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I stepped out of the car parked along a familiar road, walked forward toward the lakefront, and there it was—the sprawling leaves of the Buckeye tree—the most cozy vacation home I dreamed. Red-stained, wood siding pointed toward the lake, as if I needed a neon sign to spy it. I never expected to be greeted by anyone from the empty house, but I heard feet thumping beyond the screened windows. A black-haired, pigtailed girl popped from the porch door. I instinctively opened my arms wide, knowing she’d jump at a full, barefoot run into my arms. Embracing her as I wanted to be embraced, she tangled her fingers into mine and tugged me to the grassy slope with the lake in almost-full view.

“Come. This is where we skin the fish,” she said with a face of elation. “I like to watch Henry use that knife, the guts all laying there and their eyes open big.”

I had no idea what a sheeba was, but I knew it must be good. With a hint of sleepiness in my traveled body, I turned back toward the car and suggested to her that we might get my suitcase. I forced my throbbing knee to straighten and saw a petite, white-haired man swing open the porch door.

“I love to see the bone after all the fish gets cut off,” she continued. “Henry doesn’t let me use the knife, but I pretend I’m cutting anyway. I’m so excited you’re here. I’ve been waiting for you forever,” she said with the most sincere smile.

“We’re gonna have fun. I can’t wait to show you the beach and my rock collection and our bedroom and the sheebas!”

I opened my eyes wider to absorb the little girl’s glee about the fish filleting.

“Come. This is where we skin the fish,” she said with a face of elation. “I like to watch Henry use that knife, the guts all laying there and their eyes open big.”

Still dizzy from the greeting, the grass encased my exposed knees in a breezy velvet coat. I couldn’t help but run my hands through it. I opened my eyes wider to absorb the little girl’s glee about the fish filleting.

“I love to see the bone after all the fish gets cut off,” she continued. “Henry doesn’t let me use the knife, but I pretend I’m cutting anyway. I’m so excited you’re here. I’ve been waiting for you forever,” she said with the most sincere smile.

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“We’re gonna have fun. I can’t wait to show you the beach and my rock collection and our bedroom and the sheebas!”

I stood in the doorway of the empty house, greeted by anyone from the empty house, but I heard feet thumping beyond the screened windows. A black-haired, pigtailed girl popped from the porch door. I instinctively opened my arms wide, knowing she’d jump at a full, barefoot run into my arms. Embracing her as I wanted to be embraced, she tangled her fingers into mine and tugged me to the grassy slope with the lake in almost-full view.

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But this girl had creativity. She told me about her make believe could've been reading the phone book to me. I didn't mind.

enamored with the lapping waves and the endless blue, so she warned over and over, and the monologue began. I was bluff and requested I sit next to the dandelions. She cautioned began. She ushered me straight to the lake, perched me on the bluff and requested I sit next to the dandelions. She cautioned me not to get too close to the edge, as she had obviously been warned over and over, and the monologue began. I was enamored with the lapping waves and the endless blue, so she could've been reading the phone book to me. I didn't mind. But this girl had creativity. She told me about her make believe friends--all seven of them--in great detail. She stood atop a smooth, round stone and in a preaching fashion spoke like Moses to the water. At some point, I believed that lake might actually obey and do whatever she commanded. Her speech, strung together with very little logic and a wide stream of

Henry took care of my bags, and my adventure with Lizzie began. She ushered me straight to the lake, perched me on the bluff and requested I sit next to the buckeye. As I stopped by the lump under my sandal. Swiveling my heel, I twisting ballerina. Another step forward and again I was stopped by the lump under my sandal. Swiveling my heel, I saw a lop-sided buckeye, shining with a wink of its eye. As I bent down to pick it up, Henry came to my side.

“Hey, yes,” I smiled as I rubbed the oily-looking casing with my thumb. “I love to collect them and have a bowl full on my mantle at home!”

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“This tune whistled into the air by Henry resonated like my childhood music box with the twisting ballerina. Another step forward and again I was stopped by the lump under my sandal. Swiveling my heel, I saw a lop-sided buckeye, shining with a wink of its eye. As I bent down to pick it up, Henry came to my side.

“Lizzie’s been talking about you for weeks,” he said. “Glad you could come stay. Make yourself at home.”

I approached the elderly man with a friendly handshake and a smile. “Lizzie’s been talking about you for weeks,” he said. “Glad you could come stay. Make yourself at home.”

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consciousness, sparked my own sense of creativity. I saw the dandelions as her confidants, the lake as her audience, that rock as her pulpit and the swiftly moving clouds as onlookers uneasy to stop and listen but eager to hear her 11-year-old poetry. The sun bobbed its head, as if as sleep on an airplane, and eventually succumbed to the night. Henry’s voice called for us in the compact, weighty air. We rose and bid goodnight to the lake, as if in the child for the night. I didn’t realize how cool my skin had become until it met the long day’s air trapped inside the cottage. I rubbed my hands together and on the tops of my thighs. I brushed the tops of Lizzie’s bare arms and hurried her to the sofas. Built in L-shape, this furniture sent an invitation to my core, engraved with simplicity and snuggles. We scooted ourselves back into the lap of the futon-like couches, propped with overlapping pillows all dressed in calico prints and fitted in outrageous smocks of color. Like the lap of my grandmother, I felt comfortable and content—but somehow swaddled by furniture not meant for me.

Nature’s clock moved us toward bed. Lizzie led the way up the creaky stairs and I forced myself through the doll house passageways. I skimmed my arms and ducked my head, gladly plunging my body onto a less-than-cushy mattress. My ears tiptoed among the night noises; the wood timbers, steeped like tea bags of humidity, rested on me like the heaviness of a homemade quilt. The rhythms of the slumbering house lulled my breathing to the cadence of the nocturnal waves drumming the shore outside.

Morning came with the temperature rising, and I peeled myself from the pillow and found the other beds empty. Feeling like I was late to the party, I dressed in cut-off denim shorts, a well-worn T-shirt, and descended the stairs to find Henry and Lizzie at the table in the glassed-in room watching the sun spark the crests of today’s waves.

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“Morning,” I said with confidence, hoping it really was still morning.

“Well, good morning. Sleepy Head. We’ve been making plans for the day and discussing whether to fish from the MaryKay or the rowboat,” Henry stated.

“Fishing! Your favorite pastime, Lizzie!” I said.

“What’s a pastime?” she asked.

“It’s your hobby or your fun,” I said.

Lizzie nodded.

“So what did you decide?” I quizzed.

“We’re taking the rowboat. We only need to go a couple miles out to find some walleye. Right, Henry?”

Henry smiled and made his way to the makeshift dock below the cliff where I had spent the previous night entertained by the oration of a fifth grader. I grabbed a banana, slid on my white-soled Converse and followed Lizzie down the bluff. Within minutes, gusts of fish-infused air lined my nostrils and the noxious fumes of our boat slipped into my empty stomach. The blare of the outboard motor overpowered the gentle whitecaps but quickly took us to the calm blue between the far-off freighters in the distance and the nearly invisible shoreline behind us. Lizzie was a focused fisherwoman, watching the line like a hawk looking for lunch. Without warning, she jumped into position and knew exactly how to reel in the line. Henry gave direction; of course, as she worried she’d lose the line and maybe even the pole. Like a man who’d been fishing for 40 years, she knew what to throw back and what to keep. And unlike me, she even baited the hook!

Speeding back before lunch, I was ready to eat and take a break from the sun on my scalp. My feet still felt the rocking boat as I navigated the hill. Once in the shade, I saw the tops of my thighs were cherry red, and I was sure my face must match. The silver trophies spent lunchtime in the bucket of water.
while we wofed down a sandwich. Lizzie could hardly wait to return to the slippery treasures and watch them be autopsied in the shady side yard. Displayed on yesterday’s news and soon to be our next meal, the lifeless creatures had no hope. Henry carefully and proudly removed the filet knife from its leather sheaf. He talked himself through it, and Lizzie mimicked his every word… “make an incision behind the gill, being careful not to cut through to the spine.”

After Henry cut the fish to reveal the meat inside, Lizzie said, “I love this part! Watch him take that fish away from its skin. Isn’t that cool?” she asked as Henry angled the knife toward the skin and separated the two.

“I hate that white stuff right there,” she said. “It gives me the willies, that silver peeling. Yuck! I don’t wanna eat that!”

I smiled and didn’t want to voice my agreement about the iridescent veil protecting the fish, but I did agree. A sprinkle of rain drove us indoors for the afternoon. Lizzie and I spent some time playing cards and reading books and listening to the increasingly loud rain patter like reindeer hooves. I spied Lizzie drawn to the black and white framed photos lining the walls, hung crooked and haphazardly placed. This chess game of genealogy seemed to pierce Lizzie’s tiny intellect, like a tangram of history. I trailed her, snooping around these men she did not know.

Just below the ceiling, lined up like coal cars, was a train track of books. Classical and Monolithic Art led the way around the southwest corner, followed by The Three Musketeers and A Tale of Two Cities followed by scores of threadbare spines and not to be forgotten, the caboche: Architectural Drafting. As the sun set, the purple painted brick encasing the fireplace glowed a blushy mauve as if suggesting a new nail polish. Lizzie pulled a book from the shelf and flipped the pages like a speed reader. I grabbed a book myself and thumbed through the pages by the light of the drafting while we wofed down a sandwich. Lizzie could hardly wait to return to the slippery treasures and watch them be autopsied in the shady side yard. Displayed on yesterday’s news and soon to be our next meal, the lifeless creatures had no hope. Henry carefully and proudly removed the filet knife from its leather sheaf. He talked himself through it, and Lizzie mimicked his every word… “make an incision behind the gill, being careful not to cut through to the spine.”

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lamp, positioned like a surgical spotlight. “What are you reading, Lizzie?”

“I don’t know, but the drawings are neat. Skeletons of birds and monkeys. I like how the bones go together.”

I suspected Darwin and realized how the impact of such moments could mortar her foundation—a respect for other people’s belongings as well as the tender turning of wisdom, not to mention how well she respects others’ notions and philosophies. As I snuggled under the scratchy blankets of my bed anticipating tomorrow’s voyage to the beach, I recalled my dad’s sketches and the red drawing pencils he used in the spiral sketch book. I bet Lizzie would love a book like that and some fancy pencils to draw turtle shells and fish skeletons.

The stifling air again alerted me to another day. And before long, Lizzie led me down the trail to the beach. Complete with sand and smooth boulders, the beach created the seamless boundary between our everyday world of grass and asphalt and the matchless creation of a seemingly boundless lake. It took only minutes for us to be awash in the water that yesterday lurked of fish but today held joy—a bursting of the spirit powered by sunbeams and abandon. Lizzie introduced me to sheeba, the distant wave destined to crash against our bodies. The anticipation, like plans to meet a Hollywood star, caused the zany commotion of loud jungle chimps.

“SHEEBA!” she whooped like a black woman adorned in a feathered hat claiming her faith in Jesus.

Within just a few seconds, the wave would break over our heads or in our mouths or into our chests if we jumped high enough. Each one moved us, causing our bodies to disco to the beat of delight. Sheeba after sheeba reached us and then quietly disappeared into the sand, like my footprints. My child’s heart now lapped at the pace of each sheeba.

With water logged attention and exhaustion, resembling ladies after Zumba, we slogged to the sand and collapsed. We

lamp, positioned like a surgical spotlight. “What are you reading, Lizzie?”

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ran our hands through the beach, moundings hills and digging craters, in time for them to sink back to the earth like last night’s moon. Just as the exuberance trickled out my fingertips, Lizzie could wait no more.

“I have to show you something. Come!” She pulled my arm until I stood. “Now,” she commanded, “we must find several lucky stones before we have lunch.”

“Lucky stones? What’s that?” I questioned. I loved stones and the thought of rummaging through them, like looking for matching socks, seemed like fun to me. Lizzie instructed me to walk beside her and look for the convex little white stone with the backwards L on it. Certainly, this was make-believe! We walked and honestly, I was not looking. Only minutes into my blind walk, she shrieked, “I found one!” She bent down to choose what looked like a piece of shell. She placed it in my palm and showed me the L—unlike anything I’d seen before. Sounding just like Henry, she explained how it was actually an ear bone from the sheephead fish. Using her best scientific language, she said the stone was used to help balance the fish and help it swim regarding its place in the water.

“Just concentrate and you’ll find one,” she assured. “You’ll catch onto it. Here’s one!”

Not only was my back tired of bending down for a fragment of a shell but my eyes were faint with looking. The first 55 opaque ivory stones I picked up were indeed shells! I was just about to give up when I picked up the next and felt the groove of the L between my thumb and pointer finger. I squealed like a kid and ran for my mentor’s approval. She winked as if to say I told you so. Returning home for lunch seemed trivial after spying nine of these treasures, but my guaranteed sunburn needed shade.

When we arrived at the porch, a note from Henry hung on the door saying he drove to the hardware store and would be back. Hung on a squeaky spring, the door slammed a

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recognizable ‘welcome home’ when we entered. When I turned the knob of the door between the screened porch and the cottage, I was surprised to find it locked. I looked for Lizzie and she was already in the bathroom off the porch to retrieve the hidden key in the Folgers can. While she fiddled with the key, I glanced in the mirror to check on the inevitable sunburnt nose but saw my innocent eyes instead; I hadn’t seen those eyes since Reagan was shot. I delved deeper into the hazel centers and felt giddy with the vision of cartwheels and flower-patched jeans and melty chocolate chip cookies. I saw smooth, guiltless skin and hair as black as the steam train engine under the Christmas tree. And with a loud blast from the smoke stack, I could look no more.

Like a magician turning diamonds to hearts, Monday turned to Thursday and Thursday to Saturday. This seemingly shallow petri dish of senses had plunged me deep into a dream: the smell of the sleepy tin roof, the thatch on the porch chair, the flavor of the silky driftwood, and the hum of jumping fish--each window sill, countertop, floor board, and sea spray churned into a kaleidoscope of memory I had lived before or would live again or did I read it in a book?

