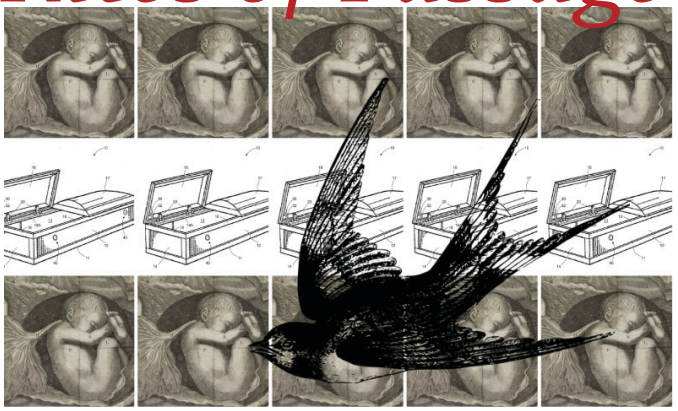
Rites of Passage



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"I believe that pain can be a rite of passage into learning."

— *Guillermo del Toro*

"To ascend to a higher rung on the ladder of personal evolution, we must go through a period of discomfort, of initiation. I have never found an exception."

— *Dan Millman*

"Death is the least civilized rite of passage."

— *Louise Erdrich*

RITES OF PASSAGE: Fiction, Nonfiction and Poetry Anthology
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Antoinette Mehler

All We Are

Salek tacked burlap on the window frame and I took giddy steps across the three meters we'd been allotted. But halfway through my second pass I stopped.

This was...theirs, I said.

Salek held me in his gaze for a second before he clambered from the table and put unsteady hands on my shoulders. Framed in the window he'd abandoned half uncovered, two American soldiers crossed the street. Broad grins. White teeth gripping filtered cigarettes. Pointing at something in this picturesque holiday resort packed with things to see.

And with other newly married concentration camp survivors.

Like theirs, our marriage had embraced brothers whose smooth faces bent over books on kitchen tables; sisters padding shoeless around sleeping infants; mothers fanning coal stoves and stirring fragrant potato soups; fathers not yet home from smithies and workshops and stores and classrooms; grandmothers and grandfathers; uncles and aunts and cousins. Children.

We'll give them new lives. In our land, Guta, Salek promised as we stepped from the blue and white wedding canopy an aid society sent to displaced persons camps. But surviving your family drains you of *We'll give them new lives*. And fills the hollow with *All that's been mutilated beyond repair*. An opaque, barren guilt usurps you. Nightmares become your children. The only ones you deserve.

Or want.

Ever again.

A desolate drum that beat louder at night, as I lay warm under the green army blanket, safe in Salek's wiry arms.

He stroked my hair. My back. Go to sleep, Guta.

New lives. Our land. New lives. Our land.

Frozen toes swelling like tubers, black against the snow. Gored horses. Angry bulls. Flames. But one night, just before dawn,

just before I woke, brown soil that crumbled, moist and warm, between my fingers.

It's a desert, Salek said, amused, when I told him.

It won't always be a desert, I said, my cheeks hot with shame for the reprieve the dream had brought. I bent over the unmade bed to hide my reddened face and mumbled,

I have to straighten thi ngs out around here.

Not that there was much to do in the *Gasthaus* room that like the rest of this inn and other houses in town, the Americans had turned into displaced persons quarters that offered an almost ordinary life.

Unlike the place we'd been before. A former concentration camp where we slept on the shelves on which our captors had stored us. Where only a favored few had jackets or scarves to hang over striped prison uniforms. Where we weren't allowed beyond the barbed wire because the soldiers thought us a threat to the people outside.

Where there was little difference between *now* and *before.*

Aliyah Bet, Salek had preached.

Aliyah Bet, the secret escape movement that disobeying the British mandate against Jewish immigration to Palestine, rescued Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe during the war. Now it filled its forbidden sailings with survivors.

Aliyah Bet, Salek urged everyone here. Family. Home. Identity. Freedom.

Yeah. No. Thanks. the frayed, gray-haired husband of the couple in the room next to ours said, shaking his head. British patrols capture the ships. They stick passengers in camps on Cyprus.

Behind barbed wire, muttered his wife, wrapping her U.S. army jacket around her gaunt, tired self, starting to shuffle away, pulling her husband along. There's no barbed wire here. Enough food. You can go where you want when the sun shines.

Not every ship. Not every one. Salek said through clenched teeth, his head bent so low the sound sank into his chest.

I slipped my hand into his. You don't need to convince *me,* Salek.

The brown soil that in my dream, crumbled moist and warm between my fingers, had done it for him.

While we waited for Aliyah Bet to signal it was time to make our way to one of the ports from which the overladen, barely seaworthy cargo ships sailed, we walked.

Up and down this small hamlet in the rolling, wooded, *Baden-Württemberg* countryside east of the Rhine, on narrow cobblestone streets that seemed to grow narrower with every step we took, past people spilling onto stoops of overcrowded group houses that had been family homes, in front of artless barracks whose overnight construction stood raw amid the charming half-timbered *Fachwerkhäuser.* And one early morning, three months after we'd arrived, to a long meadow fenced by shattered wood posts. High grass rustled between our legs and curved around a tall, thick ash tree.

Probably a pasture before the war, Salek said.

A green caterpillar emerged from the vines that wound around the broken stakes and I put my finger in front of it. The worm hesitated, standing up and swaying from side to side, then inched itself over and kept on going.

When we got back to the village I turned toward the small Quonset hut the Americans used as an office. They posted a new list of survivors every day. Salek looked up at the sun, squinting. It's almost noon, he said. And then, as if I hadn't understood, Too much time's gone by, Guta.

Yet at the bulletin board he searched the typewritten page with a trembling index finger and in a kind of litany, whispered the names.

Abel, Aberlieb, Abranel... Buchwald... Chagall...

Halfway down the list, his neck turned a violent red. This... is my older brother's name, he said, And the place he was born. And when.

By the time we made it to the front of the line and crowded through the narrow door of the corrugated steel shed, the sun had set. *Just a minute,* the young blond soldier signaled, tugging again and again on the string that worked the lone electric bulb. As soon as the light turned on, Salek spoke up.

Jacob Painsky, he said. Katowice, Poland, December 14, 1913. My older brother... Three years older.

The soldier lifted a worn, caramel colored notebook from a shelf, turned its pages, took a scrap of paper from a stack on the corner of the desk, scribbled on it, and handed it to Salek, saying almost in a whisper, It looks like Jacob Painsky was here today.

Salek shot out of the office, howling.

As he ran, his mournful wails faded into ragged breaths and by the time I reached him (my right foot, its toes lost to frostbite, slowed me down) even my wheezes were louder. He offered me the piece of paper he'd crumpled in his fist.

Oh, Salek, I cried, Salek, Jacob's address? That's what the soldier gave you? Jacob's address? I have to stop. My foot... I lowered myself to the ground. You know we can't go right now, don't you, Salek? It's almost night. Salek?

Behind him, an old farmer, gnarled hands on the ropes that harnessed him to a straw-heaped clattering dray, plodded closer. Salek tore the piece of paper from my grasp and flung himself toward the man shouting, Do you know where this is? The old man glanced at the writing and shook his head. Then he scratched his bent-over back, smiled a sad, mostly toothless smile, and started to move on.

Wait. Wait. Please, I yelled. I ran up to him and *told* him the address.

Not far to *Dossenheim,* he mumbled. He pointed straight ahead.

The year before, on the morning of March 29, 1945, my twenty-ninth birthday, in the dazzling countryside edged by the waves of beech trees that are the *Odenwald,* just outside Dossenheim on the

Rhine river flood plain, a company of the 144th Infantry, while advancing on Heidelberg, five kilometers south, ran up against three hundred Germans who raked the ground with machine and flak guns. The Americans fired back.

The quaint town was unharmed. But the houses that had, in preparation, been painted in camouflage colors still darkened its otherwise colorful streets.

A curtain fluttered in a first-floor window of one of those masked facades and a placid German face disappeared behind it.

I pointed with my eyes.

Salek, who despite the sleepless night had regained his usual composure, loosened my hand from his and with two fingers, traced an ever-expanding coil on my palm. Let's walk in circles and make them bigger and bigger as we go, he whispered. We're bound to run into their house.

It wasn't his brother who opened the door.

She was hardly taller than a child. Her unevenly hacked brown hair bristled around the small, perfectly formed ears that were all I could see of the face she buried against Salek's chest. Tattooed numbers marked the arm she bent, moaning, around his neck. With the other, she held him in a grip so close I couldn't breathe.

When she finally let go of him she waved me over.

Come. Come...

I'm Maya, she said when I reached her. Salek's cousin.

Guta... I answered, great mouthfuls of air interrupting my words... His...wife.

Maya closed her eyes. Her jaw fell open. One beat. Two...

She put her arms around me.

And led us into a dim room, acrid with the green laundry soap smell of my childhood. Lit a candle stub and set it on the table. Took a rag from the pocket of her overly large, discolored shift and wiped the chairs even though there was nothing to wipe. Salek caught her frenzied hands midair, between his own, keeping them, it seemed, from flying away.

Jacob? he asked.

She nodded.

Anyone else?

Tova, she said.

Here? Salek asked.

They'll be back soon.

We lowered ourselves into the damp chairs. Stared, as if holding a séance, at the candle flame. Maybe half an hour, even perhaps a whole hour, passed before the door opened. Tova held a small bunch of celery and Jacob, behind her, a packet wrapped in greasy paper. He dropped it when he saw Salek, and two or three marrowbones rolled to the corners of the room. Jacob reached for the bones with his eyes but didn't move. Neither did Salek.

Before I knew it, Maya and Tova had slipped their hands in mine. Holding tight to each other, we wrapped ourselves around the brothers and pressed them into each other's arms.

Maya collected the marrowbones, washed them with the green soap I'd smelled, placed them in a dented aluminum pot, and got on her knees to scrub the places where they'd landed. Tova, Maya's older sister (much taller, as if the five years had served to stretch her out) closed the door, crouched against it, and just loud enough to hear, whispered, Isn't it wonderful? Then she said it again, a little louder this time, as if whoever she was talking to was just on the other side. Several seconds passed. She unraveled her body one limb at a time. Smiled. Touched my cheek. Tucked wisps of hair behind my ears. I'll make the soup, she said, dragging herself toward the small stove, murmuring how lucky she'd been to find the celery that thrust its small green leaves from her old string bag.

It's really good, I said, my eyes shifting from my hands to the scratched table top. To my bowl.

I'm glad, Maya said.

You like it, Tova said.

I would learn that Tova usually finished the sentences Maya

started. Unless she said something sad. Then Tova's eyebrows shot up, and instead of speaking she pursed her lips into a small round grimace that lingered between her younger sister's unhappy phrases, until defeated by that thin damp circle, they dissolved into a sheepish smile.

Tova handed me another piece of bread.

Maya poured me a little more soup.

Jacob said, eyes darting about in hasty, oblique glances that made his pale eyebrows dance, You'll stay here with us.

Salek opened his mouth as if trying to breathe in words.

New lives, Salek. Our land.

But he said nothing. Instead, after yet another huge breath, he started shaking his brother's hands up and down, more and more enthusiastically each time. It made Jacob laugh. It made us all laugh.

Tova made a pallet for us in the kitchen.

The next day Salek went back to the camp and signed us out. He brought the blanket they'd given us. And the burlap, too. And the half a loaf of bread I'd saved.

One day led to the next.

Maya cleaned and washed and mended and folded and polished everything, even what wasn't visible to the rest of us.

Tova hurried about smiling, patting our arms and shoulders and cheeks, soothing scratches and scrapes, comforting us. Mothering us.

I cooked what we found or managed to get with ration cards.

You understand, don't you, Guta? Salek had said that first night, curling around me on the pallet.

I...

We can't go now. Tova is too frail. And Jacob... It's like he's going to explode. He just drums his fingers, even when he eats.

I...can't...stay... Here.

I'll look for a place to grow things. Raise rabbits. I've seen them down by the river.

The bleak drum in my head beat out *rab-bits, rab-bits.*

And then, Salek?

Then it'll be up to the rabbits, he said, putting his arms around me.

I did not tell him that wasn't what I meant.

Sometime during our second week, several tired-looking former partisans came to the door that Maya washed so often its forest green paint had started to blister (she washed everything every day in a cycle that never ended: walls, furniture, windows, food, clothes; nothing ever dried completely).

We've come to get you home, the woman in the group said, resting long fingers, nails bitten into nubs, on the doorjamb. To our land.

The day before, Tova and I had gone to forage a wild-grown patch. Pulling at the green shoots as if her life depended on it, exertion forcing the words from her like air from a deflating balloon, she mumbled words that lifted a deaf rush from the soil.

Family is all we have. All we are.

Now, as the small brigade's vaguely feral scent seeped into our clean dampness, the subterranean grumbling rose again.

Salek's family's not my family.

Jacob stood behind me, wringing his hands.

Maybe what I told him after I shut the door was an apology. One Jacob didn't know I owed him.

He listened without a word. When I was done he asked, looking at the floor, What color was it? The bus that took your boys?

Red.

I was almost taken away in a bus too, he said without lifting his head. A gray bus with the windows painted over. But there was no more room. The doors slammed shut, the soldiers turned their machine guns on us, and an officer, scarred from eyebrow to chin on the left side of his face, came out of nowhere.

We were three across in line. I was in the middle. The guy on my right started to pray.

Officer Scarface leered at him, hands on hips. What are you mumbling, you?

Please forgive me, Sir... I'm giving thanks, Sir.

Ja? And who are you thanking?

Please forgive me, Sir... I'm thanking God, Sir.

I'm the one you should thank, he said. Kiss my boots, he ordered.

The way he spread his legs reminded me of an SS recruitment poster I saw once. Anyway, the prisoners on either side of me fell on their knees.

You too, Office Scarface ordered, taking his pistol out of its holster, pointing it at me.

You'll kill me whether I kiss your boots or not, I said in German.

The right side of his mouth lifted. His right eyebrow, too. If his eyes hadn't been so blank, Guta, it might've been a smile. He kicked the men huddled at his feet until they lay still. Then he waved his head at the guards and his gun at me. Take him to the guardhouse. And with a brief glance at his feet, Finish them.

At the guardhouse, the *Obersturmbannführer* behind the desk glanced up from his papers for an instant. You speak German, huh? he said, You'll translate our commands to the new arrivals.

On my second morning at the camp entrance, an older man wearing brown pants that still held a ghost of a crease limped forward. His heavy coat hung open. The lining was torn and stained but its dark blue fabric was rich and smooth. Silk maybe. He held a dirty-faced twelve or thirteen year-old boy by the hand. I explained what was wanted but a few dead moments went and he gave up nothing, not his watch, not his wedding ring.

The guards behind me cocked their guns.

The man reached in his pocket and brought out a very small purple drawstring bag. He angled his head toward the child and whispered, To buy... To buy... My grandson's freedom...

I reached across the table for the little felt sack. Held it by a corner and shook it out on the table. Three tiny diamonds skittered

out. But there was another one. I felt it between my thumb and forefinger.

