, among many

other publications. He has had poetry published in *Philadelphia Stories, Fox Chase Review, Deltona Howl, Artifact Nouveau, Black Bottom Review,* and *Feile-Festa*. He lives in Langhorne, Pa.

Iris Jamahl Dunkle is an award-winning writer and former Sonoma County Poet Laureate. Her work challenges the Western myth of progress by examining the devastating impact that agriculture and over-population have had, and continue to have, on the North American West. She obtained her MFA in poetry from New York University and her Ph.D. in American Literature from Case Western Reserve University. Dunkle wrote the first full-length biography on Charmian London, Jack London's wife, *Charmian Kittredge London: Trailblazer, Author, Adventurer* published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2020. Her fourth collection of poems, *West : Fire : Archive* was published by The Center for Literary Publishing in 2021. Dunkle teaches at Napa Valley College and is the Poetry and Translation Director of the Napa Valley Writers' Conference.

D. B. Gardner, a graduate of Michigan State University, has had stories published in *Flumes Literary Journal, East by Northeast,* and *Black Fox Literary Magazine* and is currently working on a collection of short stories.

Joyce Goldenstern writes and "lives by" fiction, often inspired by folktales, animals, visual art, and other literature as well as her own experiences and imaginings. She has been published in many journals and anthologies and has a collection of short stories (*The Story Ends — The Story Never Ends,* 2015, ELJ Editions) and a chapbook (*Way Stops American*, 2017-18 Gambling the Aisle chapbook contest). She has been awarded two Illinois Arts Council grants for her work and won a *Quarterly West* novella contest. Her novel *In Their Ruin* will be published by Black Heron Press in early 2024. She lives in Chicago. *https://thestoryendsthestorynever-ends.wordpress.com*

Natascha Graham is a writer of stage, screen, fiction and poetry. She lives with her wife in a house full of sunshine on the east coast of England. Her short films have been selected by Pinewood Studios & Lift-Off Sessions, Cannes Film Festival, Raindance Film Festival and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Her plays and other stage work have been performed at The Mercury Theatre, Colchester, Thornhill Theatre, London and Fifth Avenue Theatre, New York where her monologue, *Confessions: The Hours* won the award for Best Monologue. Her poetry, fiction and non-fiction essays have been previously published by *Acumen, Rattle, Litro, Every Day Fiction, The Sheepshead Review, Yahoo News* and *The Mighty* among others, as well as being aired on BBC Radio and various podcasts. Natascha also writes the continuing BBC Radio Drama, Everland, and has an upcoming theatre show at The Lion & Unicorn Theatre, London.

Mark Heathcote's poems are published in journals, magazines, and anthologies online and in printed form, residing in the UK, from Manchester; he is the author of *In Perpetuity* and *Back on Earth,* two books of poems published by Creative Talents Unleashed.

Mary Lewis has published stories and essays in journals including *Superstition Review, The Woven Tale Press, r.kv.r.y. quarterly, Persimmon Tree, The Spadina Literary Review, Toasted Cheese, RiverSedge, Sleet Magazine, Lost Lake Folk Opera Magazine, Trapeze, Valley Voice, Wapsipinicon Almanac,* and a story collection, *Frank Walsh's Kitchen and Other Stories.* She has an MFA in creative writing from Augsburg University. She also has an MS in Ecology from the University of Minnesota, and taught for many years in the Biology Department of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa.

Fabiana Elisa Martinez was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She earned a degree in Linguistics and World Literature from UCA University in Buenos Aires. She is a linguist, a language teacher and a writer, who has lived and worked in Dallas, Texas, for almost twenty years and speaks Spanish, English, French, Portuguese and Italian. Her first work of fiction is the short story

collection *12 Random Words*. She also authored the grammar book series *Spanish 360 with Fabiana* and the short story *Stupidity,* published as a book by Pierre Turcotte Éditeur. Her short stories have been published in *Rigorous Magazine, The Closed Eye Open, Ponder Review, Hindsight Magazine, The Good Life Review* (UK), *The Halcyone, Rhodora Magazine* (India), *Mediterranean Poetry, and Writers and Readers Magazine* (UK), among others. Two of her stories were featured in the Manawaker Flash Fiction Podcast. She is currently working on her first novel.

Sarah Mullen earned her Bachelors of Art in English with a minor in writing from Portland State University in 2014. She is currently working on her Masters in Literature & Writing at California State University San Marcos. Her writing recently appeared in *Feels Blind Literary.* Sarah has worked in eclectic industries including substance abuse treatment, family law and construction. Her dynamic work experience has been excellent for relating to diverse groups of people, appreciating their stories, and learning how all stories are intertwined. Sarah currently lives in San Diego with her two children two and under and her husband.

Mary Cuffe Perez lives in Galway, upstate New York. In addition to six books — which include poetry, creative nonfiction and children's novels — she has published numerous magazine articles on natural history subjects, and fiction and poetry in a variety of literary publications. "Chico" is part of a memoir of linked stories, entitled *Just be Pleasant and Enjoy the Ride.*

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith was born in Merida, Yucatan, and raised in Tucson, Arizona. Growing up in a biracial, bilingual home near the frontera, and then teaching high school English for 28 years in a large urban school with a diverse student body created many experiences rich in voice and imagination. Some of his works have appeared in *Book of Matches, Hole In The Head Journal, Sand Hills,* the anthology *America We Call Your Name* and other places. Kelly, his wife of almost 30 years, sometimes gently edits his work.