I overheard my little self talking to my big self, and I visualized the rush of my grown-up burdens, deadlines and obligations, all turned by my moral compass. Like a green swimmer, I had found myself in a strong current of life’s undertow--drained. My elders would propose swimming parallel to the shore of reality, putting an end to the wrestling. Unsure of it all, I packed, ending my respite, but toured the property, like a realtor looking for strategy. I wanted to capture every essence of the grass and the living water and the shadows and the perfectly planned cottage, to paste it into my scrapbook and decorate it with captions and color and save it for later.

Back in the driveway, I looked for Lizzie. She was under the Buckeye tree, one foot on the trunk and one arm waving to the sky. I said goodbye, hugged her little frame, and took my seat.
behind the wheel. I checked my rearview mirror for cars, even though the road was only likely to cart one of the seven neighbors, and I saw her. Lizzie was in my back seat, smiling and talking about sheebas and lucky stones. But how could she...? My eyes darted to the left of the car where she stood waving like an American flag in a breath of summer. And my eyes back to the mirror, only to see her chatting in the backseat corner of my conscious. As I drove out the road, pea gravel clicking the underbody of my car, I saw the scaffolding—the structure of my childhood. A house that helped build me. An address magically inked into my genetic strand. A week of summers pinned to my bones, like a pattem draped over fabric.

I saw a shadow of myself—dark hair swinging like a lop-eared bunny, crooked teeth, and baby fine hair covering my olive skin.

Not likely to suspend my disbelief and live in this fairytale, I drove 187 miles checking the mirror, blinking my lids, and pinching my arms. Just like the purpose of the lucky stone, I could feel my renewed energy, how it was linked to this place and space. Hours spent in unswimmable water, nights combing through pages of books I couldn’t read, lightly dipped into mature discourse had deepened my marrow, intensified my bloodstream—without me even knowing! I reunited with my 11-year-old self this week and found she was only wearing bigger shoes.

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Suddenly,
you announce plans to trek the Himalayas.
I don’t want to say goodbye to you.
There will be too many miles between us
and time is short.

How much snow will fall before you return?
And there the air is thin, the rocks are steep.
Not everyone wishes good luck
and hangs prayer flags.
Solitary men have been known to disappear.

Snow is falling now as you pack your bags.
We go outside for a moment and build a snowman,
laugh.
Back inside you stare again
at the gray pages of your agenda,
can’t listen to my chatter.

I quiet and glance out the slightly fogged window.
Nearly everything that was there only yesterday
is now a soft, indiscernible whiteness.
In the subdued late afternoon light
the falling snow thickens,
keeps falling.
Take-Off

It happens again as always --
a spaceship veering off course,
and I am there,
forever floating through space
or circling an unfamiliar orb,
caught in the magnetic field,
radioactive,
the cabin's oxygen depleted,
gasping for air.

At home the next day
I pack all belongings,
pile them into the truck,
all the necessities --
a mattress, some chairs,
a toaster, but also
items I could leave behind --
small rugs, photos
of you and me at St. Marie del Mar,
a dream
about a spaceship
veering off course.
I slam on the gas,
lurch forward.

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I slam on the gas,
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You are trusting.
A friend gives you a push
off a cliff
saying
almost in afterthought
fly
and you let him
you
thought you could but
he seems so sure
when you land
he just says
fine as if you
flew every day so
you feel obliged to answer
easy
before you know it you
are up there again
swooping around like some
Jonathan Livingston Seagull
and planning
migratory trips to California
wanting to bring more baggage with you
than you can possibly get off the ground
finally settling for
a few feathers
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finally settling for
a few feathers
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and your own
trusty feet.
In the kitchen the clock strikes
A pot of boiling water falls with a bang
And the baby screams insistently

   Ding Dong

In the living room the TV talks
Mr. Tibbs and his trophy fall from the shelf
And poor little Molly is crushed

   Ding Dong

In the bedroom the bed is perfectly made
Bobby lays untouched
Not a hair out of place
Nor a breath to be seen or heard

   Ding Dong

In the bathroom the tub overflows with red
The red still warm and slippery
It leaks through the floor leaving the ceiling stained

   Ding Dong

And in the backyard there are rather large holes
Twenty or more, deep and dark where no light can go
Surrounded by many humps
Filled to their brims
A capacity of land never to end

   Ding Dong

What's in the basement?
I dare not say

   Ding Dong

What's in the basement?
I dare not say

   Ding Dong
Martha was doing Ruth’s hair in the laundromat. Ruth had already changed her clothes from a washer to a dryer. She sat on a bench by the window with the younger woman behind her. Martha had brought an extension cord, some combs and brushes, and a curling iron. Except for the two of them, the laundromat was empty. Even for early September and not yet midmorning, it was hot and humid. Flies flitted in the shafts of sunlight that came through the open windows.

Ruth watched the sporadic traffic go by on Highway 60 while Martha did her hair. Most of it was heading east from Monett towards Springfield. The lunch whistle blew at the extrusion plant down on County Road, even though it had been closed for over a year. Neither of them noticed it. Martha watched Frank Wilson working on his truck in the trailer court across Highway 60. Behind the court and all around it was woods, green and dense. There were big, puffed-up clouds over the trees. The sky was blue like the inside of a seashell.

“Here comes your boyfriend,” Ruth said.

Les came across Highway 60 from the trailer court with his hands down in the pockets of his jeans and the tails of his plaid shirt flapping. He crossed the parking lot, entered the laundromat and pushed his thick, black glasses up on his nose. He walked over to the soft drink machine and bought a soda. Martha watched him as she curled the older woman’s hair. She smiled. He came over and sat on one of the washing machines next to them.

“Did you see Frank? He’s still working on that carburetor,” Martha said.

Les nodded and looked out the window. On the side of the parking lot, two gasoline pumps sat on a little concrete island gleaming in the sun. A smoke-stained brick convenience store gleaming in the sun. A smoke-stained brick convenience store gleaming in the sun. A smoke-stained brick convenience store
sat beyond the island, and there was an old, narrow bar of the same brick next to it. Several men stood or squatted smoking outside the bar. Les recognized all but one among those he'd worked with at the plant. A torn awning over the darkened doorway there threw an angle of shade. Les took out a cigarette himself and lit it.

"Are you going up to the fair in Springfield?" Ruth asked. Martha regarded Les, who didn't reply. "We don't know yet," she said.

Les lit a cigarette and looked out at the canopies of green leaves above the buildings. He could see part of the old bridge that crossed the creek, and beyond it, the tall, still chimneys of the extrusion plant. A crow flew over the buildings, and a small, hot breeze kicked a paper wrapper across the lot.

Dust rose as Myron James drove his big, red truck from the dirt alley next to the buildings into the lot and parked in front of the store. He helped his grandmother out of the truck and held the door for her before following her inside. Les watched the screen door of the store bang softly once, twice, three times shut.

They sat in silence while Martha worked on Ruth's hair. Les finished his cigarette, stepped on the butt, and then almost immediately lit another.

After a while, Martha clapped her curling iron shut and said, "I made it a little tighter today".

Ruth reached up and touched her hair with her hand. "It feels nice," she said.

Martha unplugged her curling iron and put her things away in a paper bag. Ruth handed her two five-dollar bills and walked over to one of the dryers. When she opened its door, it stopped whirring. She squeezed a few of the warm clothes and then began to fold them into a basket that was on the dirty linoleum floor. She looked back out the window as she folded sat beyond the island, and there was an old, narrow bar of the same brick next to it. Several men stood or squatted smoking outside the bar. Les recognized all but one among those he'd worked with at the plant. A torn awning over the darkened doorway there threw an angle of shade. Les took out a cigarette himself and lit it.

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and said, “I think Myron is going up to the fair. I’m not sure, but I think he’s going tonight. You could go up with him.”

“Is he taking Lenora?” Martha asked.

“I suppose.”

“We’ve been four in the front before,” Martha said. She looked at Les. He hadn’t touched his soda, and a ring of condensation had begun to form under it on the washer. “Is it more expensive this year?”

“I don’t know,” Ruth said.

Les could hear a couple of the men in the shade of the bar chuckling in low voices over something. He watched another toss pebbles out into the lot. A black kitten played in the dry juniper bush next to the bar. Les watched it rub its back up against the low branches of the bush.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Good bye, Ruth,” Martha said.

Les dropped his cigarette into the soda can, left it on the dryer, and held the door open for her. They walked out squinting into the sunlight and across Highway 60 to the trailer court. Frank Wilson was still bent over his truck. An old washing machine, some tires, and a crumpled couch sat in front of his trailer. A little boy in the dry drainage ditch next to the road pointed a stick at a crow, holding it like a gun.

When they walked into the trailer, Martha saw Les’s suitcase in front of the window. The shades were drawn there over the still air conditioner they could no longer afford to run. The room was hot and airless. It smelled like the pork chops they’d eaten the night before; the grease from them was still coagulated in the pan on the stove. Dishes remained on the table and counter. The green throw blanket had fallen off the back of the couch.

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Martha dropped her bag on the couch, lifted the suitcase, and put it back on the floor. “It’s packed,” she said.

“I’m going to North Dakota,” Les said. “My cousin has a job for me in a quarry there.”

She knit her eyebrows. “North Dakota.”

He nodded.

Martha walked over and took his shirt in both hands. “Don’t go,” she said.

“I’ll come back for you if things work out.”

A flying beetle in the bedroom was buzzing and knocking into curtains and walls. It flew into the kitchen and then out the open doorway. Frank Wilson tried to start his truck, but the engine only whined. It was quiet and still again.

Les took Martha’s hands in his own and put them by her side. He picked up the suitcase and walked out to his truck. He started the engine and drove through the gravel. Frank Wilson looked up at him and waved as he went by and turned south on Highway 60. Dust rose over the little boy in the ditch.

Martha listened to Les’s truck rumble over the bridge. She walked into the kitchen and stood there. Then she cleared the dishes from the table and counter and set them in the sink. She stared down at them for several minutes before finally running water over them. She looked around the room, turned the burner on under the grease, and watched it begin to melt. She blew her nose on a paper towel and threw it hard into a plastic trash can next to the stove. She shook her head and turned off the burner.

Martha went into the bedroom and lay down on her back on the bed. The stained ceiling tiles had a pattern of tiny holes in them. It was hot, and the light was muffled from the thin curtains as they stirred in the small breeze. A wilting African violet sat in a clay pot on the windowsill with one vibrant hand.

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Martha went into the bedroom and lay down on her back on the bed. The stained ceiling tiles had a pattern of tiny holes in them. It was hot, and the light was muffled from the thin curtains as they stirred in the small breeze. A wilting African violet sat in a clay pot on the windowsill with one vibrant hand.

“North Dakota.”

She knit her eyebrows. “North Dakota.”

He nodded.

Martha walked over and took his shirt in both hands. “Don’t go,” she said.

“I’ll come back for you if things work out.”

A flying beetle in the bedroom was buzzing and knocking into curtains and walls. It flew into the kitchen and then out the open doorway. Frank Wilson tried to start his truck, but the engine only whined. It was quiet and still again.

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purple burst at its center. At the sound of the whistle to end lunch hour at the plant, Martha turned over on her stomach and put her face into the pillow, but she could still hear the sounds of the occasional Thursday morning traffic on Highway 60.
The back gate gapes around fallen bins
its hinges torn its security bent and broken,
so sorry to have failed in their purpose that
they lean forlornly against the crimpled siding
of the garage, tangled in the unkempt mop
of sleepy climbers turned brittle with season’s decay,
the sullen husks of walnut shells so dark and hollow
that it seems impossible they once bore fruit—
they scatter like pressed rose petals, mourning.

Three years ago the wind blew trashcans in the sky,
tossed sheet metal like feathers,
little more than linens on a clothesline,
a dry hurricane some called it, a steady gust
that lifted the brawny barrier off my yard,
an idle finger flicking paper footballs
over neglected conversations.

The gate’s been on the to do list but the list
grows faster than the grass and the dust moles
that forever gnaw at my wheedling pencils,
poised to scratch to replace each new task
and as we toddle through the evening,
kicking ball and composing song,
sidling from revelry to fever and coddling
and worrisome fretting, finally cradled
in the dim glow of kitchen where I rock
and soothe and watch the alley yawn
through the hole in my defenses

I pull striped cardigan tighter, check the lock,
flick off the light, and remind myself that
there’s more than one way to mend a wall
and sometimes, good neighbors are
the best fences of all.

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Cold Snap

When the frost comes
dandelions
  turn porcelain and glass
frozen
still-life moments
  made statuesque
they sigh like memories
almost forgotten but lingering still
  along the edges
of some cerebral snapshot
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  unable to bend
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Through Antelope Canyon

A run-down silver jeep, with the stench of body odor and stale beer, seats padded with dirty blankets, races over sand and ridges, then comes to an abrupt halt outside a red rock structure. The Navajo guide flings open my door. My stomach is still in my throat.

He leads me to the entrance of the canyon, his raven hair spiked and gelled. His mother, an aged Navajo with leathery skin, carries out a tumbleweed bush, barren, except for two black widow spiders poised motionless on a branch. I want to see their scarlet undersides.

Inside the slot canyon, sun pours in like butterscotch, designing every shade of orange, red, and purple. Splendor saturates my senses. I photograph everything I can, except the guide, who says, "It is bad luck to photograph a Navajo; you will steal his spirit."

The rock is a living organism. He tells me the history of the canyon. Then he asks, "Do you know LeBron James? I hear he's from Ohio." And "Tell me about the Steelers. I saw them win the Super Bowl. Do you live near the Amish?"

Our worlds aren't so different. I step back, he steps forward. He drives me back, a teeth-rattling adventure as we whiz over ruby red canyons and endless white sand; Shock waves shoot up my spine. He assures me black widows really won't hurt you--their venom is in too short supply.
When a Horse Dies

When a horse dies, a man dies.
Everything inside the horse erupts, And pours out his nostrils:
Blood, grain, manure, Loyalty, trust, kindness.
Everything in the man’s heart is spilled out, covering the ground, Because his heart has just been Crushed and splattered.
The pain is immeasurable.
The other horses are silent, motionless. They’ve seen it all before. They know how the story will end.