On the way back from our soup break I slipped it through the fence that separated us from the women. For when we find our son, I told my wife. We'd managed to arrange it so we marched past at the same time every day, Guta. People did, you know? One day a month or so later, my wife didn't come. The woman usually behind her in line made the thumbs down sign when she caught my eye. I never saw any of them again. Not my wife. Not my son. Not the rich man. Not, God forgive me, his grandson.

I held Jacob's hand for a while. Then I got him a piece of bread and some of the vegetable stew I'd made the night before.

That night Salek told us he'd found a small abandoned cottage. Two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom, with a tiny yard covered in rubble. Near the railroad tracks, he said. The next morning while Tova and I cleared "our garden," and Maya cleaned the cottage, Salek and Jacob brought our pallets and table and chairs and odds and ends.

On one of their trips Salek saw a rabbit and captured it, and on the next trip two more. The first was a female heavy with her litter.

Salek built cages for the pregnant rabbit and for one of the males. Tova butchered the other one. I was sickened by the smell of its blood and though I managed to cook it, I couldn't eat it. Three days later Salek killed another rabbit and the little body was still warm when I began to skin it. Tova happened in the kitchen for a glass of water, found me gagging, wiped the tears from my eyes and nose, and took over. The next morning, the smell of blood still in my nostrils, I barely made it off my pallet before I threw up. In the days that followed, when I wasn't throwing up I wanted to.

I'm sorry, I mumbled when Salek found me bent over the toilet.

He didn't say much. But when someone told him of a farmer with a hen, he put a two week-old rabbit in each of his coat pockets and set out to walk the fifteen kilometers to the place that had been described to him. After having gone some five kilometers he

turned back and got a third rabbit. Just in case. He was new at breeding animals and especially with the young ones, wasn't sure he could tell the difference between the sexes. Their parts seemed so similar to him, so hidden and inconsequential. The farmer might not trade eggs for two small rabbits if he couldn't breed them, and since farmers usually kept animals, Salek had no doubt the man would know at a glance. The third rabbit was insurance. You could at least make a meal of three small rabbits.

He returned after everyone was asleep, with three eggs, one for each rabbit. He woke me, and unwrapping the cloth in which he'd protected them put them in my lap, one after the other.

He didn't tell me until years later, but he saved the eggshells and ground them into a fine powder he fed me, a little bit at a time, lost in potato pieces he mashed carefully and sprinkled with salt.

The nausea went away.

My breasts were swollen. Just a little.

Then came the craving for sweet things and sharp things and salty things.

And the familiar small throbbing in my belly.

I'm not replacing you, I whispered to my dead parents and brothers. My dead husband. My dead sons.

And foraged and dug in the garden and cooked and put food on the table and grasped for the flashes of hope that like skipping stones, sometimes skimmed my guilt. But the more I strained toward them, the faster they disappeared.

A lonely, exhausting week went by. And another.

Then, one morning as sharp and white and vivid as lightning, Tova handed me a cup of dandelion tea. Drink, she said, as if consecrating me to some holy pact.

She took my hand and laid it on my belly.

Salek is in the backyard, she said, reaching for the cup I'd drained, and pushing me out the door.

I found him building rabbit cages.

I'm pregnant, Salek, I said.

He sighed.

My knees gave way.

Salek cried out, reached for me, and begged, his voice cracking,

Are you all right? Please, Guta... Please... Did you think that I... No. No. It was relief... That you're still... That you didn't...

You knew I was pregnant?

He nodded.

He touched his lips to my hair, pushed me away, and looked at me as if to drink me, his eyes brimming with feelings he had never named. Would never name. Then he took me in his arms again and started dancing us to a soundless cadence. In circles. Wider and wider with every turn.

When we reached the cottage he called,

Jacob. Maya. Tova.

Jacob stepped from behind the growing stack of rabbit cages. Had he been watching? Listening? I was always taken aback by how tall he was. I thought of him as small and bent over and every time I was confronted with the real Jacob, his long-limbed self surprised me. Was it just me? Did the others also see Jacob as small and bent? *Not Maya,* I told myself as she ran into the yard from washing something and shook her wet hands at him, laughing. He seized her and tugged at the hair I'd trimmed into lively curls. She laughed again. Behind her, Tova drew herself toward me, her steps uncertain, cautious, encumbered.

With no more prelude than the music in his words, Salek announced,

Guta is carrying my child.

A train whistle sounded. We were very close to the tracks. As the railcars went by we stood in their shadow.

Salek cleared his throat. And yours Jacob, and yours Tova, and yours Maya, he promised, his voice a living thing as fragile and brilliant as candlelight. Our family is going to have a child, he sang, lifting his tear-streaked, ragged, hardscrabble face to mine.

Palm Olive

"Damn, it must be mad at us," my muh declared as she rinsed the suds off an egg pan.

Normally, I finish out the script with her, but today I just said, "Yeah that's funny," in the flattest voice I had. Not only are our days together numbered now, but it makes things hurt even more for me that she doesn't seem to be bothered by that. She has that rose in her cheeks, a wild curly flow to her reddish-white hair, and her kiwi-green eyes are ponds of glee. My mother, the love of my life—I decided a year ago, while I stooped near the creek at the foot of the hill near her rented house in Arnold, Pa. Her husband, whom she won't speak to face-to-face anymore, covers the rent and my car insurance; my job at the print shop takes care of everything else. Soon, that arrangement is going to shift, and she'll need to get more money from that ridiculous man. And still, she liltingly trots out all the lines that used to make us piss-our-pants-while-crying kind of laugh.

The love of my life.

It was weird the first time I said that to myself, that May night down by the creek. Muh was already in bed, it was a Friday and the first time I had smelled the dirt in months. The word for the smell of rain on dirt is "petrichor," or so I learned on the Internet. The air, ground, and water were ringing with the urgency to push out life. I lifted up the hood of that statement—*love of my life*—and sure enough, the parts were all as solid and in working order as they could be. Who sees me for who I am and loves me nonetheless? Whose touch on my forehead or shoulder tells me everything will be okay? Where has she been all my life?

Until recently, the opposite was true. To get away from her and the man she dumped my daddy for, I became the town hump and never wanted for somebody to shack up with. To punish me, I think, she put my college money far away until the day that I

should straighten up and choose to get the education that she hadn't had, mainly because she'd married my dad to get away from *her* parents. Thing was her parents had money, my dad did not. She had me, and then when I was seven, told my daddy she was seeing someone else. My daddy started drinking more, and probably killed himself: Let's just say he was found facedown, though further south, in the same creek I was standing by last year when it hit me, with little sense of creepiness, that my mother was the love of my life.

When I was about 23, I was living with this guy named Deano Redlick. He said he was part Cherokee but he could have just been Italian. I remember one night when, as usual, he was out with his friends and I was up at 3 a.m., waiting for him. He was my number 12, give or take a few. I was deciding whether I should stop at that, a dozen, because I was actually feeling a strong attachment to him, which was new. I first had sex when I was 13, with the guy who cut grass at my mom and my ridiculous, rich stepdad's house; the landscaper had a permanent Gene Simmons KISS face tatooed on his actual face. He'd told my parents it was to hide severe burns from a housefire he'd survived when he was three, but I was skeptical, since his skin felt pretty smooth to my palm in the little cabana near the ridiculously rich pool I never went into then because I was pretty Goth and the water would've wrecked my look.

I never felt much for KISS face. I could see how, once we did it, I kind of lost the power I'd had leading up to doing it, and that really registered on me. Ten years later, though, I was finding it hard not to love Deano Redlick, but he never ever wanted to spend time with me the nights he wasn't working at his friend's scrap metal yard. At the same time, my mother was sending me love letters, trying to get me back. The letters said she understood all this was me trying to find, trying to save, my father. They said she was sorry for causing my father such pain; he was a good man and had deserved better treatment. I was reading these letters over and over. I was wondering what college was like, what kind

of a student I would be. It was 3 a.m., and I was working up the speech I'd make to confront Deano about why he never wanted me to go out with him like he used to. At the same time, I was trying to sit in such a way that the rib in the middle of my right side wouldn't hurt, because whenever it hurt I had to admit that it was probably busted from when Deano pushed me down the steps the other day, mad because I'd taken a twenty from his dresser to buy some cereal and milk. Maybe Deano was on meth; maybe I was dabbling in it too. But that particular night, I read this one line from my ma's letter about a hundred times in a row: "Carly, I'm a vase, you're my flower. Come back."

The hundredth time exactly, these rings of sob rose up in me and got wider as they rose, and I was a barrel bursting and my ribs were the staves all around me, with that broken one blaring its loudspeaker of pain. Then silence. And then something so cold I could make two real promises and know that I meant to keep them: First, I would not stop at Deano, I would keep going until I had slept with 36 men, which was the number of years my dad had lived; and second, I would never speak to my mother as long as she was with that man who, as I once overheard him say to my mom, could buy my father 1,000 times over.

I almost got to 36, but fell short by a few because my mom got breast cancer. She got a partial mastectomy, started getting chemo, and her husband couldn't go with her or even look at her without her top on. He said he was sorry, he didn't know why, he'd get therapy. He was sure that, once she had reconstructive surgery, he would be all right. He brought in people to take care of her and said nice things to her, but she kept wasting. This is what she told me in her letter when she also said she hoped that I would visit her in her new place. She'd left him and didn't care if he had the better lawyers. Her new place was out in the country near where she and my dad had both grown up in Arnold; it was an old stone house by a two-lane road. At first, I wanted to burn all her letters, but my grandmother, who received the letters and

passed them along to me when I visited her at her retirement home, would beg me with tears in her eyes to take them and read them, and now that my mom was sick, my grandmother was even more urgent; in the atrium of Mainstay Senior Living, the light seemed to shine right through her paperwhite skin. I finally wrote one back to my mom, telling her she should have known—the minute he said, on hearing that my dad had been found in Squaw Creek, "Jane, you're wasting tears on pure cowardice"—that this man would shrink from her illness. This, while running his hands up her shirt in the middle of the kitchen. I stopped in my tracks and went back to my room before they could see me.

When I got to my mother's new home, she was sitting in a rocking chair near the fire. It was late October. I knew from her letter that this hippie couple named Virgil and Kae were her landlords and lived down the road. The two people here now, sitting on the couch across from her, seemed to fit her description, so I assumed that was who they were. My ma was emaciated but every wrinkle ironed itself out when I came into the room. Where her red hair had always been short and spiky, making me silently nickname her The Swiss Army Knife, it was now clouded with gray, but thick and flowy, curls reaching out like flames from a pile of slow-burning leaves. I immediately blurted out "Wildfire." *Wildfire* was this seventies song she played incessantly on the stereo when I was a little girl. It's about somebody being crazy mad about a woman who rides this horse called Wildfire; this woman apparently dies in a killing frost and the guy singing keeps hoping she'll come back and rescue him on her horse, like a knight in shining armor. Virgil and Kae were unfazed when I said "Wildfire"; it seemed like they were used to people telegraphing huge significance to each other. And Muh nodded heartily. She only seemed to be staying in her seat because she wanted to sit back and take in the sight of me. This felt like the softest blanket ever, falling over me.

"We were just giving your mom her medicine," Kae said. "We're her nurses." They both wore jeans and flannel shirts, and

a quick scan of the room turned up a guitar, strings still faintly vibrating with the Grateful Dead bit I'd heard being strung and loopily sung as I approached the front door. There was also a skunky smell that was not the smell of a skunk. In the country, when you've already driven over a dead skunk carcass on the way, you can tell the difference. Virgil was a thin and handsome man in his sixties, with long white hair and beard, smoothly brushed, and trusting yet invulnerable brown eyes; Kae had long straight light brown hair and looked younger than Virgil, even though they were about the same age, which is often the case with genuine hippie couples.

"I really do have an appetite now I've seen my heart of hearts," my muh said, standing up from the chair and gaining a good 15 pounds in the process. Very soon, she'd be able to wear size 2 pants without an untoward safety pin cinching in the waistline. I'd seen men get cocky and full of their useless whatever at my approach, but I'd never seen love before I saw my mother get up from that chair in her orange fleece footed pajamas.

"Move in," my mother said. "I have a really nice room ready for you." How she knew I had my suitcase in the car, having heard Number 29 actually say it in words—that he would never marry me because I couldn't have kids—I do not know. (I couldn't have kids because of an injury I don't remember getting at a rave party when I was 16. I'd gone to the doctor, who sent me to the ER, and while I was being poked and prodded, I gradually pieced together something of what happened, and it all fell into place when two suburban assholes started making train whistle noises at me at a party a couple of months after that.)

My mother loves me and doesn't need to fuck me. It wouldn't make any sense to most people, but that's what it comes down to. Or that's what I realized that night smelling the new dirt in the spring while my mother slept; she was now at 120 pounds, full head of hair, and glowing with health—doing yoga, even, and picking up on the downward-facing dog lessons she used to give me when I was little. I'd put on some weight since moving in with

her, weight which only added to my beauty in her eyes. "You're beautiful and you were always beautiful, even when you dressed like a corpse," she tells me, and I believe her. In the mirror after she and I smoke a bowl, my features do look soft and well and kind. We do each other's nails. We massage each other. My mother and I are most definitely in love. I like to think I was the Wildfire girl coming back on that horse for her.

And, to top it all off, even though there were, in the doctor's words, about 10 tumors scattered through breasts and armpits, even though she was said to be Stage IV, they can no longer find a trace of cancer in her body.

We never doubted that this was due to the ministrations of Virgil and Kae, their music, their mantras, their general vibe, and their bud. I was cleaning some with them, as a way of paying them back for all their help, when the cops raided their cabin.

In two weeks, I begin serving a six-month sentence. V and K get longer, and they're already incarcerated. Ma and I write them letters that are really like song lyrics; I write a line, then she writes a line, and so on. Down at our house, which the cops didn't raid, we had just over an ounce left, so she still takes her medicine while I go without. It's not the same. As I said, she finds magic in the moment; every moment she's missed with me is quadrupled, she tells me, in the moments we share now, and yes, that is moving but not as much as it would be if I could hit that pipe just two, three times. But I need to have clean urine or I won't get released in time to make sure the cancer doesn't come back.

The script goes like this. One day, while washing dishes, my ma says, "Damn, it must be mad at us," and I'm like, What? with no idea what the "it" she's referring to is.

"The Palmolive," she says in a mock-scolding voice, as if of course I'm supposed to just know that she's personifying the dish soap. "That time we bought Dawn because we had that coupon? And we found out the bubbles were smaller and dissolved much faster than Palmolive? Well, then we bought Palmolive again and we didn't really tell it we were sorry. And now its suds seem weaker, not like they were before the Dawn."

"Stop!" I screamed the first time she said this, laughing, folding in against her. "Don't be so ridiculous." We both fell down in front of the sink, laughing. All that hair that had grown back twice as thick, twice as fuzzy, tickled my face. And when I pictured a dinner plate turning face-up in those piss-poor suds, I caught myself thinking soon he will knock at the door (my father). *Soon* was like the soft pine floor under our elbows, arms and squarish butts, the toppermost bones at the backs of our skulls. My shattered rib and shattered pelvis weren't hurting, even though we laughed until the floor was wet.

Robin Carey

Postcard

The old geezer across the aisle jerked up his head and looked around the bus with confused eyes. He lifted his hands, dropped them, mumbled an unintelligible word, and settled back with his head tilted over against the window. Soon he was sleeping again, his mouth ajar, black maw gaping, a glisten of drool on his chin. I watched for a minute, wondered what kind of man he was, his skinny hips covered in cowboy jeans, wondered what mayhem he kept cooped in his brain, wondered where he came from, riding across North Dakota like this on the dog bus, not that it was any great concern of mine, except that I was thinking about my own home town and the kind of people who lived there. I reached into my shirt pocket one more time for the postcard and read the address in the dim flicker of the overhead bulb: Lester Wanderski/322 Langor Ave. N./Casselton, North Dakota/ 58012.

Casselton wasn't much of a town, just a bedroom community for Fargo professionals and for the people who serviced them, a few remnant out-buildings from the Bonanza Farm days, political turf of the filthy-rich Dalrymple clan, but for me mostly just the dusty house on Langer, the junky back yard full of thistle, the Red Baron Lounge and Pizza Pub down on Front Street where my old man spent too much of his time leaning on the bar, and then the ball field, of course, with its chalk lines and its clover.

A smell of saddle soap rose off the bus driver's leather satchel, not my favorite smell, but the back of the bus smelled worse with its miasma of human sweat and hot-dogs-to-go. I'd been back there for awhile, and watched the first driver climb down at Jameson, and this new one climb up, his slate pants pressed and wrinkle-free, and swing into the driver's seat like he owned it.

That's when I'd moved up front for a change, and sat across from the geezer and behind the new driver. One half of the driver's face reflected in the big rearview mirror, and one half of

his mustache squirmed like a caterpillar when he twitched his lips. He drove through the darkness with a calm assurance, and I credited him.

Distant lights blinked as the towns passed. The geezer snored. I myself did not feel sleepy. I watched the distant lights and studied my finger nails. Dickenson, Glendive, Miles City. Was my old man anywhere along this route, I wondered, was he under one of those roofs with the yard lights? If not, where then? It's not proper or fitting to be ignorant on these matters.

Just past midnight the bus turned twice through the streets of Billings and then into the dark station lot. The driver switched off the motor, and the two passengers in back climbed down through the rear door and scuttled into darkness. The geezer gathered himself, went out the front, nodded to the driver, and tottered away toward the streetlight. The driver made his final check of the seats and picked up his slate jacket.

"Where are the station lights?" I asked.

The driver turned. He stood there giving me a look.

"I need you up and outa here," he said.

"My ticket says Lander. I figured to sleep in the station."

"Sorry kid," he said. "This company is on strike as of midnight."

"They sold me a ticket."

"Where?"

"Casselton."

"Yeah? " He slicked back his hair and lifted his satchel. "I'm locking this bus up. Better get yourself a place. Maybe they'll have this settled in a few days."

I tried to look miffed, but didn't feel it enough, and it didn't work. This guy only held the wheel, only followed the road. I got my bag from side-storage and went on down the street toward a blinking neon bar-light.

A water-stained sign in the window read "Rooms." Inside the place it was smoky and tight, with a velvet picture of Elvis over the bar. A puffy-eyed woman traded me cash for a key. The stairs

sagged and smelled of urine. Three burned holes in the bedspread matched the room's number. The walls creaked. Voices filtered up through the floorboards. The windows were sealed shut, and the bed sheets thin as gauze.

I dug around in my pocket and lifted out the bent-over postcard. It was postmarked from Lander, and showed a picture of Lander's main street, some old commercial buildings, and behind them a range of mountains, high and timbered. I turned the card over and read the small script for the hundredth time: "Dear Lester. Remember this place? We were here once. You should see it again sometime. Your Dad."

What was it he had liked so much about Lander? Maybe those high, cool mountains rising up behind it, places of retreat, places of escape. Maybe that was it. Or wasn't. Three things I knew for certain about my old man. He threw a wicked knuckleball. He liked to fish for trout. And he'd walked out on us without a word when I was twelve years old. Then this other thing, this postcard that arrived in our mailbox a couple of months ago. I'd been able to get a glove on his knuckleball most of the time, but this postcard through the mails was a digger. I read it almost every day trying to figure it out.

The doorknob turned. The door rattled hard, but the lock held. Footsteps moved off down the hallway.

"Let the bastard try," I thought, wishing I had a baseball bat, and for no particular reason remembering those uniforms we wore, white and clean, and the smells of clover in the outfield, and that baseball spinning fast as it came curving across the numbers. For a minute there I thought that none of the dirt and none of the smells of that lousy room could touch me. Hadn't I stood in against those wicked side-armed sonofabitching curves? Hadn't I hit a couple of them out of the park?

At dawn I clomped down the sagging stairs, out through the bar with its spilling ashtrays, my suitcase banging my leg, on past a sleeping mongrel, to a street lined with cottonwoods. I walked for some ways out toward the junction with Highway 212. There were smells in the air of asphalt and fresh-cut grass. I sat on my suitcase and watched grey clouds pile up along the horizons.

A beat-up Chevy truck came out from town and pulled off beside me on the road, gravel popping under the tires. Out of the cab climbed a burly white-haired guy who grabbed my suitcase and shoved it between some galvanized pipes in the truck bed.

"That should hold them," he said, and wiped his hands on his overalls.

We both got in the truck from opposite sides and looked each other over. His hands on the wheel were swollen and red at the knuckles. He had knobby teeth. The truck smelled of cigars. We sat there eying each other for a minute

A kestrel dove off a telephone wire out front of the truck and struck a small bird. I watched it. Loose feathers swirled past the windshield. When I looked at the driver again, a pistol pointed at my face. The guy grinned his knobby grin at me.

"You're early on the road."

"I guess I am."

"I don't trust your kind one minute."

"What kind is that?"

He just looked at me. He said, "Them pipes was rattling. You best sit and mind your business. Think on all the drugs and pussy that make up your wasted life. God judges us all."

He waggled the gun at me, then put it down between his seat and the door and pulled his truck out onto the highway. He saw me looking at his knuckles. He said, "Was a time I could box pretty good. Won eleven of twelve professional fights."

He paused, considering, and added, "Should have won twelve."

"That was then," I said.

He eyed me for a minute, shrugged, then opened and closed one swollen fist. "I work the big rigs now. When my wrench slips off a bolt, the knuckles get chewed. Feels like the old days, sometimes, with the hands all swollen up."

I said, "I need to turn south, down toward Hardin."

He just nodded his head and kept driving.

As he drove I tried to imagine how he had looked in the boxing ring, his yellow-white body gleaming with sweat, his slow left jab pushing out, his right cocked under his chin, his legs like sun-bleached fence posts. He'd be one of those slow relentless ones.

To my relief he made the turn south, and rumbled on a few more miles, but he pulled over in a bad place. Sometimes they do that, take you out a few miles from town, where the drivers are just kicking into cruise-control, and drop you there.

"Hey kid," he said with a little bark of amusement, "get yourself a haircut."

My suitcase was bent and dented in new ways when it came free from between the pipes, but it didn't matter. The boxer-man hollered something else I couldn't make out and turned left down a ranch road with a cottonwood wind line, black dots of cattle on the hills beyond. His truck raised a line of dust as he drove away, and the back of his head glowed like cotton candy. He'd held that gun in his left hand, steadied across his right arm. Lefty, then. I should have thought of that. Lefty with a right jab.

Thunderheads were building to the south and west, and a purple storm-light moved across the fields with a kick of wind. Two cars passed me by, one with its headlights burning. Drops of rain fell against my face. Curtains of rain closed down across the base of the sage-dotted foothills, no tree in sight to shelter under, no overpass to north or south. The rain came harder. My leather jacket soaked up the rain and felt heavy where it sagged across my shoulders. It got cold and lonesome out there on the edge of things.

Finally the rain blew over with a wash of virga. A wet-fresh smell of sage rose up from the ground. In the sun-break, under a clearing sky, I stopped shivering, but I was way too far out from town, and what cars came by never slowed, only the kids waved out the back windows.

Almost an hour passed before a Ford rig pulled over. This guy's hands on the wheel were small, almost dainty, and covered with freckles. Blonde eyelashes made his eyes look sandy and distant.

His heater fan was blowing. Once we got started up, he pushed the speed needle to ninety and kept it there while he talked. He was a rancher who still worked his cattle with a horse.

"The big boys are using helicopters. Can you believe it?"

"I can."

"Hard to compete," he said, shaking his head, then looked over at me. "I don't generally pick up hitchhikers."

"Why me?"

"Truthfully? I thought you were somebody else, the Hays boy from down the highway. I don't see as good as I used to. But jeez you two do look alike, twins almost."

He took me only a couple more miles down the road.

"Every little bit helps," I told him as I jumped out, but it was just something to say.

Like the boxer, he had himself a side road he could turn down, a sloping road along an outcropping of yellow rock, and though I couldn't see around the last corner of the hill, I knew there would be a ranch house down there, friendly faces in the windows, some dog named Shep or Laddie bounding off the porch to greet him. The thought made me remember again my old man, how he'd turned away from our house in that green Buick sedan of his, had maybe looked back one last time in the rear-view mirror, had maybe seen sunlight flare on the front pane-glass of the living room before he'd rolled out over the crunching gravel of the drive and past the stalks of the dead garden. Sometimes I even think the old man set off driving to Lander right then. But I'd checked the Lander listings, just like I'd checked other listings across the Dakotas.

A wind rolled tumbleweed along the fence lines, and I stood there with that funny feeling you get when somebody says you look like somebody else. You don't know who or how, good or bad, where or when. First the lefty guy thought I was a druggy. Now this Hays boy. The Hays boy meant nothing to me. The only person I could think of around those parts with maybe some affinities was George Armstrong Custer. He hadn't died that far from where I stood. When he'd been up on that ridge above the Little Bighorn

he'd probably seen a sky like the one above me right at that instant, and seen it edge-to-edge, seen it vainglorious, hadn't seen much else worth noting, hadn't checked the shadows, the dark declivities of the ground, and wasn't that different from myself in that regard. Wasn't a lot that scared me, and wasn't a lot that slowed me, and I guess that's just another definition for being young. Being young, with the long hair flowing down over the shoulders. Being young, able enough to count, but not much willing to add.

An ancient Pontiac stopped, half rusted out on the back fenders, with two old native women inside, their hair in braids, their faces wrinkled. I climbed in back. The rig was so badly sprung that my head kept bouncing up against the roof as we drove. I hunched forward with my knees almost on the floorboards and my nostrils flaring to the smells of leaking gasoline. I put my face up close to the backs of their heads. I whispered, "Name is Custer. My friends call me George."

Old-woman laughter, dry and dusty, tinkled around over the dashboard as we bounced slowly across the landscape.

"Welcome to the Agency, George," said the one driving, while the other one lit a cigarette from the push-in lighter, then waved the lighter around like a knife and said, "We cut your nuts off, George. We cut everything off, and there wasn't much there."

Her words settled into the smoke she blew out. More laughter tinkled. I could only smile. Just a handful of blood makes a good enough joke in a bleak landscape. "You look wet with good rain," said the other.

When they dropped me outside Hardin, I pulled out my stash of M&M's and poured some into their hands.

"Truce," I said.

And so it got late along the roadways, with thunderclouds over the Bighorns to the south, and shit-hided cattle pushing along the fences behind me, dust just starting to rise back up again through the day's rain, spurts of dust rising under the hooves of the moving cattle. I felt less like a kid, my hair itchy with dust, and wondered how I must look from the inside front seat of a

tourist Wagoneer. Probably on the lam, down-at-the-heels, lost and lonesome. Sometimes it wasn't so lucky to have grown fast and early. I looked big, and the leather jacket wasn't the best style for hitch-hiking, either. Cars kept passing me by.

It was twilight when a green car pulled off a side road and stopped at the intersection where I stood. My heart flipped for an instant, because this was an old green Buick sedan like my dad had driven, but the guy rolling down the window was a stranger. He asked, "You seen my wife?"

He had an odd twangy speech, something queer with his mouth; and his question made me laugh.

"She's out here somewheres," he said, serious. "Got herself a flat tire."

The man motioned me in and flicked on his headlights. I realized he had no teeth in his mouth.

"Well, to hell with her then," he said, his lips folding and flapping over his gums.

He turned south and drove fast, although the engine kept missing. He talked crazy.

"The goddamned insurance company takes their time." he said. "It's the goddamned phosphorus mine." He pointed at his gums, opened his mouth, and snapped it shut again. His forearms and shoulders looked like he worked out with weights. His face was short and sharp.

I said, "I can see what you mean."

"What do I mean?" he flared.

"You've got no teeth."

"Right. Goddamn phosphorus eats out your teeth like acid."

He drove us on south into Buffalo, and down some side streets. He had a whirly on the steering-wheel so he could spin it fast. He skidded us up onto a two-track drive of dirt at the back of a clapboard bungalow where an empty dog kennel tilted on its side against a broken fence. I kept looking at this guy. He had a hooked nose slanting out from a flat forehead, an extended birdy shape to the back of his head, black hair chopped short, and his eyes flat-gray.

His kitchen smelled of cinnamon. It was clean and tidy with red-and-yellow peasant paintings across the walls. It made me more hopeful. He handed me a beer, then climbed a chair up into a closet and came down again with a cord light and a screwdriver.

"The name's Walt," he said, and muttered something about tires. "Give me a hand?"

We went out to work on the car. I was shivering in my wet coat and shirt. I sat in the car shivering and drinking beer and turned the motor for him while he reset the points. The glow of his cord-light turned the house-siding an eerie yellow. He'd say, "Hit it now. That's it. Slow. Slow. Slow. Slow. Stop!"

He scraped the points with a hunting knife, and when I got out of the car, he threw the knife just past my shoulder into the fence where it stuck and quivered. I pulled it out and hefted it and walked back to where he stood, turned, and threw in one motion. It was a good knife. It turned over and drove point-first into the fence. This made Walt laugh. His gums flapped together. We started betting. He tacked little pieces of cardboard up to the fence to throw at, his cord light hanging on a clothesline post.

"That's pretty good, kid," he'd say. "Pretty good. How about five on this one."

We were even for awhile, but I started losing. I owed him thirty bucks, then forty, then fifty.

"Double or nothing" I said.

"OK," he nodded, and without hardly pausing centered the cardboard with the knife's tip. I didn't even throw. I swallowed hard, and stood there looking at the ground. Walt spit on one arm and shaved at it a little to test the blade, then slid his knife into a leather scabbard. We went into the house. He fried up some hash and diced in some mushrooms. We ate it with tomato kechup.

"You got hustled, kid," he said. " I never lose with a knife."

"I got ten bucks is all. I'll pay the rest when I can."

He looked hard at me for a minute while he sucked in on his lips. "Never bet what you don't have, kid," he said. "But I like you, so forget it. I'll need me a new goddamn tire for Vera. You can help me with that."

He gave me an army jacket to wear so I would stop shivering. We went out again into the dark yard, flashes of lightning skittering over the Bighorns. We drove north.