When a horse dies, a man dies.
Blood gushes out, mixing memories Of the twisting road:
rocky trails, river crossings, lush pastures, cold nights, hot days, broken bones that healed, a broken heart; an inseparable union.
A machine drags the half-ton corpse into a pit, and then covers it with dirt.
The man’s soul is buried with it.

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The man’s soul is buried with it.
We lose oxygen, & our breathing becomes dependent upon the exertion we choose not to exercise.

There was a story in “Scientific American” centering on the odyssey of 50 breeding pairs of European starlings released in Central Park & later expanding across North America,

though few readers remain to peruse what’s left of that old exemplar’s dog-eared pages.

Garbage-strewn fields are filled with scattered testaments of the end of conspicuous production:

Rusted refrigerators’ disjointed pieces buffeted by toxic showers as fan-belts slowly corrode amidst a graveyard of home appliances now far from home.

What ties us together is our inability to see where we’ve gone wrong.

Survivors trek through a labyrinth of detached things & choose the best that excess has to offer.

Once everything accessibly useful is ultimately used up, the real battle begins,

how the living glean odd rewards from cars without brakes & bikes without spokes & books with faded words,

while others remain resolutely in denial,
but once the grain’s exhausted, a search for substitutes begins, a scavenger hunt for invented flesh temporarily staving off starvation, all this happening as the world we live in starts losing its meaning long before it ends.
A Mix of Blues, Celestial & Marine

The sea devours metallic constellations fallen from their starry ledges, & whales swallow this fractured firmament, their bulk glowing phosphorescent in the murky depths, & the plankton grow jealous, blinded by cetaceans as the natural order’s thrown into disarray, then an exodus of marine life rises to the heavens, crossing paths with plummeting planes & birds seeking shelter from luminescent leviathans. Fireflies submerge themselves inside the sea to see the validity of the breaching monsters’ electricity, & they dance in duets, engaging in underwater pirouettes, anomalous beasts marking measured beats with their intermittent flashes. What was once foreign overcomes its out-of-its-element instability, the stars’ new home now deep within the sea, within the bellies of waiting whales, inside their framework turned candescent from the astros’ freight, while in the sky, a lonely moon weeps its quartered shower of descendant light deposited on an infinity of nocturnal flowers blooming on the sea’s surface, their scents celestial reminders of a continued melancholy

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engendered by the stars’ displaced flight, by their fall from space into the wet & awe-inspiring jaws of the ocean’s interminable depths.
At the End of Our Illusion

She’s gone I say to myself, not yet knowing what that means but feeling a sort of synchronicity with the way my heart beats & the turning & twisting of the falling leaves.

She said there was no more love inside her, no existential wondrement, no passion extracted from our union.

It all happened in a matter of months, just a short communion. Before crossing paths with her illusion, I was somewhere in a prehistoric void, in the loss of comprehension, immersed in thoughts ephemeral & light, & what I took for love was only an intrusion, the rusted reckoning of another heartbeat’s falsest rhymes.

Everything in its enormity was imagined, every torrid touch a sad invention, & her caresses reddening my cheeks were standard movements, her fingers’ motions indistinct from duller duties.

My lofty feelings, too, were a fiction arbitrarily conceived, two wistful dreams of a future the two of us no longer dream, nor together ever dreamed.

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Summer meant mornings plopped in front of the TV and afternoons being pushed in a shopping cart down supermarket aisles, and at least once a week being tugged through the mazes of department stores while his mother sought the perfect dress. Afterwards she always said, “Wasn’t that fun?” If Toby’s mother was working that week, Grandma Hoyt came to babysit and brought her cold hands and scaly arms. Grandma Hoyt hated just about everything, especially games, music, television, and children. She’d spend most of the time poking through his parents’ closets or standing in the doorway to the back porch smoking her cigarettes. “Don’t you dare tell your parents,” she’d warn him between long plumes of smoke.

But one Saturday a month was Uncle Roger Day. He’d come and take care of the yard and the gutters but was never asked to stay for dinner. Toby thought of him as Uncle Roger even though he could tell they weren’t related. Roger was much larger than anyone in his family, with biceps he could flex into snowballs. His mother grimaced whenever Toby asked him to do it. He had dark, leathery skin that stuck tightly to him, and he smelled like the old saddle Toby’s grandparents kept in their attic. He wasn’t anything like Toby’s father, who was short and waddled a bit when he walked, and whose pale white belly drooped over his belt. Roger talked differently too. It wasn’t just his raspy voice, he seemed to speak a whole different language. “What up, my man?” he’d say to Toby, and when Toby’s father said it was good to see him again, Roger would cock his finger like a gun. “Right back atcha.” But Toby liked to think of him as Uncle Roger anyway. He had no brothers or sisters, no pets, and there wasn’t another kid in the neighborhood within six years of him. That left Roger.

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Toby never knew which Saturday it would be, but that made it all the more exciting when he heard Roger’s car sputtering.
up the street. According to Roger it was once a mighty slick green, but it had faded to a dull copper with splotches of rust on the sides. Toby could hear it rattling all the way from around the corner, over the sound of the television, or even in the tub with the water running. He could have heard it in his sleep.

In July Roger came on a sweltering afternoon. It was a high sky without any cloud relief in sight, and Toby’s mother had slathered him in sunscreen before she let him outside. Roger stood on a ladder on the front lawn cutting branches from the tall oaks with a long V-shaped pair of clippers. The branches fell softly, rustling like running water all the way to the ground. Toby was on the driveway playing with his trucks, getting his knees good and dirty spinning about the asphalt. He was allowed to sit outside and keep Roger company provided he stay behind the line. The line was invisible but powerful. It extended across the driveway from the lawn jockey to the stone fountain that had never spouted water. When his mother came home, lugging shopping bags from the back seat of the car and groaning that the sales had nearly killed her, the first thing she said to Toby was, “Are you being a good boy?” which meant was he keeping behind the line. His mother had a way of talking to him almost entirely through questions. He nodded vigorously as he revved up one of his trucks. Before she went inside she said, “You’re going to come inside soon, aren’t you? Too much sun is bad for you.” According to her, most things were bad for him.

From the ladder, Roger called down, “You having a good Fourth, bud?” Toby nodded with great enthusiasm. “Bet you had hot dogs and sauerkraut, didn’t you?”

The only thing Toby had eaten today was a bowl of Cheerios and some orange slices, but he didn’t want to disappoint Roger so he said yes.

“I could never dig kraut on my dogs,” Roger said. “Kinda stinky, ain’t it?”

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“I could never dig kraut on my dogs,” Roger said. “Kinda stinky, ain’t it?”
Toby stopped playing a moment and giggled as if Roger had said something naughty, and he hoped he’d say some more before the day was over. As he went back to zipping his trucks around, under, and over his legs, Toby roared like a lion. It was how he imagined pickup trucks must sound.

“What kind of trucks you racing, bro?” Roger said, squinting in the bright sun.

“A blue one and a red one.”

“I think I’d put my money on the red one.”

“The blue one goes faster.” Toby held up the blue truck so Roger could see for himself.

“You sure about that, chief?”

“Yeah, the blue one goes—” And he roared even louder as he revved up the blue truck.

Roger whistled to show he was impressed. “Bet it’s got a hemi engine and the works, don’t it?”

“Uh-huh.”

As Roger clipped another branch he nodded towards his own car parked down by the curb. “Sure wouldn’t want to take it on in my hunk of junk. I’d be eating your dust.”

Toby launched his powerful blue truck across the driveway expecting it to roll straight onto the grass towards the fountain. Instead it veered to the right and quickly accelerated downhill. The rattle of metal axles against plastic wheels grew louder as it picked up speed, and Toby watched helplessly, certain it would roll forever, but it hit something in the driveway, tipped sideways, wobbled desperately on its two left wheels for a moment, then fell over.

“Oh-oh,” Roger said. “Hope you got AAA.”

Toby got up and dusted off his knees. The overturned truck lay towards the bottom of the driveway. He looked back over

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Toby got up and dusted off his knees. The overturned truck lay towards the bottom of the driveway. He looked back over
his shoulder to see if anyone was there, but only Roger was watching and Roger wouldn’t say anything. He held his breath and scampered across the line in the driveway, expecting his mother’s shriek from inside any second. He suddenly understood what people meant about a pounding chest.

What the truck had hit was practically camouflaged in the black driveway. Toby couldn’t see it until he was directly over it, and even then it was so ravaged it took a moment to recognize. It lay stiff and horizontal, its short crooked legs jutting out haphazardly. The body and wings were mashed together into one dark dusky slab, and its feathers were brittle as autumn leaves. Ants were crawling from both ends into a hole in its back and marching out with tiny bits of scarlet in their mouths. Only the head remained uncrushed, poking out of the smashed body like someone buried up to their neck in the sand, and its eye was still as smooth and glassy as a marble, making him think it was being eaten alive.

“What’s the matter, big guy?” Roger asked as he climbed down the ladder. “Why the tears?”

It was only then that Toby felt the wetness running down his cheeks. He took a deep breath, and the air rushed through him so strongly he thought his own chest must be as hollow as the bird’s.

Roger left the clippers on the lawn and came towards him, almost stomping on it with his big work boot until he stopped short at the last second.

“This little thing what got you down?” he said. “Don’t worry, it can’t hurt you.”

He got down on one knee and swatted at the ants, which scattered in all directions. Then he casually reached out and plucked it off the driveway. It tore away from the asphalt like the sound of fabric ripping. It looked so much smaller in Roger’s enormous hand. He gripped it by the tail and the stiff body pointed straight up to the sky. Then he held it out in front of him, almost stomping on it with his big work boot until he stopped short at the last second.

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of Toby’s face, swinging it side to side like a windshield wiper, and in a lazy singsong he said, “Two little blackbirds sitting on a wall, one named Peter, the other named Paul.”

Toby caught flashes of Roger’s smiling yellow teeth as the bird swung past.

“Fly away Peter, fly away Paul.”

Now it was gone, but not really gone, just hiding behind Roger’s back, but it was still a relief not to have to look at it anymore. Then Roger brought it back around and even closer to Toby’s face.

“Come back Peter, come back Paul.”

It shouldn’t come back, he thought. Either it should shake off the dust and filth and fly away or just disappear, but it shouldn’t come back.

“Shoot, I haven’t thought of that for ages,” Roger said. He stared off into the distance and crossed his arms over his bent knee, as if nothing had happened and the thing wasn’t still clenched in his fist. “Mom used to sing that to me. She’d use two fingers and bend them to make it look like they were birds singing.” The bird shook in his hand as he laughed. “One time this survey dude knocked on our front door wanting to know who she was gonna vote for for president. She talked his ear off for a half hour. Wouldn’t let him leave until she had her say about what she thought of both those turkeys. And if you had asked me that morning, I would have said she didn’t even know their names. That was the thing about her. She mostly kept quiet so you thought she didn’t know much, but she knew anything that was worth knowing.”

Toby couldn’t stop staring at it, jutting out horizontally from Roger’s hand like it was trying to fly. He tried shutting his eyes but he could still see the ants crawling in and out.

“It’s funny the things you’ll remember,” Roger went on. “Sometimes I don’t think about her as much as I of Toby’s face, swinging it side to side like a windshield wiper, and in a lazy singsong he said, “Two little blackbirds sitting on a wall, one named Peter, the other named Paul.”

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“Shoot, I haven’t thought of that for ages,” Roger said. He stared off into the distance and crossed his arms over his bent knee, as if nothing had happened and the thing wasn’t still clenched in his fist. “Mom used to sing that to me. She’d use two fingers and bend them to make it look like they were birds singing.” The bird shook in his hand as he laughed. “One time this survey dude knocked on our front door wanting to know who she was gonna vote for for president. She talked his ear off for a half hour. Wouldn’t let him leave until she had her say about what she thought of both those turkeys. And if you had asked me that morning, I would have said she didn’t even know their names. That was the thing about her. She mostly kept quiet so you thought she didn’t know much, but she knew anything that was worth knowing.”

Toby couldn’t stop staring at it, jutting out horizontally from Roger’s hand like it was trying to fly. He tried shutting his eyes but he could still see the ants crawling in and out.

“It’s funny the things you’ll remember,” Roger went on. “Sometimes I don’t think about her as much as I
should. Some things I don’t want to remember, you know? But then something comes to you like now and it makes it seem ok, because I’d rather only remember the good times anyway, right?

Toby’s head felt fuzzy like when he would wake from a nap, and it startled him when Roger’s other hand clasped him on the shoulder. “Why you still crying, chief?”

For Toby the question wasn’t why he was crying; it was why Roger wasn’t. One of them had to be wrong.

Roger gave Toby’s shoulder a friendly punch. “Don’t you worry, Ace. We gonna take care of this little fellow right now.” He got up and headed for the garage, the bird hanging upside down beside his thigh.

Something told Toby to run away while he could, that Roger might come back with something even worse. He ran up the driveway and into the house, but he had been in the bright sun so long that the living room seemed pitch black and cold. The back door was propped open and he hurried out onto the porch. Out on the patio his mother sat under an umbrella, flipping through a magazine. Even in the shade she wore sunglasses. She had on a bright yellow sun dress he didn’t recognize, and it made her look too skinny, almost invisible. His father was sprawled out shirtless in the chaise lounge, his left arm dangling over the side near a tall glass of iced tea.

“The way they’re going, she’s going to blow her brains out one of these days,” his mother was saying. She brought the magazine up to her face to sniff a page.

“It’s not our problem,” his father said. “Let them dig their own grave.”

Toby flinched as a rocket went off in the distance. It soared with a high pitch sound like a slide whistle followed by several quick, sharp pops.
“Isn’t it too early for fireworks?” his mother said. “What’s the point in the daytime?”

“They probably want to get to them while they’re still sober.”

She held her fist up to her cheek as if she were holding a phone. “Hello, 911? My drunken slob of a husband seems to have blown himself to smithereens, and it’s attracting quite a lot of flies. Please send a street sweeper around immediately.”