The windshield wiper on my side of the car didn't work. Rain vibrated across the glass and blurred my vision. I thought we were looking for his wife and scanned the roadside for glimpses of some figure hunched between the asphalt and the fields. This was my expertise, after all, searching for a lost soul, for an entity adrift in the rainy universe, but, as usual, I saw only an empty road.

Walt drove fast, and the engine sounded better. His wheels slugged into the road puddles, thumping and screaming. The blue-green dash-lights cast a glow on his nose and cheeks. His hands on the wheel looked innocent and white. A thick chain glimmered around one wrist under his sleeve. I looked past him through the clearer wind-shield of his side, past the swick-swicking blade. We were climbing. We dropped down, then climbed again. Ranch lights shone out to the east and then snuffed away as we came into timber.

He said, "There's a place up here. We'll get us a tire."

"This will be easy," he added, braking, and spinning into a U-turn. He backed up a trace-road through thick jack-pine and turned off the lights and the motor. We walked back down the trace to the highway, and up the highway to a Sinclair station with a cafe attached. A night light glowed from the gable, and a card in the window read "PIE." I could feel water in my shoes. Walt's army jacket shed the rain from my shoulders. We went around back looking along the walls.

Two tires on rims leaned against a flat-tire trough. A tire iron lay in a puddle beside them. Walt picked up the tire iron, and with a little flip of his wrist launched it out ahead of himself. It spun like a boomerang before it clanked down on the cement. He jimmied the station's side door with his knife and it opened. Walt went in and passed me out a tire. It smelled of new rubber, with a

tag stapled to one side. A truck came up the road and passed with a quick flick of light across my body.

I could feel a heat in my temples and the rain on my face. Walt stood calmly inside checking out the shelves. He tossed me out some cans --battery spray, rust solvent, lock oil. He tilted a can to catch light on the label and stood there reading to see if it was something he could use. I kept looking up the road.

I said, "Lights coming."

The lights caught high on the green dinosaur at the top of the sign, then moved down as the truck topped the rise and leveled, slowed, arced into a turn, and stopped at the front of the station, engine idling, lights shining. The cab door opened.

Walt eased out, closed the door, and scuttled into darkness around a corner. I followed. The rain came too loud to hear footsteps, but we could see the gigantic shadow, how it stopped by the door, and the odd wagging of the head refracting in the puddles. Walt had the tire-iron again. We backed along each wall ahead of the shadow. The cans felt heavy in my pockets.

Something bent inside of me, something hard and cold pulling me away from myself. Not until I'd crossed the road did I know I was running. A sound followed, humming close, then a concussion of air. The spray-cans kept bouncing in my pockets. I clawed and rolled up the far road bank towards the darkest shadows. I lay there panting in the punk and the needles, the panic slowly fading, and looked back for whatever might follow. I lay there for some time wondering what I should do. When finally I worked my way downhill and back to where I could see Walt's car, he was there, lifting that new tire into the trunk.

Walt drove back to his place without saying anything.

"I like it you don't ask," he said finally, "but don't worry about it. The guy jumped back into his truck and drove away. Must have figured he'd scared us off. "

Walt took me out to his garage cluttered with motors and gunny sacks. He fashioned me a bracelet of bike chain like the one he wore. He said I'd earned it with my handy diversion. He switched on a hanging bulb over the workbench and held my wrist on an anvil while he hammered in the pin. I lifted my arm to feel the greasy weight of that chain, the cold difference it made, the circle of its coils.

Walt made up a place for me to sleep on his living room sofa, then went out again and found his wife somewhere. Vera. He didn't say where he found her and neither did she. In the morning she smiled, cooked up some eggs and sausage links. "Have some more," said Walt. "You're a growing boy." He dropped two more eggs on my plate and afterwards gave me a lift out to the edge of town. I never figured him out.

A salesman picked me up from there and took me over the Bighorns and on down to the outskirts of Thermopolis. I never once looked back. Walking the last mile into Thermopolis, I saw a woman riding a horse, her silhouette against the sun. Her hair gleamed. I felt love of the usual kind, a distant drifting dream. She was far off and smooth as mirage.

At the south edge of Thermopolis a red-bearded trucker picked me up and got me down to Lander. He tooted his horn at almost everything we passed. At the first billboard north of town he pulled over. He said, "Better get out here. I ain't supposed to pick up hitchhikers."

He revved up, pulled away, and tooted one last time. I walked into Lander, suitcase bumping on my leg, and ambled around the town. Found the post office where that card must have come from, but not much else, nothing looking the least familiar. Why had I bothered with all this, I wondered, and tromped into a corner cafe, dropped my suitcase inside the door, bought a bowl of chicken chowder, and filled up my stomach on crackers from the basket. The waitress there asked me my name. "Lester," I said. Hers was Becky. When I was finishing my soup, she came by and whispered, "Lester, wait outside for me."

I sat out front on the cafe stoop fingering that chain on my wrist and wondering if its weight would make it harder to get around on a fastball. Becky came out, scooped up her skirt, and

sat down beside me. She looked at the chain around my wrist, and touched it. She twirled it around my wrist and looked at me with deep brown eyes. Just then a pink Cadillac pulled up front. A lanky cowboy got out with twin button-down pockets on his shirt and a white Stetson on his knobby head. He looked pissed off. He ordered, "Becky, come on and get in." She got up, brushed off her skirt, and tossed back her hair.

She said, "Nice knowing you, Lester."

"You want to do something about that?" the cowboy shouted up at me.

"Might."

"Don't," said Becky, and I couldn't tell what she wanted.

"You don't have to do that," I told her.

She just smiled at me, then went down the steps and got into the pink Caddy.

"Anytime," the cowboy shouted to me.

I got up and walked down to him. I watched Becky's face behind the car window. She put two fingers to her lips, blew me a kiss, then put her two fingers to the window pane.

When I turned back to the cowboy, his fist was already winging its way through the airwaves, coming round the mountain, zinging through space like some kind of guided drone carrying a message intended for me and my kind. It landed on my left ear. The intensity of the pain shook me. It felt like the whole left side of my head had turned to fire. I guess I sat down in the road. I remember the pink Caddy driving away and the exhaust blowing back into my face like a last insult.

I clawed back up to the cafe stoop, held a hanky to my ear that was bleeding, and slumped there in the doorway like some old drunk, thinking about the bus from Casselton, and my various rides on the way to Lander, and how the dirt and the smells and the black roads get inside you, all those cars going by without slowing, all those kids waving through the windows. Waving at what? My stomach jumped, but I held it down, the way you hold down a dog to give it a shot. My old man probably had something in mind about Lander, but I didn't know what. He'd come back to see it, and sent me a postcard. I guess that was all there was to it. We'd driven out together that one time, and he'd taken me up to a lake somewhere west of town. We'd caught a mess of trout, taken them back to camp, and the old man had fried them up nice. I remember the taste of them, how the salt stung on my sunburned lips, and how we sat there together watching the fire burn down.

I dug out the postcard one more time and moved it around in the light like there might be a secret inscription on it somewhere. Nothing. It was just a postcard, one bent-up piece of cardboard, slick on one side. The caption read "Historic Downtown Lander in Wind River Country."

Not even a face on the stamp.

I sat there remembering Casselton, and those words my mom had screamed at me when I walked out the door. "Just like him!" she'd screamed. "Why do you want to be just like him?"

Mariah Smith

Raven Rock

No one was worried at first.

Yeah, it was strange for the battalion's executive officer—the second in command—not to show up at work on Monday morning but I thought she had an appointment. We both quietly saw our counselors once a week for the same problem, the residue of combat, which manifested itself in different ways. Maybe the nightmares had been unusually bad this weekend and she was there. Only after text messages went unanswered for most of the morning did I begin to feel like something might be wrong.

At lunch I stepped outside to call her. Straight to voicemail. With two hours to kill before the next meeting I headed out to Southern Pines. The Commander would ask me anyway what we'd done to try and get a hold of her.

Tess Martin and I had been a pair, inseparable and interchangeable in the eyes of the Army, since our Officer Basic Course in 2000. I can't tell you how many times I was mistaken for her and she for me by our fellow soldiers and superiors. Not when we were together, only when we were encountered apart by someone who knew us both. In my mind we only bore a passing resemblance to each other. To be honest, she was more striking. Taller, blonder, stronger, louder. I could hold my own but it just seemed to come so easy to Tess. She was a tremendous soldier and both men and women looked up to her. I used to joke to people that mistook us that I was the "70% version of Tess." We'd had multiple assignments together over our years in the Army. The old adage that two strong women can't work together without competing and causing drama is a sexist myth. I'd rather go to war with Tess then just about any man I knew.

I drove past the drop zones of Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the smoke from the summer controlled burns smoldering in the woodline, the smell delicious. A line of paratroopers dotted the

sky, drifting towards earth on their circular parachutes. The C130 aircraft that had dropped them was already circling back for another pass to discharge more human cargo. I wondered how many more times I'd see this sight. My Army days were numbered and I drove on, through the smoke and through the falling soldiers.

Tess's house was in the posh gated part of Southern Pines. A proper officer's neighborhood where the counters were granite, the cars were less than 3 years old, and every window looked into its neighbor's lot eight feet away. All of it surrounding a charmless manmade lake. A place where, when my now-ex-husband had once driven through with me on the way to a friend's promotion party to Major, he had sighed happily looking out the window, and said "This is what success looks like." I already knew, even if he didn't, that he was about to be my ex-husband, so I just gave him a tight, quiet smile, not even caring to debate it but knowing that this was most definitely not what success looked like to Major Shane Mccullough (then Miller). The week I handed him divorce papers I left our on-post quarters and put an offer in on a small care worn ranch house, barely more than a cabin, on 5 acres in fox and longleaf country, just outside of Southern Pines. A place where million dollar horse farms and golf courses were interspersed with long stretches of rusty trailer parks. He took all of our home gym Crossfit equipment, most of the fancy William Sonoma and Pottery Barn wedding gifts. I took my grandma's old Fiesta Ware and the hodge podge of antique furniture, my guns, and the cats and I was happier then I had been in the whole five years of our marriage.

So Tess was the more glamorous one of our duo. Her life always seemed more grown up then mine, more traditionally successful. I often felt like the more rustic, stranger one. Neither of us had ever made time for children. She had a beautiful pedigreed Weimaraner. And a gorgeous cobalt blue Jeep, four=door Wrangler. Her hobbies were stylish—yoga and rock climbing. I had two cats and a 15-year-old dented Ford Ranger. The thought of getting a newer, prettier car when the Ranger was paid for made no sense

to me. If you counted the feral tom cat who had moved into my shed on his own accord, I now had three cats. I think that made me a bona fide cat lady. My little family had grown, much more to my liking, since my divorce.

I pulled into Tess's tidy, short driveway. Her pretty Jeep was parked there. I felt relieved. Surely she had told me about this on Friday and I just forgot. Did she forget to put in a leave form? Were there workmen coming to the house? I headed to the front door and knocked and waited. Nothing from inside. I peered through the skinny transom windows. It looked as if no lights were on inside. I knocked harder and waited some more. I started to feel a stirring of dread. I realized I'd have felt better if her car weren't there. "TESS!" I yelled, cupping my hands around my mouth and pressing them to the glass of the transom windows. I backed up and looked at the house again. There was a small deck in the back, practically butting up against the next door house's side. A high privacy fence surrounded the tiny back yard, meant to contain her leaping giant of a dog. I walked around to the gate, bouncing up and down to see into the yard. Wilber wasn't there and he certainly hadn't barked at me inside the house. I wondered hopefully if they'd gone out for a run. I sat on the glossy white painted rocker on the front porch to wait and texted the Operations Sergeant Major.

"The XO isn't home. Neither is Wilbur. Jeep is, though."

I put my phone back in my lap, too anxious to scroll through Facebook while I waited. My phone vibrated from the Sergeant Major's response.

"Is the Scout there?"

I jumped up, hadn't thought of her old International Harvester Scout, a project car abandoned by her ex-husband. With its old bikini top, the Scout only emerged on perfect summer days, not too hot, no chance of rain. I hurried to the other side of the house, crunching over dry pine straw mulch that still had the wilted, small foundation plantings the builder put in. Tess was not the gardener that I was. The huge yard of my small ranch house was an explosion

of roses, vegetable and herb beds, and dainty fruit tree saplings. I peered in the window of the garage. The Scout was gone.

I climbed back into the Ranger but didn't turn it on. I didn't want to go back to post. I felt like I needed to keep looking for her. I swiped at my phone and opened Facebook, pulling up her profile. I didn't recall seeing her post anything recently, in fact, I hadn't heard from her at all that past weekend. Which wasn't all that unusual. We went out together about every other weekend. I have always been more solitary than her and to me a productive weekend could be spent all by myself, expanding the garden, clearing brush, tending the neighbor's horses, and making repairs on the ranch house. I'd go 48 hours without talking to a soul, unless you counted my friends at the checkout counter at Lowes, a trip I made religiously every Saturday morning to pick up things my little homestead needed.

I scrolled through her page. Nothing jumped out at me, no new photos or wall posts from friends, no location check ins. Only new thing on there from the past week was a repost without comment from a tourism website. Raven Rock Park. Wilderness on the Cape Fear River.

I hit the Sergeant Major's number. "Hey, its me. The Scout is gone."

"Well there you have it. Weird of her to not show up at work though" The Sergeant Major sounded as worried as I felt.

"Do you need me back there for the training meeting? I want to drive out to Raven Rock Park—it's the last thing she posted on Facebook. Can you try and keep calling her?"

"Yeah, been trying a bunch, keeps going straight to voicemail."

"When does the boss get back?—I think we need to tell him. We're sure she didn't tell anyone in the battalion she had leave or a pass today?

"Wouldn't she have told you?"

"Yeah..."

"OK, keep me posted."

I climbed into the Ranger and set my GPS for Raven Rock—I'd heard of it, but had never been there. It sounded like someplace

Tess would have taken Wilbur for a hike. But on a weekend, not on a workday, and she wouldn't have forgotten to tell us if she was missing work.

I followed the commands of the GPS mindlessly, not noticing the turns, an overreliance on technology I'd come to hate. I wondered if there was any use in calling Tess's ex-husband and I dreaded the thought of talking to him. When Tess and I were suffering through our divorces we spent countless 'nights drinking our way through too much wine before switching to bourbon, trading stories of our miserable marriages. How had it happened, we asked ourselves? How had we both made such terrible mistakes? We were smart, capable, tough women. How had we both picked men who were so awful to us?

It was almost 1 pm when I pulled into Raven Rock. I slowly circled the main parking lot and didn't spot the Scout, but the lot was full and a surprising number of folks were out for a Monday. There was a smaller lot, higher up in the park, near a trailhead and the Ranger bumped along a narrow graded road. I saw the Scout parked in the shade as soon as I pulled in. Instead of relief, I felt a sick sense of foreboding as I pulled into the space next to it. Wilbur's leash was tied to the winch on the front and a bowl of water filled with leaf debris sat on the grass five feet in front of the truck. When I stood up I saw the ticket on the window and I plucked it out from under the wiper. It had stormed hard on Sunday night and the ticket was still damp.