His father played along, grabbing another phone. “What do you mean you won’t? I pay taxes, don’t I?”

“We’ll have to remember to send them a fruit basket.”

“Sorry for your loss. And please trim those damn hedges on your curb already.”

“At least he died celebrating his country. How patriotic.”

His father began whistling Yankee Doodle. He had just reached the second line when Toby’s mother interrupted. “Toby? What’s the matter?”

Hearing his name startled him. He had forgotten he was actually there on the back porch, as if he had only been watching them on television, and now he suddenly felt the sun on his face again.

She came and squatted in front of him. He could smell the suntan lotion, and in the dark oval lenses of her sunglasses he saw his face distorted.

“Richard, something’s wrong,” she said as she wiped his cheeks with her hand.

His father craned his neck around the back of the chaise lounge. “What’d he do now, fall down or something?”

She squeezed Toby’s hand gently. “Toby, honey, can you be a good little boy and tell mommy and daddy why you’re crying?”

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She squeezed Toby’s hand gently. “Toby, honey, can you be a good little boy and tell mommy and daddy why you’re crying?”
He did want to tell her because he knew she would understand. Not like Roger. She would see how awful it was and why he was crying, and then maybe she could explain it to him. But he didn’t know where to begin: the bird, Roger’s yellow teeth, the ants—it was all swirling together. Both his parents were staring at him and he felt he had to say something quickly. All he got out was Roger’s name.

She didn’t need to hear any more. Waving a hand in his father’s direction, she said, “Richard, go take care of this.”

His father swung his legs over the side of the chaise lounge and knocked over his glass. “Goddammit!” He set it back upright, but all the iced tea had already spilled and was slowly spreading outward over the concrete.

“Richard, now!”

His father grumbled to himself as he stomped past Toby into the house.

“Why don’t you come sit in the shade, you poor little thing.” She led Toby to her chair where he plopped and stared into his lap. It was cooler under the umbrella, but the shadow falling over him felt like someone lurking, and he was afraid to look up.

She knelt and cocked her head to try and look up into his eyes. “Feeling better, honey?” Toby shook his head no. She held out her magazine. “Want to look at some pretty pictures?” Again he shook his head. “Why don’t you close your eyes and try to relax?” But he knew what he would see if he did.

His mother sighed and smoothed his hair to one side. “You’re such a good, good boy, aren’t you?”

She was being so gentle and sweet, as if he had every right to be crying, but Toby wasn’t so sure anymore. If he hadn’t crossed the line in the driveway, if he had just stayed on the safe side like he was supposed to, none of this would have happened.

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happened. Some more rockets went off followed by pops and bangs. Toby felt like they were all aimed at him.

When his father came back he was carrying a glass of iced tea so fresh the iced cubes were still crackling.

“Well?” his mother said, brushing the hem of her new yellow dress as she stood.

“I talked to Roger. He said--”

“I don’t care what he has to say. We can’t have somebody like that around here.”

“If you’ll let me explain--”

“Richard, how can you even think of letting someone around Toby who would make him cry?”

“He’s a kid. Kids cry.”

Her jaw drooped and she put her hands on her hips. “Don’t you dare blame him for this. It’s not his fault.”

“For Chrissakes, I’m not blaming anyone. I’m just saying kids cry. It’s part of life.”

She glared at him. “Not for our Toby.”

Another rocket went off and burst. “My god, aren’t they bored of it yet?” she yelled, throwing up her hands.

Toby was starting to get too cold under the umbrella and wanted to go inside now, but he also didn’t want to get up from the chair.

His father took a sip from his new glass as she folded her arms and shook her head at him. He waited until she had settled down. “Like I was trying to tell you, I knew how you’d feel so I took care of it. Roger was good about it, and he wanted to apologize if he upset Toby.”

“I don’t want to hear anything that man has to say.”

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“I don’t want to hear anything that man has to say.”
“I know you don’t,” his father sighed. He raised the back of the chaise lounge one notch and lay down, keeping the new glass in his hand this time. The empty glass was still beside him in a sea of damp, dark concrete.

There was a rumble nearby and Toby expected another bang or pop, but this wasn’t a firecracker; it sounded more like a sick choking lion. The rumble continued steadily for a moment then faded away.

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” his mother said bending over him. She had gathered herself enough to manage a big smile. “Mean old Roger won’t ever come back here again.”

It was then that Toby realized what the rumble had been, but it took him another moment to understand why. “I’m not scared anymore,” he said. The words had come without his even thinking about them.

“Of course you’re not,” she said in a familiar tone. “You’re mommy’s brave little boy, aren’t you?”

“I’m not scared anymore,” he said louder than before.

“I know you’re not, sweetie. It’s ok. Everything’s ok now.”

He stood up quickly from the chair, startling her enough to stumble back a step. “I’m not scared anymore!” He was a little woozy and his shorts felt like they were slipping from his waist but he wouldn’t stop. “I’m not scared anymore!”

“What’s he crying about now?” his father grumbled.

Her smile was gone. She took Toby’s hand and rubbed it between her palms. “This whole thing’s got him all in a tizzy. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

But Toby did know what he was saying, even if it wasn’t coming out right. There was something hard and jagged in the pit of his stomach that was much worse than fear.

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“I’m not scared anymore! I’m not scared anymore!”
She knelt and pulled him into her chest. “Everything’s going to be ok, honey,” she said in a shrill, quivering voice. Her arms were wrapped tightly around his body but Toby wouldn’t hug her back. He could feel her heart beating against his damp cheek. It thumped even more intensely than his had, either because it was bigger or because something had frightened her worse. When he tried to push away she only clutched him tighter. No matter how much he struggled she would not let him go. It wasn’t fair. Why should her heart get to beat so hard? In her whole life she’d probably never even seen a dead bird.
It never occurred to Peter to knock; he’d grown up in that house and knew the door was unlocked. Once inside, he called out and heard the sound of flushing followed by the flow of water down the pipes. The old man blew his allergy-inflamed nose and coughed to clear his throat. From the second level, he asked, “Who’s there?”

“It’s me, Pop,” Peter answered—even as a child he called his father, Pop.

As the elderly man moved down the stairs, he leaned heavily on the banister, watching his feet on each step, as if not trusting. His appearance surprised Peter. Once a fastidious dresser who traveled by connecting buses to downtown Brooklyn to buy fitted suits, Peter’s father was wearing a stained white shirt with a frayed collar; his unbelted pants hung loosely and the cuffs were torn from catching under his shoes. He was a small man reduced further by the slight stoop of age; his face was flushed from inherited ruddiness, years of beer drinking, and high blood pressure. A semi-circle of stubble darkened his jaw and sagging neck.

In 1948, Peter was six when his parents bought the house at Forty Fifth Street in the Sunset Park section. Throughout much of Brooklyn, the numbered streets and avenues formed rectangles; the long residential streets consisted of multi-level houses pressed against each other, all with small squares of grass and concrete walkways. Stores and markets were on the bordering avenues, some with second floor apartments for short-term rentals. Generations of Sunset Park and Park Slope residents were born in Lutheran Medical Center, received communion and confirmation at St Michael’s, and were buried in Greenwood Cemetery, all in the borough. In the late 60’s, Peter was drafted and after returning in 1970, worked in Manhattan, renting an apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey. The
following year, Peter’s mother died unexpectedly, and five years later, his father retired, living alone.

“I just came to see how you are doing,” Peter said.

“I’m fine,” he said as if the question was nonsensical. But Peter didn’t believe him. Since they were children, his father often talked about the past; lately, the past was intruding into the current days and he seemed confused at times by the overlap. Peter’s older sister, who had moved to Dallas after marrying, was concerned, basing her apprehensions on phone conversations in which her father called her by their mother’s name, and at other times, talked as if she was away overnight.

“I’m afraid he’s getting senile,” she’d said to Peter in a call before the visit.

“He’s getting old,” Peter had responded, “what is he, seventy?”

“Seventy one,” his sister corrected.

After spending the morning at the house, Peter walked along Fifth Avenue. The stores were as varied in their lettering and displays as the products they sold. Like bulbs on Christmas tree lights, a failed shop could be replaced with minor adjustment, without altering the symmetry. It was nearly five by the time he returned to his father’s home. The old man was sitting on the couch, reading a newspaper with a glass of beer on the coffee table. The Yankees game was on television.

Sitting in the chair across from the couch, Peter looked around the room and noticed subtle reminders of his mother’s passing: dust on shelves and table tops, crooked pictures on the walls—untolerated when she was alive. There was a framed Mass card from her funeral on an end table and he was drawn back to that day, recalling the sadness.

At night, Peter sat on the front steps. The houses were connected and similar in shape, the only distinction was the color of the cornice. The brick curved fronts held narrow windows, three on the first floor, four on the second, and a

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"Neighborhood’s changed, Peter."

"I don’t recognize anyone I see," Peter said.

"Most are gone," his father said wistfully. Pointing to a sandstone house across the street he added, "The two sisters died barely a monthly apart. Remember how they’d sit in the front and say the rosary together?"

"I was a boy when they lived there."

The old man put his hand on his son’s shoulder and Peter flinched at the unfamiliar touch. Looking around at his father he saw a pained, sorrowful expression on his face.

"I remember a lot from then," the old man said. "But then, I can’t remember where I put my car keys."

"Pop, you got rid of the car last year. We talked about that; you don’t need it. You walk to most places, or take the bus. Also, you kept getting tickets because you’d forget about alternative side of the street parking when the sanitation trucks came around with those huge sweepers to clear away debris."

After a period of silence, Peter said, "I was going to go back to New Jersey but I think I’ll stay in my old room tonight. How about dinner at New Corner? You always liked Italian food--my treat."

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“Sure,” his father said.
“We, Peggy and me, are concerned about you.”

“Who?” the old man interrupted.
“Peggy, your daughter, my sister.”

His father laughed nervously. “I always call her Margaret.”

“No, you do—” Peter stopped mid-word.

At the restaurant, they sat in a booth and leaning against the
cooper-colored cushions, read the menu opened out on the
rose-color tablecloth. His father looked around the room at the
filled tables and waiters moving adroitly between the thin
spaces. Bending over to pick up his dropped napkin, Peter
noticed his father was wearing different color socks.

“I know what you’re getting—Lasagna. You always get that
when we go out,” he said to his father.

“Nobody makes it like your mother does.”
Sipping on a glass of red wine while his father drank beer
that he poured carefully into the tilted glass, Peter looked at his
father’s face, noticing that it aged in layers of wrinkles,
deepening circles, and darkening tint as if each could be peeled
to reveal youthful complexion beneath and the wear of years
could be tossed.

After they ordered, Peter asked his father, “Do you often
have trouble remembering recent things? You said so before.”

“I remember you’re paying,” the old man said slyly.

After dinner, Peter drove back and they settled in for the
night; his father laid on the couch, his shoeless feet pressed
against the edge of the armrest, and his head lifted by the
pillows moved from the center. The old man watched a
detective series and before the hour show was over, was
snoring softly. In the kitchen, Peter took the wall phone from
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detective series and before the hour show was over, was
snoring softly. In the kitchen, Peter took the wall phone from
its cradle and called his sister.

“Sure,” his father said.
“We, Peggy and me, are concerned about you.”

“Who?” the old man interrupted.
“Peggy, your daughter, my sister.”

His father laughed nervously. “I always call her Margaret.”

“No, you do—” Peter stopped mid-word.

At the restaurant, they sat in a booth and leaning against the
cooper-colored cushions, read the menu opened out on the
rose-color tablecloth. His father looked around the room at the
filled tables and waiters moving adroitly between the thin
spaces. Bending over to pick up his dropped napkin, Peter
noticed his father was wearing different color socks.

“I know what you’re getting—Lasagna. You always get that
when we go out,” he said to his father.

“Nobody makes it like your mother does.”
Sipping on a glass of red wine while his father drank beer
that he poured carefully into the tilted glass, Peter looked at his
father’s face, noticing that it aged in layers of wrinkles,
deepening circles, and darkening tint as if each could be peeled
to reveal youthful complexion beneath and the wear of years
could be tossed.

After they ordered, Peter asked his father, “Do you often
have trouble remembering recent things? You said so before.”

“I remember you’re paying,” the old man said slyly.

After dinner, Peter drove back and they settled in for the
night; his father laid on the couch, his shoeless feet pressed
against the edge of the armrest, and his head lifted by the
pillows moved from the center. The old man watched a
detective series and before the hour show was over, was
snoring softly. In the kitchen, Peter took the wall phone from
its cradle and called his sister.
“Well?” she asked as if the word was sufficient.
“He forgets a lot, but not to the point of being a danger.”
“What’s that point, Peter?” she said impatiently.
“When he leaves the stove on, when he’s walking around
the street in his underwear having forgotten his house number.
He’s absent-minded, but not in dementia.” After a pause, “not
angry.”
“You’re not there long enough to be certain.”
“And you’re too far away to be so confident.”
“Is he drinking?”
“Not like he used to.”
“Is he taking his medications?”
“I don’t know,” Peter answered, “he has more vials than a
pharmacy.”
“Well, inventory them, the number in each, the frequency”
“I can’t be a nurse, Peggy.”
“If I could help. I feel so distant, not just in miles; so far
from him, from you, the memories there. I envy you being
there—seriously—surrounded by the reminders, even the painful
ones. Peter, Peter,” she stumbled over the words, “when he’s
gone, will we remember him as a good dad, a distinctive one?”
“What are you turning into? Ask me at the wake,” he added
facetiously.
“You’re right. But tell him why I’m not there; remind him
of the distance. I’m afraid he’ll forget that and--”
“I’ll tell him.”
“Often?”
“Bye, Peggy.”

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“Often?”
“Bye, Peggy.”
After hanging up with his sister, Peter went back inside and gently shook his sleeping father. “Go to bed, Pop.”

His father stared at him with a look of momentary confusion. As he rose from the couch, gripping the cushioned arm of the couch, he said, “Who called?”

“No one called. I called Peggy. She says hello.”

“The prodigal daughter?” the old man said, smiling.