"All vehicles are required to be removed from the day-use lots when the park closes at sundown, except for the camp grounds. Register your vehicle at the visitor's center." The ticket was dated Saturday night, 8:05pm, almost 40 hours prior.

The next few hours passed with agonizing slowness. I found a park ranger. I told him about the Scout and the ominous Wilburless leash and Tess, the faithful Army officer, not showing up for work today. I rode back up with him to the upper lot, where he walked around the car, confused and eventually joining me in quiet, serious worry. I called the Sergeant Major who called the Commander, on his way back from a professional conference at Fort Leavenworth. The park ranger and I did paperwork and when the State Trooper showed up I went over it all with him again. I pulled out my phone and showed him Tess's photo, he studied it and then studied my face.

"She looks like you. Are you two related?"

I smiled a little at the familiar comment. "I guess you could say she's like a sister to me."

The Commander and I got on the phone together and after a solemn debate over who should call her parents, he hung up to call her folks in Texas and give them the news no parents ever want to hear, even when their child is 36 years old. Their daughter was missing.

That night, I couldn't sleep. I sat out on the porch until full dark. I watched the pair of grey foxes that lived in the hedge along the side of my property trot their way across the yard to eat the spoiled fruit and stale muffins I'd left out for them. My mom would be upset if she knew I did this. She kept telling me foxes eat cats. I thought of feral Tom, purring himself to sleep on the seat of the riding lawn mower in the shed, a massive dusty black animal with scarred ears, and thought it was much more likely that Tom would brutalize these delicate foxes floating across the lawn.

I'd be out of the Army in less than a month and I felt lost. The Army was drawing down and a bunch of us had been offered 15-year retirements to leave now in lieu of any hope of future promotion. I suppose I should have felt lucky. Most of my soldiers were envious of my position and I tried to be sensitive to that fact and not cave to self pity before them. Truth be told, my feelings were hurt. I didn't understand why the Army suddenly considered me dead weight. I'd done four deployments: one to Iraq and three to Afghanistan, doing well on each one. Tess and I had held almost identical assignments and gotten nearly identical evaluations. But suddenly at this critical juncture she was being groomed for eminent Battalion Command and the Army was showing me the door. I'd been in the loop of the Forever War on Terror for all of

my 20s and half of my 30s. It colored every aspect of my life now and every part of my being. Why didn't it want me anymore? What was I lacking? I'd checked the Airborne block, had led well in combat, and even had an advanced degree. I had absolutely no idea who I would be when I took off the uniform and was no longer Major McCullough, US Army officer.

The phone rang at 7 am Tuesday morning. The police had found a kayak they thought might be hers, floating upside down, miles down the river—could I come identify it? When I got to the station, I couldn't say for sure. I did my best to try and remember if the red kayak that was always tucked neatly on hooks in her garage was the same scuffed and muddy one sitting in the evidence room at the state trooper's office. The officer looked at me disappointed. It was a brand commonly sold at higher-end outdoor stores, I had a similar one myself in blue. The most compelling case for it being hers was simply the fact that hers was missing from her garage.

By Tuesday night Tess's parents, whom I've known our entire time in the Army, arrived from Texas. The Commander and I drove over to Tess's house to meet them. Tess's mother, a frailer, faded version of Tess, had taken something, probably Xanax. I couldn't say that I blamed her and I stuffed down the urge to ask her for one for myself. She was distant as a mirage, calm, almost in a torpor. Sitting stiffly in a dining room chair, she ignored my attempts to draw her into the living room and the couch, just as she ignored the tea I placed on the table in front of her. Tess's dad broke my heart further. At turns business like and logical, jotting down ideas for what he could do in the next few days, agencies he would call, places he would look. He paused to thank the commander and me for our help and mid-sentence quietly crumpled into tears. He quickly choked them down and apologized, studying his notes and a county map in earnest embarrassment. I sat with them for hours, worried to leave them alone in the house like that. Finally I slept, leaning over in an easy chair in the living room, feeling too guilty for some reason I couldn't define, to stretch out on the couch and pull a blanket over me while her parents suffered,

sleepless in the guest room, their quiet murmuring of conversation leaking through the walls.

On the third day of Tess missing, we got the only good news. Wilbur was found. A couple had found him on Sunday morning when he wandered into their campground at Raven Rock, collarless and whining. They had asked around at the Ranger's office but at that point no one knew Tess was missing yet. When the local news started playing clips of her, asking for information, and describing Tess and Wilbur, the couple had recognized him from the news and brought him to the police station. I drove there and brought him back to Tess's house and her parents. By that evening Tess's mother was up and washing and rewashing everything in the kitchen and listening—nodding gently and distractedly—to Tess's father as a steady stream of ideas and reassurances poured out of him, all while tears leaked slowly from the corners of his eyes, wetting the collar of his golf polo. By 10 pm no one had eaten anything, same as the day before, and no one wanted to. Tess's parents asked me if I would keep Wilbur at my place while they focused on the statewide search for her. I left them in silence to fear the worst.

The Army had to list her as AWOL—Absent Without Leave—until she turned up or a body was found and that status felt like a dishonor to her reputation. All Tess had ever wanted to be was a soldier and a leader, we had both picked it over everything: children, marriage, and stability. She would never go AWOL.

Thursday morning, the fourth day, the Commander called me into his office to show me something. While going through her things her mother had found printed emails in Tess's bedroom. Stacked and highlighted, all from her ex-husband James. Too upset to read more than a few lines she gave them to the Commander and me to decide if the police should have them. They were horrible. The most vile verbal abuse and threats I had ever read. Over and over he called her worthless and a fraud, a whore, and he swore to destroy her for leaving him. While the words from James were enraging it was their effect on Tess that broke my heart. In her

responses, my beautiful strong friend appeared to believe him, to believe she deserved the insults he spewed at her. She apologized over and over and seemed helpless and diminished before his onslaught. The messages went on up until the week before her disappearance. Why had she printed them out? For the first time it occurred to me to wonder if Tess had committed suicide. Either that or her worthless ex-husband had made good on his threats to "destroy her." The Commander drove the emails straight to the police chief himself.

That night I wasn't surprised when I saw James' picture on the news. I remembered how handsome her ex-husband had been once, how beautiful they had been together, when no one, not even them, knew it was all fake. No one looked good in a mug shot. Red faced and softened jaw, you could practically smell the alcohol through the TV screen. His chin had weakened over the past few years, crumpled up like a sad little dried apple underneath his mouth. I realized that whatever happened to him, he's ruined regardless. I learned the police took him into custody because the emails made him the most likely suspect. But no one was even sure yet if this was a murder, a suicide, an abduction, or a deliberate disappearance. Since there still wasn't a body, after he'd been in jail a few nights, they let him go.

The Commander put me on leave and I felt even more useless. I had 20 more days until I was out of the Army and I wanted to spend them working hard. A foolish part of me thought that the harder I worked, the sorrier the Army would be to see me leave. It didn't work that way. I knew my unit would miss me, but it was the faceless human resources command that decided I was an excess number to be eliminated.

I spent the morning sitting on my front porch watching the crows that I had over many months lured to the yard. They loved shiny things and bowls of dog food and I loved to hear their voices talking to each other from the tall pines that line my front yard. Crows can recognize faces and remember who helped them and who hurt them, and I had carefully cultivated their trust because I

had always loved these smart, glossy black, raucous birds. Everyone was worried about how I was doing but I didn't feel there was anyone I could talk to. Tess would have been the one I could tell my darkest thoughts to and she wasn't here. I was scared and the intense anxiety of waiting for good news or any news hadn't faded into sadness yet, although I was feeling more and more sickly certain that good news would not be coming. I threw dog food to the crows gathered on the lawn, wondering not for the first time, why a group of them was called a murder. Wouldn't "coven of crows" have sounded more poetic?

During the worst hours of our divorces, Tess and I would dream of what life would have been like if we'd walked radically different paths instead of becoming Army officers, if we hadn't married men determined to break our spirit and our bank accounts. If we hadn't spent our youngest adult years going to the same war again and again, every other year, until it became monotonous but never any less dangerous or exhausting. We'd share articles about daring women throughout history. We sketched business ideas on napkins and made long lists of places we wanted to see. We took pleasure in imagining ourselves in these alternate lives where we were the best and wildest versions of ourselves. I sat on my porch and tried to imagine she was free and working in the Dolomites as a climbing instructor, her favorite fantasy. How would she have gotten there, though? There would have been a record of her leaving the country. Some trucker would have remembered picking up a pretty blonde hitchhiker, right? But when I thought of her parents, her mother sedated into a zombie, her father choking back tears, as much as I wished the version of Tess faking her death were true, I hated the idea she could do this to her parents. If she wouldn't have left us to run away, how could she have left us via suicide? How could she have left Wilbur? The not knowing was agonizing and I found myself growing angry. Angry at Tess, angry at the uselessness of the official investigation, angry at myself for not probing more, not knowing she had been feeling terrible, deep down. I thought of her words to her ex-husband that I had read:

"I hate myself, I'm sorry I'm not a good person." How could she have felt that way? Anyone who spent ten minutes around Tess could tell right away she was a good person, it radiated out of her. All of us were drawn to her warmth.

Sometimes, they say, the dead appear to you in dreams so that you can say goodbye. It happened to me when our old commander was killed in Iraq in 2003. About ten nights after his death, I'd had a vivid dream of standing in the middle of a classic Italian restaurant. White table cloths, red leather booths, dark wine colored walls. Our commander stood in the middle of the restaurant, silent, a small smile on his face, dressed in a clean set of desert camouflage. In my dream I felt a calm swell of affection, knowledge that he was dead, and no fear. I walked up to him and said "I miss you, Sir." He smiled at me gently, nodded, but didn't speak, his gaze shifting to a spot far away, over my shoulder. We stood there for a few moments in companionable silence, me knowing I was saying goodbye to my mentor and seeing him one last time. Then the dream was over and I was awake, but with a slight easing of sorrow and a feeling of peace that I hadn't felt since before the ambush had taken him.

Sleep paralysis had haunted me since I was a teenager. It had only gotten increasingly worse with time and with each subsequent deployment. I'd read that is brought on by stress and with Tess's disappearance, it came on again with a vengeance, leaving me afraid to fall asleep and tormented when I did. That fifth night I felt the familiar waking fugue state, body frozen. Though the panic has never disappeared over time I've learned to recognize it and acknowledge it for what it is. That night I fell asleep with the bedside lamp on because I was a chicken shit and I didn't want to be in my own dark house by myself. A few hours later, I came back to consciousness in the dim light, the familiar terrifying feeling of the demon pressing down on my chest. My body was frozen. Auditory hallucinations are not uncommon with sleep paralysis. In the past I had heard music, voices, and explosions. That night I heard something different. I heard a wet sound outside my room, in the living room. The sound of something soaked and dragging. I struggled to move, which only increased my panic. The light from the lamp seemed dimmer than it should have been. Crackly black shapes danced at the edge of my vision as if I were going to pass out. I knew what was coming. I knew who was outside my room. Her shape filled the doorway. Then she was standing at the foot of my bed, water streaming off her clothes. My twin, my best friend. She opened her mouth to speak and storm-stirred water poured out, the color of tea. I closed my eyes and screamed as hard as I could, the exertion immense, the sound nothing more than the small croaking of air escaping my lungs. But it worked and I jerked into full awareness, my body unlocked. My room was empty, the lamp bright. Wilbur whined from his crate in the kitchen, and I hurried to let him out and bring him back to my bedroom with me. He rushed, his huge silver body wriggling with excitement, into my room and sniffed furiously at the foot of the bed where the apparition had stood. That was the last thing I wanted to see him do. I nudged him with my knee and my foot touched something on the rug. The small colorful red and blue Mazar-i-sharif rug I had toted back from my first tour in Afghanistan. The rug was damp, cold to the touch.

Three more weeks passed and then I was out of the Army. There never was a funeral, at least not at the time of this telling. I stayed in touch with her parents from time to time, gave them updates on Wilbur. Battling ghosts and a blank identity, I couldn't stay in the little ranch house in the Pines, I put it on the rental market and grandma's china and antiques in storage. I took my honorable discharge papers and my Ranger, Wilbur and all three cats, and the last of my nice Major's salary and bought a small Airstream travel trailer and across the country and up the Al-Can highway we went. I made it as far as Anchorage. Inside every homemade cabin in Alaska they say you will find the shell of a travel trailer somewhere. The vessel that carried us wayfarers here. Alaska is 25 percent veterans. But I don't even talk about it here. Alaska is also a place where everyone is half-wild and people go to reinvent themselves.

I found a job doing quality control inspections for the oil industry that paid a stupidly high salary compared to what I needed. When I have enough, I will go somewhere else and invent myself again as the person I want to be, someone I can look up to. When Tess and I used to sketch out our dreams I would imagine a rustic farm in the wilderness or near it, where fellow veterans could come and help work on the land and let the things that haunted them fade. To become themselves again or someone better. To escape any feelings of worthlessness by caring for growing things every day. There will be all kinds of animals, livestock, horses, whatever and whomever is in need of a home. At night, in the travel trailer—with a tiny space heater going and Tom attempting to lie on the keyboard and Wilbur attempting to sit in my lap, I write and I plan. I am a blank slate here and I am nobody's twin. I am waiting for the closeness of the wars to fade and preparing to become the next version of myself. On the weekends I take Wilbur out to the water's dark edge but we never go in. The crows here are the size of eagles. We watch them circle the sky and cry.

Lyn Stevens

Cleaning House

In July, shortly after I graduated from NYU, my mother called to say she needed my help. She was leaving my father, moving out of the house. She begged and needled and blackmailed me with the silent treatment when I balked. My manager at the smoke shop told me summer was not the time to be taking off and warned I might not have a job when I returned. My boyfriend, the glassblower, told me I was insane to leave now when we'd just begun to talk about moving in together. It was no use trying to illuminate anyone about the perverse pull home had over me, so I blew them off.

The following week I picked up a peppy Zipcar I named a Snot, which my mother had paid for, and headed up the Henry Hudson Parkway. It was dusk by the time I meandered through the quiet curvy streets of Brookline, Mass. Trees swollen with leaves stood guard over the legendary black and white Brookline street signs, their puffy green florettes shielding bleached brick houses and Queen Ann Victorians and colonials in white-washed colors trimmed with black shutters. I passed a red, white and blue mailbox, then a walled-in garden. A walkway dignified with stepping stones. A mural painted on a double garage door, each house so individual, so clearly defined, it could tell me the story of who lived inside.

Like Cheever and Yates and Updike and Perotta and Chang Rae Lee, I'd decided that writing a suburban tale would be my niche. I could be a lady who wore sunglasses all year long in a mid-century modern bungalow, or an eight-year-old child from Braintree who'd mastered fifteen languages, or some tech mogul in a multi-terraced house whose start-up had failed. I was good at it. While earning my BA in creative writing, I'd published two short stories, one in a literary mag, the other in an online journal. Both stories were about the New England suburbs though they were not about myself or my fam.