At night, Peter was restless. Toward dawn when the faint rays lightened treetops and building roofs, he looked out the rear window toward the back yard—a rectangle of crab grass and weeds. He saw a rusted pulley attached to a thick telephone pole in the rear of the yard. The doubled rope that once extended to the downstairs window and held clothes clipped to the line was gone, taken down when the first dryer was delivered. He recalled late nights pacing in that room, looking at the stretch of rope that seemed to extend far into the darkness. He was anxious then about the end of high school, the draft—the uncertainty. When he heard his father’s snort coming from the adjacent room, another memory returned, one of himself cowering at the far end of the bed listening to the sound of heavy footsteps and deep-breathing anger; the door had opened violently and his father had stood in the doorway, his belt coiled around his hand.

The next morning, Peter came downstairs and found a note in his father’s scratch writing, I went to the diner for breakfast—his father’s usual start to the day. On the way home, the elderly man would pick up a copy of the Daily News. Late morning, his father would sit out in the back yard on a beach chair in the warmer weather, and, as if prodded by an internal alarm, would go back to the diner for lunch, walk along the avenue, and by three o’clock go into a bar for a beer. Peter recalled that the routine was similar to his weekends when his mother was alive, except that she would often say to Peter, “Dinner’s nearly ready; get him.” He would go to the bar on

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Fifth Avenue and in the smoke-filled room, would find his father on a corner stool, gripping a beer bottle and slurring his words to a half-listening man. Once, when Peter grabbed an arm to take him away, his father swung wildly, striking Peter across the nose. Peter pulled his staggering parent out while pressing the end of his bleeding nose with a reddened handkerchief.

After a few stays, Peter explained to his sister, “The same thing every day, the same places, nearly the same time. I bet he orders the same meal. Mindless routine--his brain’s on autopilot. My being here has no influence. I tried to get him to take a trip to Jones Beach where we used to go as kids, but he refused. He seems at times not to know I’m here. Yesterday, when I came out of my room, he stepped out of the bathroom naked. He heard me and turned, saying nothing, making no attempt to hurry or cover up.”

“You’ve been out of the house a long time, as I have. He’s not used to having you around.”

“I just think this constant repetition, doing the same thing over and over has got to be dulling his mind.”

“It’s a comfort, Peter.”

“Maybe we need to get him out of here.”

“A nursing home?” she asked. “Wait, weren’t you telling me not long ago that he wasn’t that bad?”

“He’s not an invalid or crazy, but there are places where he can be independent and people are around.”

“Good luck with that one.”

“I can’t be responsible for him, not alone.”

“Let’s not get too far ahead; we’ll work something out.”

“He wasn’t a distinctive father maybe not even a good one.”

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“He wasn’t a distinctive father maybe not even a good one.”

“What?” she asked.
“You’d asked me that, remember.”

“Do you forgive him?” she asked.

“He wasn’t that way with you.”

“I know, do you forgive him?” she repeated.

“Finally.”

Roaming around the house, Peter went down to the basement. The concrete floor and cinder block walls were bare. A tin clothes closet in the far corner leaked an odor of mothballs. Peter sorted through the boxes in the center of the room, most of nick-knacks and Christmas ornaments collected by his mother. In one box, he found photographs and taking a handful, walked back upstairs to view them in better light. The pictures were old, black and white, many of relatives long dead. Peter flipped through them quickly but stopped at the image of his mother standing in front of a high wrought-iron fence with spear-like tops in a cement base. She was gripping the fence with one raised hand while the other arm was at her side, her fingers barely visible in the folds of her long skirt. Her hair was combed and carefully curled, and she was without the glasses she always wore. He thought her attractive and healthy, so vastly different from the memories of his childhood, early adulthood, before the wear of years, before the fighting and yelling. Peter could recall brief flashes of girlishness in his mother, moments when she would giggle, seemingly unencumbered by maturity. He wondered what she was like then, as in the picture; her expression was elusive, slightly haughty, and faintly annoyed at being photographed.

His father came into the room and Peter asked, “Do you look at all this stuff; doesn’t it make you sad?”

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“Pop, you can’t live your life looking at old pictures, doing the same thing every day. You need to do something different.”

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“Pop, you can’t live your life looking at old pictures, doing the same thing every day. You need to do something different.”
His father seemed not to hear him. “Those pictures were in order; you didn’t change that, did you?”

Peter laughed. “You proved my point. I didn’t change anything.”

Peter made sandwiches for both.

“You used to like peanut butter and jelly, remember,” his father said.

“Seems like I had them every day.”

“But it wasn’t so bad.”

In his weekly update to his sister, Peter spoke in short, flat sentences.

“What’s the matter, Brother, aren’t you telling me something?”

“It’s getting to me—”

“Pop?” she interrupted.

“No, Mom. The reminders.”

“We don’t talk much about her, do we?”

“No; it’s too hard.”

“That says a lot, doesn’t it, Petey boy?”

Peter continued the cycle of weekend visits for over a year, interrupted only by storms or competing plans. During those days, he saw a deepening decline in his father. In November, Peggy visited and when their father went into the kitchen, she looked to her brother and cried softly. “He’s changed so.”

The following summer, when Peggy’s called and there was no answer for days, she contacted her brother. Peter went to the house and found the old man dead on the couch.

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On the day of the funeral, Peter walked to Sixtieth Street and stopped in front of the massive Catholic church, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. The building stretched the entire length between the parallel streets. Bits of torn offering envelopes mixed with trampled remnants of wedding rice and stuck to the corners of the cement steps that began at the sides of the lower doors and wound into a semi-circle to the upper sanctuary of the two-altar church—the ornate upper level for high Mass and the lower for the briefer, daily services. Statues of saints stood guard, the chiseled pleats of their stone robes washed of fine lines by the seasons. He went into the lower doors of the ground-level sanctuary, which was dark like a vault. The lighting fixtures hung from tarnished brass extensions. His father’s funeral was about to begin. Peggy sat with her husband; relatives were scattered about in the rows of pews surrounding the casket. The priest, wearing starred vestments, came out from behind the altar, and shook the thurible over the glossy coffin. The incense-coated charcoal emitted small clouds of smoke through the perforations of the metal. The mourners stood, mouthing prayers. In that somber place he thought about a concept he’d not considered for a long time—sin; his sins, his father’s, forgiven by a priest in confession, long remembered by a son. A few women with black scarves pinned to their dark, gray-streaked hair sat in these outer pews, fingering rosary beads, separate from the mourners. A discordant note from the organ echoed in the high-ceiling building, but then the music softened. As part of the ritual, communion was offered and the grieving family knelt at the altar railing; after they were done, the ethnically-dark women from the side pews came forward to receive the host. These ancient women, Peter recognized from his faded commitment to religion, were as much a part of the service as the priest and altar boys, and when they were done, others, also aged and experienced in grief, would take their place, performing the same silent act of sympathy. He once thought them to be morbid with little more to do than watch the spectacle of mourning, but then he understood that it was their role to be

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there, adding a layer to the ceremony, standing and kneeling without prompting, drawn by the unchanging sacrament. The rituals, beginning with baptism and ending with the solemn service, explained in ancient catechisms, linked lives and generations offering consistency, solace and redemption. Routine was the sole defense against the confusion of change for people like his father, perhaps his mother as well, he considered, and the rigidity of his father’s life, formed early, hardened with age, was not senility as he and his sister might have thought, but a retreat to the familiar. Routine was the absolution, the erasure of wrongs. As their capacity to muster against complexity diminished, they sought refuge in constancy. For the first time, he saw the reasoning in his father’s later-life choices. Peter followed the coffin out of the church, purged of sorrow and his own confusion by the pungent incense.
Today I Saw a Chipmunk Running in the Rain Gutter

This autumn has been like a snake,
shifting its body away in cold dirt.

When I was a child, I spoke
as a child. You could be a mother
by now: It has been long enough.
Does a man ever put away childish things?

I still cling to the concept of dreams:
shepherd's pie under the broiler,
downtown Dublin sprawling out below us,
my son at the window, starry eyed.
The Beauty of Smaller Arrangements

I used to listen to Brahms in concert halls
so grand and arrogant.
The instruments doubled, the tone color full;
muffled, as if swaddled in stag skin.

Here, listen to this one:
phonograph, 1928.
I've rehearsed my description of it:
The static before the track
is the sound our coats make
when shrugged off after a long night out.
And the sharpness in the bows
is throaty, so clearly human.

The nightlight glows beside the dresser, and we're dancing.
Spin me around, hold me down, let me go.
Para "Malagueña Salerosa" Interpretada por Chingon

The electro-flamenco charge has me
oscillating, like the calendar-calculating savant
who told me once in a trance
how many days have passed since I've slept.
On the library floor plan, this place is marked "void,"
a pleasant emptiness settled in
between polished marble floors and a need
for honesty as new and foreign as the pedal steel
I hear plucked harp-like when you speak.
The birthmother has found us again. She calls, ranting, stupid-drunk, threatening to come to our house to take back her child. Even though it has been five years since she signed the final papers, she says we stole her baby. My husband tries to reason with her, but her words are jumbled, her thoughts incoherent. He asks how she got our unlisted number, and she laughs. He reminds her of the restraining order, and she cackles. I think of her 90 page police record – charge after charge after charge of prescription drug fraud, credit card fraud, drunk driving, disorderly conduct, solicitation, prostitution . . . and the one that sickens me the most - the investigation of child abuse. I start to pack. I will not wait for her to show up at our door. I will not let her ruin our lives. She will not hurt my babies.

My husband calls the police. I listen as he recounts the long list of threats she has made against us. I throw clothes and toothbrushes in gym bags, and I will myself not to faint, not to vomit. I will not even let myself cry. There is not time. I cannot believe that once again, the birthmother is present in our lives, that she is controlling us. I am shocked by her persistence. It’s been five years! But I will run from her for as long as I have to. I am faster. I am smarter. I have people helping me – police, lawyers, judges. But even though they help, their rules slow them down. I will out run them too.

I finish packing. My husband decides to stay behind to close up the house. He takes out the gun from the lock-box. Normally, we would fight over this. Now, I don’t even blink. “I will call you, every hour,” I say, on the way out the door. “Aim for her legs. I really don’t want to visit you in jail.”

I run with my children, in terror through the night, driving, driving, lost and not even caring. My children sleep in the back seat. They do not know how lost we are.

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I run with my children, in terror through the night, driving, driving, lost and not even caring. My children sleep in the back seat. They do not know how lost we are.
In a grand gesture of bravado, I pull into a beautiful hotel at last. We will spend the night here. We will pay for lots of people between her and us. We will pay for a bell boy. We will pay for a concierge. We will pay for a desk clerk, who stays awake all night, who acts like he doesn’t notice that I keep looking at the door and looking behind me. I sign the charge slip that has big numbers on it and try not to think of all the money this woman has cost us. How I wish I could make her pay.

I put my babies in beds with satin-edged sheets and too many pillows. I feel proud of myself for making it here. I am taking care of them. I check all the locks on the windows. I lock the door, bolt it, then swing the extra metal loop over it too. There is no way she can get in. But still I leave the bathroom light on.

In the morning, we go down to the room off the lobby for the complimentary breakfast. I avert everyone’s eyes. I do not want even polite conversation. Manners feel extraneous.

I let my son eat as much as he wants. He makes waffles, and the batter drips down the sides. At home, I would chide him and make him clean it up. Here, I say nothing. I will let people take care of us.

My daughter eats very little. I try to encourage her but she’s still sleepy. I want to tell her to eat all she can, when she can, to be ready. But she is 6. She drinks her milk and asks if we can go back to the room.

They watch cartoons while I shower. I dig through the suitcase that I packed in such a hurry. I can’t find my other sock. After five minutes of searching, I put my tennis shoes on without them. I will get blisters, but that will not slow me down. I am so used to running in pain.

I remember my roommate in college once came home once after a cross country meet with blood trickling down her shirt. “What happened to you?!” I gasped, afraid she fell down a hill.

In a grand gesture of bravado, I pull into a beautiful hotel at last. We will spend the night here. We will pay for lots of people between her and us. We will pay for a bell boy. We will pay for a concierge. We will pay for a desk clerk, who stays awake all night, who acts like he doesn’t notice that I keep looking at the door and looking behind me. I sign the charge slip that has big numbers on it and try not to think of all the money this woman has cost us. How I wish I could make her pay.

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I remember my roommate in college once came home once after a cross country meet with blood trickling down her shirt. “What happened to you?!” I gasped, afraid she fell down a hill.
or was attacked by a wild animal in the woods. Instead, she answered me with pride. “I have bloody nipples,” she announced. “Only real runners get bloody nipples.” She took her bra off that has rubbed and scraped her breasts raw. She holds it in front of her like a trophy.

I did not understand her pride then. Now I clasp my daughter’s wrinkled pants and shirt to me, and smile because they match.
Art Affair on the Square
~for Peggy Hanna

I sit beneath a white tent, sun ferocious, heating the day to boiling point, my book of poems before me on a table. For sale.

Amid glass arts and country crafts, Italian ice and lemon shake-ups.

Passers-by read my sign, crinkle their noses, brush sweat from their foreheads. They do not touch. Even the woman who runs the show, who owns a gift shop in town, who invited me, the poet from the paper, won’t pick up a copy.

Beside me sits Peggy, author of her Vietnam memoir—how she transformed, as she put it, “from hawk to dove,” participating, eventually, in the Paris Peace Talks of 1971. She tells me she doesn’t read poetry, has never quite understood it.

Nearby, a paper-making booth buzzes with curious customers watching the vendor churn chunks of material in a blender, then pour them into a press, push down, and voilà!—pink or blue or green, what’s your favorite color? you can choose!—blank pages develop.

With nothing, really, to do, I look through the scrapbook Peggy has brought, reading newspaper.

JULIE L. MOORE

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JULIE L. MOORE
clippings, viewing photographs of her, a devout Catholic with nine kids, and her compatriots, all moms and neighbors, clear-eyed, resembling people in my Baptist church, Midwest sensibilities apparent as a Mennonite’s cap.

I learn her story—the one Phil Donahue blurbed on the back of her book, the one nobody wants to read today—wasn’t media-hyped or engraved in some folk song marking the occasion. Its only flaw was domestic: No spit flew, no cruel word was spoken to the soldiers they respected.

Just one goal, plain as the free-flowing tears that greeted each body returning home, returning to Ohio, its all-too-open earth embracing each one. Please. Bury the war instead.

A woman interrupts, stopping by our table, and thumbs through my poems, reads one about loss. “Oh, that’s sad,” she says, disappointment lacing the tone of her voice as it drops like a flame descending to ember. “Read another,” I say.

“Oh, that’s sad, too,” she says, handing the book back to me. I open to a poem called “Joy,” show her. “Oh, that speaks to me,” she says, then puts the book down, walks to the crowded tent next door.

And Peggy, who, I am sure, has stretched her arms around her children and grandchildren hundreds of times, then turns to me, asks me to read her a poem. I start at the beginning.

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And Peggy, who, I am sure, has stretched her arms around her children and grandchildren hundreds of times, then turns to me, asks me to read her a poem. I start at the beginning.
I’m already against the next war, declares a bumper sticker on a green pick-up parked in front of the café where I sit behind a large window. Espresso steams in the back, aroma of roasted almonds infusing my deep breath, voice of the spigot, rasping. Outside, a silent movie. Two men holding cell phones move their mouths. One, wearing a beige fedora, sits in a Ford F-150 across the street beneath the Trail Tavern sign, flickering in the mid-afternoon heat, wrought iron fence below, donning red, white, & blue bowler from Independence Day Day. The other passes between Dino’s sidewalk chalkboard touting a raspberry zinger as the cool drink of the day & that truck tattooed with slogans, their sentiments sizzling. Vegetarians do it with relish. (But we wear a condiment!) Writers from the workshop pass by & wave. Standing by a tree, a guitarist, his case propped open, strums. Be ashamed to let it die. Save Antioch NOW. The man in the hat steps from his truck, leash in hand, followed by a black & white Boxer, which, until then, had been concealed. Dave Chappelle, too, long bandana hanging from the back pocket of his jeans like Rapunzel’s hair out her castle window, appears. Lights a cigarette. Chats with a brunette. A man sporting dreadlocks approaches, grabs his hand, wrapping his wrist around the funny man’s bone. A silver SUV slows, its driver doing a double-take, gawking as long as traffic allows.

An orange butterfly floats by the crossroads of the Kingsyard StopShop, enters the gate of Asande Imports. Break the Chains! Shop at Independent stores. (MALL WART.) Another man comes through, tying the sleeves of his shirt around his waist, the red ink of a lobster stretching across his entire back, glistening in the sun. Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Neighbor’s Country. A fly blunders against the glass I look through, lifting its sticky legs from time to time, trying to fly. Chappelle answers his cell, then walks to his motorcycle, slips on his helmet, pulls away. Leaving behind the green truck, still idle at the curb. Peace, it proclaims in bold font to anyone who’ll listen, is the answer.

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Morning

The moon at her tumescent peak, reflecting
Emboldened interests of the rising sun,
Is setting now, a votary genuflecting,
Her quiet night of swollen prayer, done.

I’ve studied her and know she will be less
Tomorrow, and the next day, on and on--
For all things that rejoice in time regress--
But first the floating splendor, like a swan.

You rise to day as well in orange light
And leave me now to wonder on the dawn
With memories like blue jeans in the night
And future moons to reminisce upon.
My wall brings back the winter, the tranquility
of the minute right after freshly fallen snow.
It has no interruptions, no distractions
of molding, baseboard, dado, wainscot, etc.
The pillars stand unfluted, capitals
uncapped, the cornices stark as any babe,
with all the potential of a sheet of paper.
It’s free of everything as freedom itself,
and a simple squeegee does the trick to keep it clean.
And it makes me forget about flaws, or the August sun
bobbing under a tree in full foliage;
or the west of an autumn’s twilight, or the east
of a morning; or the outdoors, spattered and glistening,
shivering like life in a breeze, after spring rain.
She stood still, soft, hard, 
so inhuman, and so human, 
not facing me—not in particular—
between her velvet cords and stanchions, 
cold and warming, safe in her remoteness.

As Rodin’s model’s cleavage beckoned 
the placement of his nose; 
As Galatea’s soulless soul summoned 
Pygmalion’s heart and hands; 
And as all the dust and flecks and shards 
removed from whatever was not Sylvia 
were later swept into a pile on the floor 
which some enchantress raised by the stir 
of a wind and flash-turned into me, 
the marble sands now beholding:

So Sylvia the statues statuesque 
O so polished in her pulchritude 
Was desirous that I, as sudden as a breath 
Of life, break through the vermilion cord, 
Through her inanimate inertia, 
Topple the stanchions, 
Embrace—
And be completed.

On Sylvia

She stood still, soft, hard, 
so inhuman, and so human, 
not facing me—not in particular—
between her velvet cords and stanchions, 
cold and warming, safe in her remoteness.

As Rodin’s model’s cleavage beckoned 
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And be completed.
"You make my world swirly happy." Scrawled in spray paint on the bridge underpass, the words stood out in heavy black blotches against the backdrop of peace signs, random doodles and obscure gang symbols. The letters were nearly eight feet off the ground. I wonder if the tagger worked upside down? I craned my neck trying to visualize the sentence at 180 degrees and gave up. Quite a trick, either way. But swirly happy? The only swirly I could think of was the middle school bathroom torture, not an event likely to inspire happiness.

Not that happiness is something I have a great deal of experience with. I tell my husband it’s not in my nature to be happy; after thirty-five years together, I think Geo may be starting to believe me. Today’s mood was no exception to that lack. Grad school demands, writer’s block, life’s bumps, all were wearing on my always-strained nerves. I needed to escape from myself, to find myself again.

A rumbling semi on State Route 42 overhead brought me back to the present and after a last glance at the graffiti, I resumed my walk down the Little Miami Scenic Park. Trail, actually, but it seems any community area with trees merits the
name “park,” even if it is only eight feet wide. The cool early morning breeze barely stirred the heavy air that warned of an impending storm. I quickened my steps to make sure I finished my hike without getting drenched. Remnants of last night’s brief shower dripped from the dense canopy but the path was fairly dry, even under the trees. Only a stray puddle or two survived the climbing temperatures. I shifted the water bottle on my hip and felt its cold sweat dampen my side. Seems I would get wet whether it rained or not.

I settled into a steady pace along the asphalt path, forcing myself to concentrate on my surroundings. A solo hike was unusual for me, but it seemed the quickest way to that mental break I so desperately needed. The moderate depression creeping in over the last few days threatened my fragile peace of mind and derailed my study efforts. I had to find my focus again, before the disgruntled voices in my head won the battle.

Maia Sharp’s “The Girl on Her Way” looped endlessly in my brain; my steps unconsciously picked up the beat: “How long can she be the girl on her way, before she’s just the woman who never got there?” Defeatist thoughts I had hoped were quelled for good fought for leverage. Who was I kidding, thinking I could make it as a writer? Where did I get off displaying such arrogance? What a waste of time and energy, adding to the already overloaded stacks of books in the remainder bins of any bookstore – pick one! Instead of holding up my end of the marriage and selling a finished piece (or two) I felt I had become a burden, leaving Geo to battle the ogres of corporate America while I sat home in my emotional ivory tower and called myself a writer. Writers actually publish, for money; on those grounds, I certainly don’t qualify.

Swirly happy. I forced my mind back to the spray-painted words. Focus. Think. Create. What did the tagger mean? Was she – or he, I suppose, although I had a hard time imagining a male writing such a giddy phrase – in the throes of her first love? Open to the possibilities of the future, of the fairy tale name “park,” even if it is only eight feet wide. The cool early morning breeze barely stirred the heavy air that warned of an impending storm. I quickened my steps to make sure I finished my hike without getting drenched. Remnants of last night’s brief shower dripped from the dense canopy but the path was fairly dry, even under the trees. Only a stray puddle or two survived the climbing temperatures. I shifted the water bottle on my hip and felt its cold sweat dampen my side. Seems I would get wet whether it rained or not.

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happily-ever-after... Probably just finished a really good joint, the dark voices intruded. I pushed the negativity aside. Geo would be so disappointed in my current state of mind. He had been nothing but supportive of my decision to finish my degree, to concentrate on writing. “Don’t worry about the money,” he said more times than I can count. “This has always been your dream. You need to write.” Why couldn’t I accept his support as unconditionally as it was offered? Instead, I was shadowing our life together with my uncertainties.

Maybe if I just lost myself in nature for a bit. I breathed deeply and caught the musky scent of deer. None emerged from the rustling undergrowth, but they were there, nestled down in the climbing heat of the day. I concentrated on my stride and felt the stretch in my legs, glad I was making the effort, knowing I would pay for it later when my aching hips kept me awake at night. Plusses and minuses. Good and bad. Ups and downs. The niggling depression would soon pass, my logical self knew. I just had to work through it.

As if the internal battle to justify my writing were not enough, my harried brain was also busy awful-izing the trivial upsets of our marriage. Little things, really, as we settled into middle age, but disconcerting nonetheless. We picked at each other more, annoyed by quirks we once tolerated with indulgent smiles. Downtime together had become an awkward dance of avoidance, trying not to impose incessant demands or unrealistic expectations on already-overloaded hours. I needed Geo’s support; why did I insist on pushing him away? Had we ever really been swirly happy? My mind struggled through the darkness, searching for brighter memories.

I looked from the cracked pavement up into the gentle hills along the path. The new log home to the east was nearly obscured by the now full-grown bushes. It was a different world along the trail in summer. In winter, the landscape was stark and barren and the slopes were visible in all directions. By mid-July only an occasional break in the greenery allowed a}

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glimpse of the few homes and farm fields divided by the repurposed railroad bed. A mocking bird chortled on a high branch, running through an eclectic playlist of his own making. I pulled my hat down a bit to shade my eyes while I searched for his perch, but he was well hidden. A crow stop a dead limb from last fall’s windstorm competed with the mocking bird’s melodies. I left them to their lyrical battle and resumed my walk south.

Absent concerted effort, my mind buzzed, distracting me from the idyllic surroundings. Geo is my bedrock, my anchor, and I feared we were drifting apart. Far too many evenings passed in near silence, spent in front of mindless Food Network episodes or baseball games between teams with players we no longer recognized. My graduate school program ate up huge chunks of mental resources during the day and exhaustion usually hit by early afternoon. His brain drain occurred in front of the classroom while drilling often reluctant students in the nuances of computer security. His audiences of mid-life career changers, especially when it was not by choice, rarely make attentive listeners and his passion for teaching clashed daily with growing frustrations. This was supposed to be our time, the empty nest we’d been waiting for, as much as we loved our kids. How could we reclaim the contentment the world seemed determined to steal from us? We had to do it together, I knew that much. And when we are out of sync, my writing suffers as well. “Everything is connected,” Geo reminds me.

Ching-ching! “On your left!” A pair of cyclists scooted by. I lifted a hand in greeting to thank them for warning me of their approach. Not everyone was as courteous, and when the trail lifted a hand in greeting to thank them for warning me of their approach. Not everyone was as courteous, and when the trail was particularly busy and the bikers were in a hurry, it was easy to be startled by their all-but-silent progress. I watched them fade into the distance toward the curve and continued my steady pace. Step, step, step, drowning out the mental chaos. Painted numerals on the pavement marked my progress – one mile down.

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Depression is a recurring nightmare in my life, manageable most days, not so much on others. In the past couple of years, since Geo convinced me that walking would stimulate endorphins and such, the good days outnumber the bad. Now even when the darkness hits, it doesn’t last as long or drag me quite as deep into myself as it had in years past. I still struggle to force personal absorption for the chunks of my children’s lives when I was emotionally absent; they are more forgiving than I will ever be. I know it’s in large part due to Geo’s intervention, but I guess that says something about our combined parenting efforts. We joke about our thirty-plus years of tag team marriage, finishing each other’s sentences, picking up thoughts out of the air before the other can give them voice. It remains my salvation. My writing is an escape from internal turmoil that I can allow myself only because I know Geo is waiting for me when I return.

“Walker up!” A bike caravan leader warned his companions of my presence on the trail. I veered to the right, giving them room to pass in a single-file blur of motion and color. The odor of sweat trailed behind them as they vanished in the distance as quickly as they appeared. I rounded the last curve in this stretch of the trail and spotted the break in the trees that signaled Roxanna-New Burlington Road, my turn-around point. Another number on the pavement; another half-mile down.

Those markers were important; I needed signposts to keep me moving forward. One more mile on the trail. One more page in my novel-in-progress. Without a concrete plan, whether it be steps, words or finished articles, I flounder. My day is marked off in routine activity, set tasks and self-imposed duties to keep me in touch with reality, counting the hours until Geo returns home and I am whole again. If I stray too far off that path, I am lost. Writing transports me through life, if I let it. Geo is my companion and my goal. My emotional distress relaxes a bit as that realization seeps through the fog.

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Sunlight brightened the trail for the last hundred yards and I picked up my pace, hurrying towards a relief from the gloom. As I passed the fertilizer plant near the corner, I instinctively held my breath. Noxious ammonia fumes from the dozen or so parked trucks could trigger a migraine faster than red wine, but today the breeze carried the odor away from me and I caught only the scent of wildflowers from the field opposite. I stopped at the crossing, leaning against the trail sign while I took another swig of water and basked in the sun. Its warmth helped fade the mental darkness as well and I turned towards home with a lighter step.

Reaching fifty was a milestone I outwardly embraced a few months earlier, but more and more it seemed age was making itself felt. Restless nights, aching muscles from minor exertions, heartburn from my favorite foods, and those terrifying “senior moments” of forgetfulness – little things, to be sure, but en masse they were unsettling. Even more disturbing was the emotional detachment I sensed as Geo struggled with many of the same issues. This trail had become our physical and emotional lifeline when we first moved to town three years ago. Evening walks together saved us from a frightening medical jolt and gave us a peaceful interlude as we reconnected. Was the memory of those shared moments what drew me back to the trail?