I pulled up to the curb, turned off the engine and sat lurking in the car. In the grey-violet light, it looked worse than I remembered. The sloping front yard was mostly hidden in overgrown or dead bushes and the lawn was patchy with brown grass and weeds, flecked with dandelions. Shingles were missing from the siding, the tan paint faded and cracked, dormer windows in the attic boarded up. And though it had been a long time since I'd come home, I knew, the way you know immediately when the skin of a piece of fruit is badly bruised, the outside was a key to the inside.

I gulped down the last drop of bottled water, hooked my laptop bag over my shoulder and lugged my duffel up the broken cement walkway. I didn't want to belong to this or them. Yet here I was. My key still worked but I had to kick open the front door which was bent at the frame. My father was slumped over the piano, his back to me, playing a complicated jazz riff. Compulsively, I surveyed the peeling yellow walls, the pilled couch, the crooked book shelves. Two spindles of bamboo shot out of the wicker coffee table. Knee-high piles of books were strewn on the floor, alongside cartons of manila envelopes and newspaper clippings and whatever else. Maybe my mother was right. Maybe it was a disease.

My father, Robert Matthew Kaminsky, is a full professor at Boston College. Standing 6'3, with an egg-shaped belly, a deadly white complexion, bushy eyebrows and longish grey hair, he looks exactly like the mad scientist he is. He's written scores of research papers on medical microbiology, with a specialty in how marine phytoplankton is being used to treat chronic illness. He speaks fluent French and Yiddish and loves to tinker with broken appliances and rusty machinery.

"Dad, I'm home," I said.

He turned. I was surprised to see how fragile and thin he looked, less surprised by his dirty t-shirt.

"Good to see you, *ma minette.*" 'My pussycat' the nickname he'd chosen for me when I'd learned to crawl. "I wasn't expecting you for another few hours. You should have called or texted."

"Sorry, I lost track of time. The house. It.. It. What happened?"

He slid out from the piano bench and stood, looming over me. "Not even a proper hello and you're starting in with me?"

"It, I.."

"Come here and give your old man a hug."

He took me into his arms. There it was – that terrible ache I'd always felt from his long, tight desperate hugs. Guilt, love, rage, forgiveness. Impossible to tell.

"Much better," said my father, releasing me.

"Where's Mom?"

"On an observing run at Kitt Peak on the four-meter telescope. Her flight lands tonight."

"Are you okay?"

He sighed. "Your mother is a contradiction. Although she can imagine how light propagates in space, after all this time she still doesn't get me."

"Is there any way you can talk her into staying? I mean, you love each other, right?"

"Love is a virus, ma minette. In Pammy's case, the symptoms have apparently become poisonous. She may be leaving me, but I'm certainly not leaving her."

My parent's relationship was a mystery. Despite their constant warring, they'd always been loyal to each other, seemingly above and beyond their allegiance to me and Oliver, my much younger brother, who was away at Andover.

"If you could, you know," I said with a raised eyebrow.

"I *don't* know. What?" He sounded both wounded and angry.

"Never mind," I said not wanting to trod that slippery path.

My father checked his mechanical watch. "Go put your things in your old room and I'll start dinner. I found this wonderful recipe for stew."

So I hiked up the steps, sidestepping cartons of old magazines and an ancient printer. On the landing a pair of spaceman headphones I'd used for speech therapy was hooked over the banister. I felt myself blush. I'd had a severe lisp right up through middle school. I set my duffel in the hallway, pulled off my hoodie and

maneuvered around a monstrous bookcase that had once been in my father's study.

I eyed myself in the streaky mirror in the bathroom. a short, pudgy woman in a black tank and cargo shorts with star tattoos trailing around my left ear down my neck along the top of my shoulder, and starting just below my right ear, in letters the size of pinkie fingernails, the Vonnegut quote: *Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow*, which makes me smile every time I look at it.

After washing up, I dug into my duffel for a bottle of Australian wine the glassblower had given me. Before leaving New York, I'd confessed I wasn't ready to move in with him. We'd argued about who was making more money (me) and whose craft was more impressive (me again). He'd told me my writing was unformed. Not as unformed as your lumpy vases, I yelled. All the wine in the world couldn't make up for the insults, leaving hurt lodged in our hearts right next to the love.

In the dining room, more dusty cartons of books lined the bay windows, the table littered with pens, pencils, melted candles, a little wicker basket overflowing with office supplies, crusty spices, a box of chocolates, and a jumble of yellowed mail.

"Here, come sit," said my father, bringing out a couple of plates and a pot of stew.

I moved everything aside to burrow out a place.

"Do you have a corkscrew?" I asked holding up the wine bottle.

"Of course I do."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I'm getting a negative vibe from that question." He left, reappearing moments later and handed me a corkscrew.

"Not that way," he said as I tried to figure out how to work the damn thing.

FU, I thought, grabbing my phone, finding a matching photo of the corkscrew (who know there were hundreds of complex corkscrews), then watching a 30-second YouTube to put it together and uncorking the wine. "Voila!"

"*Bien joue,*" exclaimed my father. I smiled with uncertainty.

He ladled out some stew and poured us both a full glass of wine. "Tell me about graduation. I'm sorry we couldn't make it to New York. We wanted to. But your mother was giving a paper at the American Astronomical Society meeting in Austin."

After a graduation ceremony with 8,000 classmates I'd gone back to my dorm, vaped some Indica Strain marijuana (strong, fruity and sweet aromas to provide an uplifting, euphoric sensation) and still in my purple gown and mortarboard, wandered through the cavernous NYU bookstore, feeling like one of Wendy's Lost Boys, picking out books, putting them back, at last unable to resist buying one new and one old (*November Storm* and *Tenth of December*). I'd worn the purple gown for three straight days, had sold my last hookah wearing it.

"Graduation was fine," I said. I stood up to get the bread and again to get the butter. We passed the butter back and forth over a chipped mug filled with packets of duck sauce, hot mustard and soy.

"Did you hear about this young woman, Reality Winner?"

"Who?"

"That air force vet charged with leaking classified info."

"Reality Winner, no kidding? That is a mad cool name," I said, obsessed with names for my characters.

"In any case," my father said dismissively, "her arrest was completely unwarranted. If the NSA document she stole alleged that Russian government hackers targeted 122 local election officials right before the election, we are entitled to know. Don't get me started," he said but he'd already started. "Remember 9/11, *ma minette?*" (I was five). Strangers, anyone you met in Pioneer Supermarket would give you a sad, complicit nod, but now nothing that greedy lying cocksucker does is shocking because everything is. Forgive my bad language."

I gulped down my wine and poured myself a second glass.

"Yep, it's a lot to take in," I said, peering up at a 2003 New Year's decoration strung across the dining room entrance.

I was thirteen before I noticed my house was different. When Amy, my best friend in 7th grade came over with Tom and Stewie, her boyfriend, Stewie, called the place a fucking pigsty and my eyes popped open. (It had been more humiliating than Tommy slipping his hand up my shirt and wedging it underneath my padded bra.)

It's a sickness, my mother told me as she wiped away my tears. Like alcoholism. Tell your friends to pretend they're camping. But I hadn't told them. I just didn't bring them around after that. It wasn't only the shocking awareness that my home was different. I suddenly saw the ugly complications of the whole world more vividly. And it became harder to love my parents.

The sadness was like a tangy stew bloating my stomach. I knew not to start but started in anyway "You know, I could help you," I said softly.

"With what?"

"Fixing things up a little."

"I'm not interested in fixing things up right now."

"How come?"

"I'm not sure that's any of your business but since you asked, I don't have time. I'm busy. There are only so many hours in the day."

I fortified myself with another gulp of wine. "Dad, won't you feel better if things are organized? We could get rid of junk together and throw stuff out."

"You want to throw out MY STUFF! What are you? Insane? 'My stuff' ISN'T junk. I'm not a hoarder. I'm not inept and I'm not crazy." My father emptied the wine bottle into his glass. "You're a chip off the old block, just like your mother, aren't you?"

"I was trying to offer my help. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"You're not sorry. You're not sorry at all."

The meat turned to rubber in my mouth. I struggled to swallow it.

"Excuse me." I stood with my plate in my hands.

"You don't have to do that. Just leave it on the table."

"I don't mind."

"Leave it, I said."

I trudged up the steps, walked into my room at the end of the dim hallway, hearing echoes of my mother. Not the words but the angry inflections I remembered hearing in my diluted sleep. Nothing had changed. My clothes were still scattered on the floor, my narrow childhood bed still unmade, the scuffed white furniture littered with knickknacks. Edges of Matchbox 20, Pink, and Foo Fighters posters peeling. I plunked down on my bed and reached for my laptop.

In the opened closet where I used to try and bury my mind, a thick shiny loose-leaf book caught my eye. My brother's quarter collection. It had been my father's. I'd thought at the time it was a dumb Christmas present but then I'd found Wisconsin and both Oliver and I were over the moon. I wished I could text him but he was fourteen and didn't have a phone. I got up and flipped through the hard plastic pages, dumped my change purse to check for the missing quarters: Connecticut, Shenandoah and North Dakota, all dupes. I felt delirious from too much wine, angry and disoriented from arguing with my father. I meant to start writing but flopped down on my bed and fell asleep.

Much later there was a knock on the door. "Zozo, are you awake?" said my mother, flipping on the light.

"Mom?" I sat up in my bed.

The Second Brilliant Parent. My mother, Pamela Sullivan, is an astrophysicist, a leading expert in the field of massive star formation in giant molecular clouds. But beneath her dazzling theories and drive to succeed, my mother is a social misfit, aloof, self-centered and a severe yenta.

She shuffled towards me, looking the same as always, her grey hair in a short sloppy braid, her eyes as dark as space. An ill-fitting suit hugged her pear shaped body.

I rolled to the wall to make room for her to sit.

"We have a lot to do. I've planned it all out. We can work for a few hours each morning and then you can write your Great American Novel."

"Short stories. Are you sure about this?" I said.

"I'll admit it's a challenge. I've been mulling this over for years. I'm 51, more than half my life is over. Three days, four, five tops and then you go back to your novel."

"Short stories," I said, baring my teeth.

"Of course darling, but if you want to make a name for yourself that isn't the way."

"We'll talk more in the morning," she added cheerily and kissed me on the forehead.

I was wide awake now. I opened my laptop and began to type.

The tech mogul sat on his third floor balcony with his gin and tonic. He lit his pipe, and he puffed and he puffed and he. Does anyone still smoke a pipe I wondered. What if the tech mogul stalked the woman with the sunglasses because of her lovely, scandalous body? What if he fell in love with her and didn't care that she never took off her sunglasses even when they made love and eventually talked her into marriage? Suddenly my thoughts were textured and burning so bright I couldn't stop writing.I imagined a big backyard wedding with Chinese lanterns where the wait staff all wore white and walked around the garden festooned with purple hydrangeas the size of cantaloupes, holding trays of Crystal. *During the ceremony the woman in sunglasses slowly lifted them, uncovering her eyes the way a bride uncovers her face by lifting her veil and he saw she was missing an eye. Would he still love and adore her? Be blind to her blindness?* I rubbed my eyes with my fists and the trance lifted. I needed to write something bigger and bolder than Boy Meets Girl. This was shit, anyway.

At 7 AM, I trotted downstairs and hunted for the Mister Coffee. The sink was piled with dirty dishes and greasy plastic take-out containers, the counter overflowing with more dishes. I was too repulsed to keep looking. Back upstairs, I showered and put on a pair of jeans. I knocked on the master bedroom, peeked in. Empty. Then I poked my head in Oliver's room and there was my mother in her granny nightgown, jabbing away on her laptop.

"Darling, why don't you run out and get us some coffee while I shower and we can get started as soon as you're back."

"Mom, this is crazy."

"Do you know what's crazy? All the weekends I've spent trying to put things away, moving them from one place to another. There comes a point," said my mother. "Now please," she hissed.

"Okay, I'm going."

"Your father likes two Sweet 'n Lows," she called out.

My father wandered down the hallway with only his striped pajama pants hanging loosely off his frame. Now that I looked more closely I saw his sagging cheeks, lips thinned out, green eyes as murky as a pond.

"I've been researching. Come, take a look," he said.

A dank odor wafted from the study when the door opened. In the corner was a kiddie pool where he was growing unicellular algae. On his desk next to his microscope, a coffee maker stained brown and next to that a row of plastic containers, each the size of a bread basket. In one there were large test tubes, in another small ones and in the third, glass slides. "Look!" he said, pointing at the containers. "You've got to stay with one small area for 15 minutes a day. Every day."

"That's terrific," I said though his pronouncement was upsetting for some reason. He must have sensed me trying to be kind because he kissed me on the cheek.

"I'm going out for coffee. Do you want anything?" I asked.

"Your mother likes those hard rolls."

The deal was if I packed enough to pacify Mom in the morning, I could write in the afternoon. We started in the living room while my father banged out a Chopin prelude on the piano. Using a box cutter, my mother slit open a couple of cartons.

"So tell me Zo-Zo, why aren't you writing the Great American Novel?"

"I love short stories, is why." From Irwin Shaw to Lorrie Moore. It seemed I was also a poet.

"Have you given any thought to graduate school? You know Robert and I were in academia for a total of 24 years. Isn't that right, Robert?" said my mother loudly.

"26," said my father and ran his thumbnail up the entire keyboard.

"24," mouthed my mother. "By the time I was your age, I'd written my thesis.

"I'm still in the early stages of my writing career," I replied.

It was stupid and boring, sifting through my mother's research, hearing about this theory of space or that theory of light. Admittedly, I simply tuned out. I came across a carton filled with old poems and drawings, school photos and handmade cards, mixed up with Oliver's finger paintings.

"Does Oliver know?"

"There's no point in upsetting him while he's in summer school studying Shakespeare. He's taken up fencing and I hear he's quite the swordsman. We'll get together in late August and have a family reunion. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

I looked up at my Dad's rounded shoulders. "Would Dad go for that after you've left him?" I asked quietly.

"He would do anything for you," said my mother abruptly and that shut me up. Silently, I picked through about a dozen poems I wrote when I was eight or nine, all mounted on construction paper and framed with glitter or macaroni, whimsical and far-fetched. I had no memory of writing them, only a distant humming quarrel in the background.

White is a lily, a diamond a dove.
White is a marshmallow and the first sign of love.
Frosting, pudding, vanilla ice cream.
White is the best parts of your dream.

"The Snow Kept Falling" by Zoe Sullivan Kaminsky.

It was snowing. Everybody hoped it would stop. And it never did.
It kept snowing and snowing and snowing and snowing.

"Even then, I didn't know how to end a story," I said but nobody was listening.

Outside, the electric green foliage glistened in the sunlight. Carol and Sherry Greenstein, the neighbors across the road in the yellow colonial with Grecian columns, were weeding and mulching, looked up and four heavy gloved hands waved at me. I waved back. My god, how they must despise us, having to look at the house every day and on such a warm and cheerful day, a perfect day, in a perfect neighborhood. *A Perfect Day for a Bananafish*, the epic saga of the Sullivan-Kaminsky family with its enigmatic ending. I ducked into the Snot.