A boisterous canoe party laughed and splashed its way down the Little Miami River next to the path, a visual representation of the tagger’s swirly happy, I realized. We used to have fun like that. The Dayton Celtic Festival last weekend was supposed to be a relaxing outing, but all I could do was cringe at the ear-splitting decibel level of the music. An aging hippie lost in a dreamy dance in front of the stage aroused my envy at his ability to be in the moment; I just wanted the ear plugs I’d forgotten on my desk back home. But Geo was enjoying the scene, so I tried hard to be content.

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Swirly happy. The words echoed in my brain, drowning out the worst of the negative voices. Had I ever been like that, even when I was younger? I must have been at some point, before the darkness descended. I shook my head, dispelling the resurgent urge to dwell in the awfulness of my less-than-idyllic childhood. I recalled a scene from the movie *Mamma Mia!* that brought me to tears as I witnessed the joyous abandon of the women celebrating life to the song “Dancing Queen.” I know it’s fictional, but it’s good fiction – the kind I want to write – because it evokes a yearning to share their passion. Happiness is a concept I deny myself for reasons I only vaguely understand, and “having the time of your life” is something I can’t relate to. But I have Geo, and our children, and my writing. When I allow it to be, that is enough. He and I are connected on some primeval level – separate, but one. Others look askance at our constant togetherness and mutter about unhealthy codependency. But it’s not so clear-cut. We are complete as individuals, but more so as a couple. And while either of us could manage quite well on our own, my off-kilter mental state notwithstanding, we choose togetherness. We choose us. That constant, conscious choice keeps our marriage strong and writing helps keep my sanity intact.

Over the years my search for peace of mind brought me to the Zen concept of mindfulness and I struggle for that daily. As I walked on in the midst of nature, now deserted and quiet, the wilderness continued its quiet rescue mission, saving me from my darker self. I strode a bit faster knowing that whatever issues we faced could be overcome as they had been for the past thirty years. As for my writing, and Sharp’s melancholy lyrics about “the woman who never got there,” Emerson said “life is a journey, not a destination.” Why would I want to arrive anywhere a moment too soon?

I passed the graffiti post again and stopped to take a picture of the words as a reminder of the trek and a promise to myself before heading home. I don’t want to be eighteen again, or even twenty-five or thirty. But I would like, once in a while, Swirly happy. The words echoed in my brain, drowning out the worst of the negative voices. Had I ever been like that, even when I was younger? I must have been at some point, before the darkness descended. I shook my head, dispelling the resurgent urge to dwell in the awfulness of my less-than-idyllic childhood. I recalled a scene from the movie *Mamma Mia!* that brought me to tears as I witnessed the joyous abandon of the women celebrating life to the song “Dancing Queen.” I know it’s fictional, but it’s good fiction – the kind I want to write – because it evokes a yearning to share their passion. Happiness is a concept I deny myself for reasons I only vaguely understand, and “having the time of your life” is something I can’t relate to. But I have Geo, and our children, and my writing. When I allow it to be, that is enough. He and I are connected on some primeval level – separate, but one. Others look askance at our constant togetherness and mutter about unhealthy codependency. But it’s not so clear-cut. We are complete as individuals, but more so as a couple. And while either of us could manage quite well on our own, my off-kilter mental state notwithstanding, we choose togetherness. We choose us. That constant, conscious choice keeps our marriage strong and writing helps keep my sanity intact.

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just for a few moments here and there in this second half of my earthly existence, to be swirly happy. If I allow myself to do that, to relax, to write, to have the time of my life, I know Geo will be delighted to join me and we can continue to walk this path together.
The Kidnapping of Holly Katz

Holly was upstairs in the cabin when the long, gray van came up the drive. She’d been enjoying an evening to herself while Holly Jr. was at the Simpson’s, killing time sorting through the memorabilia packed into a steamer trunk. There was the usual envelope of snap shots. One photo was wrinkled and cracked. This was of Holly’s father Herman Katz as a youth, mid-twenties; the beer belly cascaded over his trousers even then. He was a squat, beefy man who smoked Havanas the size of a torpedo, although the cigar was absent in this photo. At one time someone had wadded this picture into a tight ball and bunched it off a couple walls.

From the attic window she watched the van crunch to a stop in front of the cabin. The windows of the van were tinted black, but its chrome trim mirrored the pink twilight that had settled on the yard. Holly knew who it was; she’d been expecting this visit for over three years. A van, a chauffeured black limo as long as the cigars he smoked, an unmarked helicopter...whatever. It looked as if Daddy had finally decided to call.

By the time Holly reached the front door, Herman Katz was standing next to the van, squinting over the yard. In a minute or two daylight would fade behind the hills. He didn’t see his daughter at the screened door. Holly watched her father for a moment, pulled in a deep breath and flipped on the porch light.

“What a surprise, Daddy,” she said. Holly wondered if ‘da Boss’ had come alone.

“Hi, baby,” said Katz. He seemed disoriented as if he couldn’t pinpoint where the voice came from. “I would have called first, but—”

The van’s rear doors swung open and a huge man wearing a cheap suit with high-water pants climbed out, followed by a

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smaller man more impeccably dressed and obviously nauseated from the ride. Holly stepped out onto the porch.

“Ah,” said Katz, “there you are. My God, you’re skin and bones!” Even from this distance he barely recognized his daughter. This was not the bouncy high school cheerleader, the soccer midfielder he’d once been so proud of. She had thinned out, her black hair, loose and unkempt, fell across the frayed collar of a bleached-out work shirt; her clothes looked like they’d come from a thrift store. She held his gaze with an intensity of her green eyes long enough to make him feel shaken, uncomfortable.

“Well, honey,” Katz stammered. “How about inviting us—I mean me inside.” Holly didn’t reply. Her father walked across the gravel toward the porch as his two companions fell in step behind him.

“You remember this gentleman,” said Katz, waving an arm at the little man behind him.

“Yes, Howie. How are you?” She remembered Howie as some kind of benign hit man. But this other brute, this antediluvian throwback—growing up she had only guessed at his function in Katz Enterprises.

“And Mr. Turner. Yes. I remember your nickname. ‘Sausage Lips’, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the thug, lowering his sheepish eyes.

“You have a good memory for names my dear,” said Katz. He was now on the porch, while his employees hesitated in the darkening yard.

“A good memory for faces, too, Daddy,” Holly said. “I expected you here a couple years ago. I’m sorry Holly Jr. isn’t home right now to see her grandfather. Or should I say ‘meet’ her grandfather.”

“But, Daddy,” Holly said. “I’m sorry Holly Jr. isn’t home right now to see her grandfather. Or should I say ‘meet’ her grandfather.”

“Now, baby. This is purely a social call,” said Katz, ignoring his unsociable entourage. “It’s unfortunate Holly Jr. isn’t home right now to see her grandfather. Or should I say ‘meet’ her grandfather.”

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Lips and Howie shuffled aimlessly at the edge of the driveway, waiting for their boss’s directive.

“Do come in, Daddy,” said Holly. She led the way into the cabin. The sparse furniture, courtesy Jackson’s Goodwill and the local Salvation Army barely filled out the tiny living room.

“Can I offer you something cold to drink? There’s beer in the fridge. Mr. Turner, Howie—”

The two goons had stopped short of the door, but at the mention of beer Lips took a step inside.

“Stay!” barked Herman Katz. Lips froze like a trained guard dog. Holly took a step backwards.

“Well it’s an obvious question, Daddy, on a hot night like this.”

Katz squinted again and surveyed the interior of the cabin. Here was a small living room and beyond that, the kitchen.

Next to the pantry a narrow stairway led to the attic and to the cellar below. Holly’s father sized up the contents of the living room: a tattered loveseat sat opposite an old, hauling console television, the cheap veneer chipped from its sides. Next to this, a high-winged armchair, its threadbare corduroy seat cushion sagging into the shot springs like a loaf of soggy bread. The kitchen displayed only a crooked Formica table, a few chairs, the used fridge, and a gas stove that apparently doubled as a winter heater for the entire cabin.

“So what brings you all the way down here?” asked Holly. “Is Mother all right?”

“She’s fine, Holly. Everyone’s fine. And I know she’s been here several times.” Katz raised his eyebrows. “I went through hell squeezing this address out of your mother.”

Holly looked over at Lips. His gaze was still lowered, and a brain-damaged grin spiked his jaw. She realized everyone here, isn’t here. Or her father. I was hoping for a little family chat, preferably away from the mosquitoes.”

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“Do come in, Daddy,” said Holly. She led the way into the cabin. The sparse furniture, courtesy Jackson’s Goodwill and the local Salvation Army barely filled out the tiny living room.

“Can I offer you something cold to drink? There’s beer in the fridge. Mr. Turner, Howie—”

The two goons had stopped short of the door, but at the mention of beer Lips took a step inside.

“Stay!” barked Herman Katz. Lips froze like a trained guard dog. Holly took a step backwards.

“Well it’s an obvious question, Daddy, on a hot night like this.”

Katz squinted again and surveyed the interior of the cabin. Here was a small living room and beyond that, the kitchen.

Next to the pantry a narrow stairway led to the attic and to the cellar below. Holly’s father sized up the contents of the living room: a tattered loveseat sat opposite an old, hauling console television, the cheap veneer chipped from its sides. Next to this, a high-winged armchair, its threadbare corduroy seat cushion sagging into the shot springs like a loaf of soggy bread. The kitchen displayed only a crooked Formica table, a few chairs, the used fridge, and a gas stove that apparently doubled as a winter heater for the entire cabin.

“So what brings you all the way down here?” asked Holly. “Is Mother all right?”

“She’s fine, Holly. Everyone’s fine. And I know she’s been here several times.” Katz raised his eyebrows. “I went through hell squeezing this address out of your mother.”

Holly looked over at Lips. His gaze was still lowered, and a brain-damaged grin spiked his jaw. She realized everyone here,
including her father, was a stranger. And--less so for Howie and more so for Lips and her father--intimidating.

“So, Holly--this, ah--house. Your Robert Bolterman seems to be a sub-par provider, at first glance.”

Holly said nothing, waited for her father to spew a few more insinuations onto her husband, bars she had last blistered at when she and Robbie had worked up the courage to announce to her parents they were marrying—elopeing, actually—and that she was three months pregnant. And then the crude threats on Robbie’s life that punctuated the panicked run into the hills of southeastern Ohio.

“Come on, baby. Just joking. Trying to break the ice, okay?” Da Boss walked over to a scuffed cabinet against one wall and hefted it an inch or two into the air.

“You guys ought to do these isometrics, too,” he said to his hired help. “Good for the heart.”

The two laughed nervously, and Katz turned to his daughter.

“Shouldn’t Holly Jr. be home by now?”

“She’s staying over at a friend’s,” said Holly. “We went to the fairgrounds today. She and a few others were invited to a birthday party afterwards.”

“How late can a party for little kids last?”

“Your sources screwed up, Daddy,” said Holly as she turned and walked into the kitchen. “This is a slumber party.”

Sources? asked Katz. “What sources? You don’t think I’d spy on my own daughter.”

“You show up with a couple house movers on the first night in months that Robbie, Holly Jr. and I aren’t home together. It’s sunset and that’s when Holly is told to come inside. And your van could easily swallow the contents of this crummy little cabin.”

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Holly pulled a couple cold ones from the fridge and brandished them at the men.

“Howie--Lips,” she called. “I’ve got plenty of this and fresh Polish pretzels in the breadbox. Bought them at the fair and they’re delicious. Just help yourselves.”

Katz sighed and motioned the men inside. Lips was the first to the refrigerator. Da Boss remained alone in the middle of the living room, his lower lip curled into an acrid hook of resignation.

“So…what’s going on, Daddy?”

“I’m here to ask you home, honey.” He looked around the room, at the second-hand furniture, the moonscape throw rugs. Then he faced his daughter.

“This is not the place for you, Holly,” he said. “Or for your daughter. This is not the place for a Katz.”

“Bolterman, Daddy. That’s my name. And, yes, I sometimes do wonder what the heck I’m doing on this one acre plot, in the middle of the boonies, dressing my child in hand-me-downs from friends who are high school ‘have-to’ dropouts just like me. My husband may be a rural letter carrier who earns next to nothing, but this is our place. This is where Holly Jr. lives, and she is a Bolterman, not a Katz.”

Holly’s aggressiveness towards da Boss had disturbed Lips. He took his second beer to the porch where a net of insects hung over the naked light bulb, suspended in a luminous, flitting ball. Lips stood watching them, mouth agape as if he couldn’t figure out what they were.

“Your mother,” said Katz, “has taken the entire guest suite and made it over for you and Holly Jr. There were carpenters, carpet layers, a couple interior decorators. For a week you’d have thought we were running a home furnishing contractor’s office.”

“The whole suite?”

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“The whole damned suite,” answered Katz. He was still in the middle of the living room. To Holly, her father looked stranded, distant, on the other side of the world. She saw Lips behind him, his huge hands raised cupping insects as they twirled in the light. Goosebumps flared on the back of Holly’s arms.

“Baby,” Katz went on, “I’m here to take you home. Your mother wants you and Holly Jr. in a—clean and healthy environment. She doesn’t understand how you live this way. And, of course, I don’t understand your husband.”

“You haven’t known him long enough—not even known him at all—to understand him, Daddy.” Holly wondered how long they’d talk before the muscle moved in. “As I recall, you hated him from the get-go. And obviously that hasn’t changed at all, has it?”

“Now babe—” Katz said. He took a couple steps towards Holly to avoid being overheard by his employees.

“In fact,” said Holly, raising her voice and looking right at Lips, “in fact, you hate Robbie so much you’d kill him. Or have him killed. Am I right, Daddy? At least that’s how it was three years ago. Why do you think we lived on the road, in state parks for six months while I went full term in the back seat of that old VW bus with a busted Coleman stove and a box of canned beef stew?”