The town library was an austere, mammoth three-story brick building with concrete columns and cornices. Inside, it was airy and bright. Was clutterless a word? Before settling down I roved up and down the aisles past Anthropology, History, Psychology, Law, Philosophy, Religion and Education. The Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Oceanography, Engineering and Medicine. My mother had taken me to this library when I was little, holding Oliver in a sling. We would hang out together in the YA section and she would pull out books packed with facts that piled up on each other and got so weighty I could feel them topple over. This was where I'd learned that every star was a galaxy all its own and there were billions of galaxies. Later when my mother would leave me alone I could float away on whatever stories I chose. P*eter and the Starcatcher, The Fault in our Stars, Number the Stars.*

I found an empty table and opened my laptop.

What if the tech mogul and the woman with one eye gave birth to a child prodigy and the little girl was revolted by her mother's deformity and resentful of her father's wealth. What if the girl's parents kept missing her spelling bees? A child. A foreigner. A freak. Alone. I did not want to write a namby-pamby Coming of Age story. Everyone in my Intermediate Fiction Workshop had written one. I wanted to write a story that would elevate people and save them from their darkest thoughts, at least for the time they were reading it.

Perhaps the family had fled from Djibouti or Burkina Faso and gotten asylum in Brookline. Could a 21 year-old white girl inhabit the minds of a tortured African family?

Boy Meets Girl. Coming of Age. Stranger Walks into a Room. I'd burned through all the possibilities. Three false starts and all of them shit. I could no longer find my voice. So I stayed in the library until closing plowing through *Ploughshares* and then in the Busy Bee Restaurant, I sat in a booth and read Booth and then later in Mad Murphy's Pub, the *Missouri Review.* And every short story I read was sharp and witty or quiet and heartbreaking. Every one contained a new world!

The next morning my mother gave me a shoebox full of pens, highlighters and markers and asked me to go through them and get rid of anything broken or dried out and I went to work on them. Meanwhile, my father was in the dining room separating packets of duck sauce, mustard and soy sauce. I saw that he'd managed to clear out a circle on the table the size of a laundry basket. Maybe he was getting better. When it came to experimenting, he was a perfectionist.

"What do you think?" I said holding up the piece of paper filled with colorful doodles from all the pens and highlighters.

"A regular Willem de Kooning," my mother said dismissively and went back to her papers. My father walked over to the pile of dried out markers and pens, bent down and picked out a rusted drafting pencil.

"How dare you throw this out!" he boomed.

I lurched back. "Dad, it doesn't work."

"I taught your brother how to spin that pencil."

"Oh for godsakes," said my mother. "It's obviously broken."

"You want to take your crap, go ahead, but you have no right to mine!"

"Come Zoe, let's go upstairs. I can't concentrate around your father."

"Go! Get the fuck out of here."

"Robert!" reprimanded my mother.

"Zoe's heard that word before, haven't you? My college students say it all the time."

"Oh Robert, grow the F up," said my mother.

On a late afternoon of the fifth day, I kicked open the door and found my mother's cartons flanked on either side of the door, looking like the entrance to a stronghold. No one was home. My mother had sent me a text saying she was out playing bridge. I had no idea where my father was. Having just come from the library and in no mood to write or be trapped in the house, I went out to the back. It was twilight. Above me, the sky was a striated pink, below me, the deck was splintered, whole boards rotted away. In the yard, Oliver's swing set had rusted next to some old machinery and a set of truck batteries. The swings glided in the breeze in time with the tree frogs.

Amy answered my text immediately. "Yes, come over now!" with a row of smiley emoticons and clown faces.

Amy Featherbed's house, a nine-room mansion with eight bathrooms, was spotless. Every room a shade of white, like my fourth grade poetry.

White is the whisper of clouds floating by and white are
the snowflakes that dance in the in the sky.
The absence of all color is white. It's fresh, it's pure,
it feels just right.
White is a cherry bloom as the wind makes it fly. Turn off
the light and then white will die.

In the hallway, photos of Amy and her brothers hung in frosted silver frames. I followed her through the kitchen with its shiny ceramic bowls of fruit, past the fluffy toy Pomeranian sleeping in her pink bed perched on an oversized striped couch.

"Come upstairs," said Amy prancing up the winding staircase. "God what has it been, three, four years?" In college, she'd zeroed in on political science at Georgetown while ferociously campaigning for Hillary. She was home studying for the LSAT's. "Perfect timing. Logic Games is a bitch," she said, opening the door to her room. "So what brings you to the homestead?"

I sat down next to her on the lacy duvet. "My mom's moving out and she wants my help packing."

"Oh," said Amy. "Sorry to hear. Is the house still a mess?"

I blew out a breath. "You could say that." I explained how my father had been making little piles to sort things out. "But it makes him so *out* of sorts. People don't change, do they?"

"Love changes people," said Amy brightly and I remembered why we'd drifted apart. Amy was one of those people with boundless energy and confidence, perennially upbeat. Despite working around the clock for Hillary, commandeering a team of volunteers, getting doors slammed in her face from Iowa to Nashua, then losing, she was determined to change the world. In high school, she'd cut her hair for Locks of Love and fed the homeless in Brockton while I holed up in the library reading about fictional heroes. Amy's the real thing. She'll be a mayor or senator someday.

"My cousin has a prescription for medical marijuana," said Amy and took out a spliff rolled as artfully as any cigarette, tapered at the end with a little filter. "The old bank building on Mercer is now a huge pot store with cubes and flowers. You go from one counter to another, like a wine tasting." The more Amy talked about getting high, the less I wanted to do it. I always felt guilty afterward, knowing I could have spent my time writing. Then again, everything I'd written was shit.

"I read your story online," said Amy, flicking her lighter. "The couple in the eight-room mansion could have been my parents. They went to the same schools, Cornell, Tufts, MIT. I loved when the dad says and I quote," she said laughing, "'My fifteen year old son is now walking around with a vagina!' Imagine if that was one of *my* brothers? Peter is head counselor at a jock camp and Ben is at Habitat for Humanity, roofing."

For an hour we toked and scrolled through Instagram. Amy showed me her pins on Pinterest and her OKC profile. I showed her photos of molten glass and explained how heavy it was. We snapchatted with Tom and Stewie, got caught up on everyone's latest whereabouts. It was fun until it wasn't.

I waved her hand away. "If I smoke anymore I could start hallucinating."

Her hand stayed put. I sighed. "Okay, one for the road and then I've got to blow this pop stand."

I staggered home. The streets were radiant black under the streetlights. No people anywhere. A rabbit or possum darted out at me and ran into someone's yard. It felt ominous. Paranoia I told myself and starting naming books I'd loved with people in the title to keep calm: *Hamlet, Emma, Madame Bovary, Harry Potter, Ann Karenin, Harriet the Spy, Mrs. Dalloway. Sarah's Key, Lolita, Life of Pi.*

I kicked open the door and my mouth gaped open. I froze. A madman was hacking away at the wicker coffee table with an axe. It was my father, in his pajamas and sneakers. "Dad!" I shrieked. "What are you doing? Stop!"

But he wouldn't stop. The axe was coming down hard. Bamboo splinters flying everywhere. "You want this place cleaned up! I'll clean it up!" The table collapsed into a V, my father threw down the axe and I screamed again. He traipsed into the dining room, yanked down the Happy New Year 2003 decoration, then using his forearm, swept everything off the table, first one side, then the other. Dishes and mugs and books clattered to the floor. Papers went flying. He was having a nervous breakdown. My heart was in my throat. His pajama top was soaked in sweat. He started flinging old *Nature* magazines across the room. The magazines flew open and spread across the floor like breaking waves. The front door banged opened. The police. A raid! I thought. We're going to be arrested. They would think my father was an intruder. I smelled like a pot store. I didn't have a prescription. We'd be locked up for sure.

But it wasn't the police. It was my mother. "Robert," she said softly. She went to him and held out her arms. He fell into her embrace and began to heave, sobbing into the darkness of her shoulder. I thought I heard her weeping as well. They stayed wrapped in each other's arms, swaying as if they were a single shape, bobbing in an ocean of debris. I was relieved, of course,

but jealous. Left out. Lonely. My mother coaxed my father to the couch. They sank down together and my father laid his head on her lap. "Sit with us, darling," said my mother, so I did.

I woke up stiff from sleeping on the couch. The wicker table was gone and the living room floor was bare. My parents shuffled down the staircase in monogrammed bathrobes, smelling of soap.

"Breakfast, anyone?" said my mother, already setting out orange juice and a package of croissants. My mouth tasted of cardboard so I lunged for the juice.

"It needs to be shaken," said my mother.

"We were quite shook up enough last night, don't you think?" said my father.

"Oh honey, that was a joke," he said to my mother.

"A bad joke,' said my mother with a wry smile.

When my father reached over to brush a crumb off my shirt, I teared up.

"It's time for you to go write your short stories and then on to The Great American Novel," said my mother.

"Never quit trying, *ma minette,*" said my father.

"Your father has agreed to go to Ethan Allen to buy a new coffee table," said my mother.

I packed up my belongings that afternoon and shoved the half drafts of *Backyard Wedding* in the back of a dresser drawer. On the way down the steps I picked up the spaceman headphones to give to the glassblower. I'd never told him about the lisp. There was quite a lot I needed to tell him. My mother dutifully held my father's hand and the three of us went outside. Across the street Sherry Greenstein was unspooling a hose.

"Cute little Dart," said my father, patting the top of the car. He knew so many things! Then he gave me one of his bear hugs. "Text us when you arrive," said my mother and she hugged me too. I still felt dazed, too numb to say much of anything except goodbye.

Somewhere around Hartford, a story took shape. A story about a house in Brookline, Mass., unlike any other. Parts would be awful (if I was going to be honest. I would admit how badly it hurt that they'd missed my graduation) and parts would beautiful (knowing my parents might find a way back to each other). The ending would be ambiguous.

In New York City leaves fell like rain. It was suddenly sweater weather. Graffiti had spread and cranes towered elbow to elbow. The smoke shop was now a Subway. I landed a job on Park Avenue as an au pair to a rambunctious three-year old boy whose vocab in both German and English was astonishing. My only reference came from Oliver, my little brother, who wrote a precious letter about what a wonderful babysitter I'd been. Also, the man who hired me happened to be my English professor. The glassblower and I moved into a walk-up studio apartment on York Avenue, hauling cartons of lopsided wineglasses, novels and literary journals. Five months later and five years before our baby boy, Tobias, was born, "Cleaning House" was published. Occasionally, I still feel worried or embarrassed by my upbringing.

Annie Dawid

Extratemporal

For six days and nights, he remained immobile, pinned between the decomposing body of his older friend, behind the steering wheel, and the passenger door, which had smashed into the rocky terrain. Six months later, Kenny remembered nothing, though others reconstructed the story from available details. No seat belts on either man as they drove, vaguely drunk, home from the city to their rented house in a depressed rural Idaho town. Fortunately, the October night chill kept Richard's body from swelling and stinking, yet it ensured Kenny's future as an amputee: frostbite took both feet and three fingers on his left hand.

I also live in that economically struggling hamlet, where I read about the accident in our local paper, a week after it occurred, amazed that the younger man, who was in his 40s—younger than me—could have survived such an ordeal. Kenny's father told the reporter that his son's survival was "a miracle, absolutely." He repeated how grateful they were, he and the rest of Kenny's family, but the article didn't specify to whom.

Some have faith, some religion, others spirituality. While I have none, I still understand Kenny's father's gratitude: sometimes, waking in the dark dawn to the mourning doves cooing outside my window is enough to make an atheist bow her head in thanks.

Both Kenny and Richard were drunks, often unemployed, usually delinquent on child support payments to former wives: two in Richard's case, only one for Kenny. Their children, who lived in Boise and elsewhere, ranging from 14 to 34, rarely saw or communicated with their fathers. "Deadbeat Dads" is the term politicians use to describe these two—men sinking into their own morass, sometimes fast, more often with excruciating slowness.

On a good day, Kenny could repair engines with the best mechanics in Boise. Hungover and/or drunk, he was still superior to 90% of the capital's car repair professionals. When there was extra

work to be had, Boise garage owners summoned Kenny from the boonies. He and Richard would drive in for a few days, or as long as the work lasted, staying in motels, eating fast food, drinking.

Though I've lived here a decade, I never knew Kenny or Richard, but I am acquainted with Kenny's dad, who runs the garage with the best local reputation. Frankly, I was surprised when the newspaper pinpointed the familial connection, because Kenny's dad doesn't look old enough to have a son 43 years old, much less a total disaster of an adult. Fit and sober, Kenny's dad prides himself on excellent service and low prices for the poorest in our community—he's let customers pay in firewood, or fresh eggs, or a series of extremely low payments that might outlast the old man or woman to whom he'd been kind.

When they weren't out drinking, the two men stayed home and watched a lot of TV, the blue glow escaping their windows to illuminate the dirt road on which they lived. Town gossips speculated on what these two men might really be doing, keeping house together in a tiny one-bedroom old miner's cabin. Long ago, our village was one of those spectacular mining successes, with an opera house and multiple overnight millionaires. But that magnanimous story was born and bred of a prior century. The magnates' mansions have been torn down or divided into decaying apartments. Of the small cabins dotting the hills, old tailings in the backyards of some, many had been home to a miner who mailed his riches back to distant wives and children. These poorly insulated homes are now dwellings for the poorest citizens, the mines long depleted of their valuable ore. In the 21st century, "white trash" is what cruel people call Idahoans like Kenny and Richard.

Without delay, Kenny's legs were amputated below the knees. He has a rod in his right thigh, plates in his jaw, pins in his left elbow. As he has no regular job, Kenny is without insurance, so his father has thrown multiple fundraising dinners to pay the bills.

My own accident was far less dramatic, nearly thirty years back, but reading about Kenny and his lost days in the car reminded me of my own mysteriously lapsed time, which lasted a few hours,

perhaps—at any rate, less than one night. Like Richard, I was also a drunk driver, but of a bicycle instead of a car. Unlike them, I was alone.

Habitually, Richard and Kenny would drive back from Boise in the early morning hours to avoid traffic, and, more to the point, to steer clear of sheriffs. Both had DUI histories, and suspended licenses at one time or other. When the accident happened, Kenny's license had been pulled for 8 months of a yearlong suspension; hence, Richard drove. Bottles of beer, empty and full, were found in the wreck, and though by the time the men were discovered – too late to test their blood alcohol – it would have been typical for both to drink while driving. Ultimately, whether Richard was drunk or sober behind the wheel makes no difference. Although they'd taken the same route hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, they managed a peculiar feat: somehow, at the northernmost curve of the serpentine highway, the car jumped the guardrail and catapulted down to the valley floor, perhaps a distance of 30 feet. According to the authorities, Richard died on impact.

Because they didn't crash into the guardrail, breaking it in two, as others had before them, and since the wreck had wedged itself beneath scrub oaks in the shadow of the highway stanchions, their time capsule/coffin could not be seen by drivers from either direction.

At first, their absence was not remarkable. Richard and Kenny were taking a few extra days to work in Boise. Or, they had begun a major bender in the city. Both scenarios had occurred in the past, so the fact that the men hadn't returned didn't immediately bother Kenny's dad, who would speak with his son once a week on average. Often, Kenny would stop by the shop for a cup of bitter coffee, chatting with the guys in the garage, catching up with his father on the doings of his four siblings, numerous nieces and nephews.

No missing persons report was ever filed. By the sixth day, however, Kenny's dad began to worry. In the past, under similar circumstances, Kenny would telephone—just to report his whereabouts. Since his last year in high school, Kenny's drinking had led

to innumerable precarious and dangerous situations, though he'd never hurt another person in a fight or while driving, nor had he been the victim of any crime. He and Richard were quiet drunks; they got their DUIs from being observed wavering across the yellow lines on county roads. As a result, both had spent weekends in jail.

According to local lore, when Kenny was still in high school, already a gifted mechanic, he worked at his dad's shop. His sisters weren't interested in the car repair business, and his brother, who always wanted to be a Marine, became one. Only Kenny inherited the magic gene for fixing cars, so he became the proud father's protégé. Kenny loved the way an engine could hum, the vibrating harmony of a perfectly calibrated transmission.

On the sixth day of the men's absence, an employee of Idaho's Department of Transportation was checking guardrails on that stretch of highway, 57 miles northeast of Boise, about 15 miles from our town. The woman thought she saw something shiny and metallic poking out of the scrub below, and called over a co-worker, who said it looked like the chassis of an old wreck. But the woman, who didn't remember seeing it on her last round six months before, decided to call the sheriff, just to check.

My multiple missing hours might have been spent unconscious at the bottom of a dip in the gravel road where I flew off the bike, going far too fast in the moonless dark. Eventually, a man discovered me, threw my bicycle in the back of his pickup and drove a mile to the summer camp where I was working in the kitchen. Did I tell the pickup driver where I was staying? Or did he make an assumption, able to discern I wasn't a local. Did I speak, my accent giving me away? Maybe he took me there because it was the closest place that wasn't a private home, and, if a local, he would have known everyone in that isolated area. At the camp's office, they called for an ambulance; the nearest hospital was 70 miles away, and this was in an era before helicopters were used as often as they are now, here in rural Idaho, during a medical emergency.

After the sheriff got the fire department to send the "Jaws of Life" to the scene, and had plotted a roundabout but passable route

to the wreck, the lawman, fire truck and EMT vehicle bumped along, scratching the hell out of the sheriff's front end, as he was in the lead. The woman from D.O.T. asked if she could accompany him—after all, it was her hunch that led to this multi-vehicle production, and she wanted to see what they found—but the sheriff refused. Because the county had no knowledge of a wreck in that location, it was very likely they would find a body, he said—maybe a skeleton, depending on how long it had been there—and he wanted to spare her nightmares. The woman found his remarks condescending, but he was the law, so she didn't argue, vaguely relieved she would not have to witness a sight that might haunt her.

The car lay passenger side down, and when the sheriff, firemen and EMT team alighted from their vehicles, they thought surely no one could be alive inside that contorted metal carcass. The fireman said he would take the first look, as he would need to know if he would be able to use his equipment in the tight quarters beside the highway stanchion among the oaks. In his line of work, he'd seen skeletons, decomposed and decomposing cadavers, though usually he was called when bodies were still fresh, and, in the best circumstances, alive and salvageable.

He and one of the E.M.T. crew hacked through the scrub to get to the car, and they smelled Richard before they saw him. "Too late," said the fireman, who was thinking he shouldn't have come, because what if they needed a "Jaws of Life" to rescue a living person somewhere else, and his was the only one in the county, which was 100 miles square, more or less. The E.M.T. woman said, "Wait. There could be a passenger. Or passengers."

The fireman shrugged. Then they heard something: a grunt or moan.

"What was that?" the woman asked.

"I'm on it," said the fireman, who flew into action, now grateful to be necessary and useful.

The sheriff, firemen and E.M.T. workers managed to get the driver's door open, as it was unimpeded, hindered only by gravity. The "Jaws" were necessary to get Richard's body out—he was

a very large man, perhaps 300 pounds. After they managed that horrendous feat, the woman climbed into the car and found the living, though unconscious, Kenny, who had, by luck, been saved from smothering under the weight of his friend by an enormous rock piercing the roof of the car, wedging itself between the two men, creating an air pocket over the much smaller Kenny. His body temperature was 71º Fahrenheit.

Long after my accident, I was told that the Good Samaritan sat with me in his truck while waiting for the ambulance. My hunch is that I was conscious, probably in shock, but there is no particular reason for this supposition. What does it matter? Because it was summer, there was no danger of frostbite, and besides being dented and bruised, abrasions on my elbows and knees, my chief injury was to my mouth; evidently, I had fallen flat on my face, breaking some teeth and loosening others.

During his six extra-temporal days, Kenny must have experienced withdrawal from alcohol. The shock, lowered body temperature and pain from various injuries might have minimized his transition to sobriety. These days, he is learning to walk with prostheses. Whenever possible, his siblings and father help with physical therapy. From time to time, Kenny still asks about Richard, and when he is reminded, gently, that Richard died in the accident, Kenny says, "That's right. I forgot."

In the nursing home where he is convalescing, Kenny has been visited by his ex-wife and two of his three children. Sometimes he forgets who they are, and, upon remembering, flashes a brilliant smile—or as brilliant as is possible with a damaged jaw—and declares how happy he is to see them.

Each decade since the bike accident, I have returned to teeth specialists—oral surgeons, prosthodontists, periodontists—to shore up my mouth. Every prosthesis has needed replacement. Now, I am trying implants, in the hope they will last me the rest of my days, thus putting an end to revisiting my own wreck every ten years, my tongue exploring the broken spaces and empty places where real teeth once lived, orthodontically beautiful.

Kenny may or may not acquire a new life in his post-accident, amputee world. At the garage one day, waiting for my car, I overheard Kenny's dad talking to another customer about his son's ordeal. "You know, after he started drinking so much in high school, I wouldn't let him work here anymore. It wasn't safe. I think he always resented that, but it was the right thing to do. Now, twenty-five years later, he's finally stopped." He snorted. "It only took the loss of his legs," he said, smiling a crooked smile.

A much older white-haired woman, the customer clenched his hand. "God is in this, you know," she said. "Another person might drink even more in your son's circumstances. But Kenny has seen the light."

"Maybe. We won't know, will we, until it all plays out. But I do remember him saying once, not long after he came out of the coma, something like, 'Richard gave his life for me.'"

"You see?" The woman nodded. "Richard died in order that your son might live. Kenny's life was re-born out of that pain, like the rest of us, who owe our lives to Christ."

Sitting on a plastic chair, hiding behind the newspaper, I shook my head. Richard died because he was driving drunk and flipped the car off a cliff. That truth was clear enough. But why did Kenny live?

On the day of my accident, I had wanted to die. Untreated suicidal depression had eroded my will to persevere, and each day was an excruciating countdown: three hours, if I can just last three more hours, then I can go to sleep, and I'll wake up tomorrow, which will be better. But the tomorrows never improved, and the countdowns resumed in the mornings, my waking hours spent imagining various ways I might do myself in, how to disguise my death as an accident for my parents' sake. Their lives had not been easy, and for their youngest child to die a suicide would seem a brutal blow inflicted by me purposefully, which was not my intention. Rather, I just wanted to be put out of what felt like untenable misery.

Did Richard and Kenny want to die? Subconsciously, or drunkenly, or both, did Richard fly off the cliff in the car, believing he was levitating it somehow, like the magic Rambler in the Harry Potter movies?

Which is the greater miracle: Kenny surviving or the Oldsmobile's flight over the guardrail instead of through it?

In my own case, the afternoon of the accident, I chose alcohol to ease the pain and succeeded marvelously. After months of darkness, I felt happy, thrilled, exuberant, able at last to leave myself behind. And the fall from the bike, the days in the hospital, the loss of teeth—all of it sprang from the blissful idea of flight. That night, on the road in the blackness, I believed I could fly on that bike, go so fast down the hill I would escape the pull of gravity, and travel out of time.

Chamois Shirt

For decades, I've had a shirt
(actually, a series of shirts)
the color of late-summer wheat,
like our neighbor's golden retriever
(actually, a series of retrievers).
Each swiftly moves from dignified
to comfortable, and rarely
goes to town.

This Christmas, my daughter gave me
another shirt, which provoked the
problem of infinity—that is,
the time between the full use of
one thing, and the first use of the next
(shampoo, toothpaste, men's underwear)
the old shirt you love, the new one
you now own.

I was resolute. The bleach stain,
the expanding tear on the left sleeve,
the seams departing from themselves,
gave excuse. I donned the thick
new shirt, brought scissors to the old
and made small garden plots of cloth
to clean the floor, wash windows, put some
polish on.

But infinity is always there
beneath, between us. Dogs
wagging their delight, shirt after
shirt, the wheat we wear, the wheat
that will sustain us. Down on my knees
scrubbing today's soil from the floor,
that cloth I use is soft,
so soft it's almost gone.

Getting to Work

Our stubborn Guernsey snapped off
the drinking bowl beside her stanchion.
We puzzled a threaded end of pipe
trapped in the fitting, I took the thin blade
from the hacksaw, cut twice, close,
inside the pipe, removed that slice,
bent a corner free, used it to screw
the broken pipe-end out. Dad
looked at me as at a genius.
I was ten. I fell in love with work.

We pulled our side delivery rake
behind the Jeep until slow smolder
of hay tight around the driveshaft
stalled us. I crawled beneath to cut it free.
Dull jackknife, tar-clotted Linoleum
blade…I went and begged my mother
for her precious paring knife, which
sliced the knot. We started raking
with the team. She understood relief
at recognizing right tools for the job.

When dad died, spruce and fir he'd stuck
instead of cows in most of our fields
were sprung to ten or fifteen feet. We
chainsawed them off at six, started shearing.
Made into Christmas trees, some weighed
a hundred pounds. Our old John Deere
flapping chains, evergreen hay wagon
sliding in the snow. Brandy to stay warm.
Three bucks apiece. That's how we kept
the farm, opened up the fields again.

Dad put an acre of asparagus
in an old hayfield. It created years
of wasted effort, as so many dumb
decisions do. We tried to reason,
"Who do you think you'll sell it to?"
But It was crises, small and large,
filled with the sap of urgency
that let us take the work in our own hands,
start something new, gladly work
twice as hard, and feel set free.

Building

I make another trip to Alan's
for green cedar, crawling ant-like
up Hollister Hill in the red pickup.
This year it's a woodshed.
I feel the full heft of the logs,
only occasional lighter ones
from trees that started dying
on the stump. I creep home,
staring at daffodils that poke
through goldenrod straw
in relinquished meadows.

My post-hole digger slices
the thick web of sod, chunks
and bounces on the first tree root.
It clanks and shimmies on every
stone. There is a give and suck
thirty inches down when I hit wet clay.
I raise a log, hoist and balance it
like a Scottish clansman
at the games. I stagger a few feet
to the hole, hesitate, aim it
carefully, let it slide home.

No fancy work; I notch crossbeams
with chainsaw and hatchet, make
quick cuts through the brown, red
fabric of bark. Bone-white ridges
crack, fall over like dominoes.
I dance the saw across to level out.
"Stop," I tell myself. I inhale;
balance one crossbeam end on the left post,
set the other on my shoulder.
I inch up the groaning ladder,
spike it down one-handed with the maul.

These buildings possess me.
I pretend I plan them but become
part of their plans. I built a pole shed,
twenty feet by fifty just before I left
the life I'd built with my first wife.
Spruce cross-beams, six by eight,
fourteen feet long. I lifted each
the same way, feeling the full risk
with my flesh, wanting every
ounce of it, discovering at last
how delicate my shoulder.

In the Cardiologist's Office

I am writing a poem
About being in the cardiologist's office with my husband
Broken hearts are a classic topic of poems.
I am panicked
We have made love for forty-five years.
There is no word even in poetry for my terror
His chest, which is shaved, is disturbing me.
I have rubbed his back
In front of the nightly news
For forty-five years.
There is a tutorial on the functioning of the human heart
On the wall.
I am studying it, but have gotten lost.
What is really disturbing me most
Is we all know how this poem ends.

About the Authors

Robin Carey. A specialist in Renaissance Literature, Robin Carey taught at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, and at Southern Oregon University in Ashland, Oregon. For many years he also worked as a whitewater river guide on the Rogue and Klamath rivers. His stories and essays have been published widely. Awards include the Oregon Book Award for *Baja Journey* and a National Endowment for the Arts Award in creative non-fiction. Robin lives in Montana close to family. See his author page on Amazon for published books.

Annie Dawid teaches creative writing at the University College, University of Denver. She was professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, OR, 1990-2006. Annie won the 2016 International Rubery Award in fiction for her first book and the Music Prize from Knuthouse Press in Fiction. Other awards include the Dana Award in the Essay, the Orlando Flash Fiction Award, The New Rocky Mountain Voices Award (drama) and the Northern Colorado Award in Creative Non-Fiction. She has been published in numerous literary journals. Her three published volumes of fiction are: *York Ferry: A Novel, Lily in the Desert: Stories, And Darkness Was Under His Feet: Stories of a Family.*

Antoinette Mehler. "All We Are" is based on a true story and is one of a collection of linked short stories based on actual events. Other stories in this collection were published by *Narrative, Tiferet* and *The Jewish Literary Journal*. A fourth won honorable mention from *Glimmer Train*. Anointette is the only daughter of concentration camp survivors. She was born in Germany just after the war and grew up in South America. She holds a Ph.D. in Human Development.

Scudder Parker grew up on a family farm in North Danville, Vermont. He has been a Protestant minister, a state senator, a utility regulator, a candidate for Governor, a consultant on energy efficiency and renewable energy, and at 74 is settling into his new and ongoing work as a poet. He is a passionate gardener and a proud grandfather of four. He and his wife live in Middlesex Vermont. Scudder has had poems published in *Sun Magazine, Vermont Life,* and *Northern Woodlands Magazine*.

Diana Sher is retired from the Metropolitan State University of Denver. She is published in over 75 literary journals including *New Delta Review, Descant,* and *REAL Arts & Letters*. Her chapbook, *After I Cut the Cord*, was released in 2003 by Finishing Line Press.

Ellen McGrath Smith teaches at the University of Pittsburgh. Her fiction has appeared in *Thumbnail, Switchback, Weave, Wordgathering, Atticus Review, Extract(s),* and *Kestrel.* One of her stories has appeared in *The Right Way to Be Crippled and Naked: The Fiction of Disability*. Her chapbook *Scatter, Feed* was published by Seven Kitchens Press in 2014, and her book of poetry, *Nobody's Jackknife,* was published in 2015 by West End Press.

Mariah Smith is an Army officer who served three tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. She has published non-fiction essays in I*ncoming: A Veterans' Anthology.* "Raven Rock" is her first fiction submission.

Lyn Stevens won the 2014 Saturday's Child Press short story contest. Her stories have appeared in *Prism Review, Greensboro Review, Eclectica Magazine* and the *American Literary Review*. In 1999 she had a prizewinning story in the *American Literary Review* Fiction Contest judged by Antonya Nelson. Lyn lives in the Bronx.