Suddenly there was a loud report from the porch. Holly looked up in time to see Lips clap his great mitts over the cloud of bugs. She couldn’t believe it. The man had popped the light bulb along with mosquitoes and no-see-ums.

Katz wheeled around and raised both fists at Turner.

“You moron,” he shouted. Holly saw that he was raging; when she was growing up it had been a familiar, frightening sight. “What the hell are you trying to do—give me another heart attack?”

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Lips stood looking down at his feet. His expression was like a kid who had just soiled a fresh diaper.


Holly saw that the big man, all shoulders and arms, was scared witless of her father. And meanwhile Howie had backed off to the far edge of the yard. Holly walked to the screened door.

“Don’t worry about it, Mr. Turner. Spare bulbs are in the cupboard. If you could just tidy up that glass please--we go barefoot around here.”

She turned to her father. “We were talking about Robbie. I’m really surprised. You knew he wouldn’t be here. But did you bother to check exactly where he went this weekend?”

Herman Katz closed his eyes, the ashed-out cigar clenched tight in his teeth.

“A postal seminar,” said Holly. “In Chillicothe. You probably passed him on the highway. That would have been a perfect chance to--”

“I guess we all must sacrifice some things, my dear.”

“So you had us watched.”

Katz crossed his arms and began to pace the room, ignoring the accusation, suddenly annoyed at this vindictive display, this pointless bravura on his daughter’s part. Katz was a man who formed instant conclusions to problems and promptly ordered others (Howie, Lips, crooked lawyers, his own wife) to carry out the solutions. He couldn’t be bothered with petty details. Nor had he cared to fathom what Holly’s reaction would be to this surprise visit because the conclusion was predetermined: that she, like everyone else in Katz Enterprises, would simply kiss his ass, obey the ultimatum, do whatever da Boss prescribed. Or else.

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“You seem to have found a friend in Turner,” Katz said. “Why don’t you show him exactly what you’d like to take back with you. Then Howie will assist. If the sissy doesn’t still feel ill.”

“Including furniture?”

“That might be going a bit too far, but--whatever else you want, babe.”

Lips was still swaying in the doorway. He nursed the broken bulb in his hands and seemed afraid to enter the room.

“There’s a trash can around the side of the cabin, Mr. Turner,” said Holly. “I’ll have to pull the main switch so you can screw out what’s left of the socket.”

“Maybe we can do that later, honey,” said Katz.

“Suit yourself, Daddy. Load the van in the dark.”

Her father was right behind Holly as they climbed into the cellar. Lips signaled when he had replaced the bulb and Holly flipped the power back on.

“Okay Turner,” said Katz as he came back into the living room. “Quit screwing around.” Then he turned to Holly.

“What do you say, baby? Will you come home?”

“You mean peacefully?”

“Come on, honey--this isn’t a kidnap squad. It’s all in your best interest. And Holly Jr.’s.”

“Daddy, you wouldn’t know my little girl if she walked in here.”

Katz was impatient with his daughter’s stalling. “Show Turner what to load up. Some of this stuff, Holly. I can’t believe you’d want to take it.” Katz smiled. “You should see the suite! Everything you and Holly Jr. need is there.”

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“Then, while they’re loading,” Katz continued, “you and I will call her little friend’s house and tell them we’re on the way. Grandpa’s visiting for the weekend.”

“And what if I don’t budge, Daddy? What if you have a hell of a time squeezing that number out of me?” Holly looked squarely into her father’s tired eyes. “With Holly Jr. away I don’t have to spare her from a scene. Will Mr. Turner pick me up and put me in that van?”

“There’s no need for a scene,” said Katz. “Just take us on a tour of the cabin. And the boys will do the rest.”

Holly swept back the strands of hair that kept falling over her face. She crossed her arms and watched her father study her, sensed the disapproval in his eyes. What he found here, she knew, was no surprise. It was true her mother didn’t understand the poverty Holly and her family lived in, and reports got back to her father; it probably took him a week of tantrums and bullying to extract the address from her mother. Since the Katz house was a compound complete with guards, dogs, and a perimeter wall topped with iron spikes, no doubt every need would be provided—except one: freedom to leave.

So she stalled.


“Just before we left. Although it seems to have disagreed with that wimp.” Katz glanced out at a listless Howie who was leaning against the catalpa tree at the edge of the yard, still noticeably ill. “Maybe we could take something for the road.”

“That’s uncivilized, Daddy. Besides it’s hard on the digestion.” Holly turned to Lips. “I thawed out pork chops for myself. And to go with it, let’s see...potatoes and broccoli right out of the garden. Fresh baked bread. I could even whip up some homemade Hollandaise.”


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“I’d say Holly knows a weakling when she sees one. Just relax.”

“You used to like my cooking, Daddy.”

Katz stood looking at a corner of the room and said nothing. Holly saw the blood rising in his ears again like mercury in a thermometer.

“Okay, babe,” he said finally. “No more games. I want you to get your personal things together and then call Holly Jr. This is your father speaking, understand? At one time you respected my wishes.”

“That was before I knew what you did for a living.”


“With guns.”

Katz turned and stretched out an arm to his men.

“Guns? You see any weapons on these gentlemen? Turner--let’s see what’s under the jacket. See? No gun there.” He waved a green-faced Howie in from the yard. “Frisk him, Lips.”

“Uh, what?”

“Find a gun on Howie, big boy. I dare you.”

The little dance the three were doing was like a Keystone Kops routine and for the first time since their arrival Holly wanted to laugh.

“All right, Daddy. I get the idea. I guess plain old brute force is back in vogue. So what if I do a sit-down strike?”

“I’m counting on cooperation, honey. Some respect.”

“After three years?”

“After nineteen years, Holly.”

“Well, Daddy,” said Holly, heading for the door. “You can just cram your respect wherever it fits the best.”

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“Let’s avoid a scene, babe.”

Holly stopped. Howie was now at the front door. If she got past the cavern she’d have to run the gauntlet with this seasick character, knowing they’d stuff her in the van with or without her belongings.

“All right, Daddy. There’s a bureau with some things in our bedroom.”

Katz snapped his fingers at Turner who looked confusedly around the room.

“Our bedroom’s in the attic, Mr. Turner,” said Holly. “And my daughter’s things are there as well. Pack all her clothes. And take the toy chest at the foot of her bed. It weighs a ton, but I’m sure you can handle it.”

Turner glanced at his boss.

“Take whatever she says,” said da Boss. Lips plodded up the narrow steps.

“She has some things in the barn,” Holly called out after him. “A bicycle, a little scooter.”

“Honey,” said Katz, “we can get all the toys she needs.” He looked around the shabby cabin. “New things.”

“And her sandbox stuff outside,” Holly shouted, for Lips was out of sight upstairs. They heard his heavy feet clomping in the narrow space overhead.

“She likes the things she has, Daddy,” Holly said, lowering her voice. “Even kids understand sentimental value. What’s the problem? Maybe you should’ve rented a U-Haul.”

Herman Katz paced the living room. Howie had retreated to the porch where he stood bent over, hugging his midriff.

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“Our bedroom’s in the attic, Mr. Turner,” said Holly. “And my daughter’s things are there as well. Pack all her clothes. And take the toy chest at the foot of her bed. It weighs a ton, but I’m sure you can handle it.”

Turner glanced at his boss.

“Take whatever she says,” said da Boss. Lips plodded up the narrow steps.

“She has some things in the barn,” Holly called out after him. “A bicycle, a little scooter.”

“Honey,” said Katz, “we can get all the toys she needs.” He looked around the shabby cabin. “New things.”

“And her sandbox stuff outside,” Holly shouted, for Lips was out of sight upstairs. They heard his heavy feet clomping in the narrow space overhead.

“She likes the things she has, Daddy,” Holly said, lowering her voice. “Even kids understand sentimental value. What’s the problem? Maybe you should’ve rented a U-Haul.”

84

Lips Turner blocked the doorway automatically as Holly wheeled around to her father. “Get the goon out of my way, Daddy.”

“Let’s avoid a scene, babe.”

Holly stopped. Howie was now at the front door. If she got past the cavern she’d have to run the gauntlet with this seasick character, knowing they’d stuff her in the van with or without her belongings.

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Herman Katz paced the living room. Howie had retreated to the porch where he stood bent over, hugging his midriff.
“I remember your favorite. Roast beef and bologna?”

They listened to the screech of wire hangers from upstairs as Katz glanced out at Howie. The crisis of his lieutenant’s nausea had worsened, and Howie’s drained face glowed chalky white in the halo of the porch light.

The springs groaned as Herman Katz sank into the loveseat.

“Now,” said Holly. “How about that food?”

Maybe a sandwich, honey. Something on the stove will just attract Turner. And a glass of milk, if you have it—watching Howard has put my own stomach in an uproar.”

“I’ve got gallons,” said Holly. She walked into the kitchen. “I remember your favorite. Roast beef and bologna?”

“With mayo and mustard.” Katz shifted his weight to stand up.

“Stay put, Daddy. I’ll bring it right over!”

Lips appeared at the stairway landing. “Hey Howie! How about some of those cartons from the van.”

Howie wobbled out into the night. Herman Katz re-lit his cigar, eased back into the cushions, crossed his legs, bubbled fat smoke rings towards the ceiling. While Holly, scraping silverware and dishes together as a cover, reached for the cordless phone in the kitchen. She slammed the refrigerator door a couple times as she punched in the number, then rattled a knife in the mayonnaise jar as the call went through.


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Where is she, Holly?"

Holly was about to add one last comment to her friend when Herman Katz grabbed the phone and placed it back on its cradle.

"What was that call about, honey? You can’t seriously think I’m here to endanger my own granddaughter."

"You can put me in your little jail, Daddy," replied Holly. "But not Holly Jr. She’ll be gone in ten minutes."

"Call your friend back and tell her it was just a joke."

"I forget the number."

"Shouldn’t be hard to find," said Katz, rummaging through paper slips tacked to an adjacent corkboard. "Her name’s Denise? We’ll just find a Denise."

Lips, sounding like a battalion on the steps, trundled several cartons of clothes down to Howie.

"Denise Simpson," triumphed Katz as he found a typewritten list of names beneath the legend TENDER LOVING DAY CARE CENTER. "And probably half a dozen more names where she’d take Holly Jr."

He rifled through the Jackson phone directory.

"Simpson, Gerald," he said. "505 North Poplar. The only one listed. Is this it?"

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"You expect me to tell you?"

Suddenly her father’s adrenalin shot up again—way up. He rushed out to the porch, nearly knocking loose the screened door.

"Howard!" he shouted into the dark. "Start the van and find that county map we brought. Turner—you stay here with Holly and keep an eye on her."

Katz turned to Holly who stood in the kitchen doorway holding an empty mayonnaise jar.

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“Okay,” he said. “But don’t you get near that telephone. Da the kitchen.
muttered.

I wouldn’t do that, missy,” said Lips.

“I just putting away the milk Daddy didn’t drink.”

Turner dropped the cartons at the door and faced Holly.

“Okay,” he said. “But don’t you get near that telephone. Da–I
mean, your father–I don’t think he wants you making calls.”

Why Mr. Turner. Can’t you be bribed?”

“Da Boss says I’m beyond approach. That means I can’t.”

Well I’ll tell you what, Mr. Turner. Your boss and Howie are on a wild goose chase–they might be gone for hours. And I’m starving. So if you want, you can pull up a chair in the kitchen and watch me eat dinner.”

Holly walked to the refrigerator and finished preparing a double-decker sandwich. She pulled out pickles and relish, a fresh bag of potato chips, dolloped home-made coleslaw in a dish, quartered an orange, and poured another glass of milk.

“I’ll be back with my granddaughter,” he said, trembling. “And no more stunts from you, young lady.”

Or what, Daddy?”

Howie hustled to the van and fired up the engine as Katz turned without answering his daughter and scuttled for the open passenger door.

“What now, Daddy?” Holly called out after the van as it spit gravel over the driveway. “You got some knockout drops in there? A couple syringes? Some ether?”

Lips stood in the living room balancing two more large cardboard cartons. Da Boss’s exit had evidently surprised him as much as Holly. “What should I do with these now?” he muttered.

“Why don’t you take them out to the yard, Mr. Turner.”

Lips plodded towards the door as Holly back-stepped into the kitchen.

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Lips followed Holly into the kitchen, reached for the telephone and casually tucked it into his coat pocket.

“Clever move, Mr. Turner,” said Holly, as she munched on her sandwich.

The television’s bluish band of light radiated throughout the living room and terminated at chair top level. The lamps were turned off. Lips had dissolved like a slug into the armchair directly in front of the TV. Several empty brown bottles were scattered on the floor beneath a hairy outstretched arm. Holly was curled on the loveseat behind him hoping the hypnotic interlude would do the trick. She’d poured an entire bottle of paregoric into Turner’s beers and left him to watch a “Sopranos” rerun.

“Another beer, Mr. Turner?” Holly said, gauging.

“Sounds good,” mumbled Lips. As he scrunched sideways, trying to get comfortable, a coat lapel fell back and the phone receiver slid out of the pocket and onto the seat cushion. Lips, shifting his bulk again, hadn’t noticed.

Holly tiptoed in from the kitchen with another beer. “One of your favorite shows?” she whispered. But the Neanderthal didn’t reply. “I’ll just put it down here on the floor, okay?” She leaned over Turner’s face. His heavy eyelids fluttered as he looked up at her with a lopsided, idiotic grin. Holly figured he must be nearly out of it. She reached for the phone just as Lips, shifting one last time, was about to bury it beneath a beefy thigh.

The cabin, except for a glow coming from the living room windows, was dark when Katz returned; even the porch light was off. Howie eased out the van’s side door carrying something that Holly could only glimpse from her vantage point in the living room.

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“What the hell is going on here, Turner?”
"Hey boss!" said Lips, waving a small pistol and spasmodically struggling to get out of the chair. "Don’t yell at me, Mr. Katz. She was trying to call the sheriff. They’re ain’t no bullets in this thing anyway."

"Douse the gun, you idiot," shouted Katz. "And on top of it, you’re drunk. I’ll deal with you later."

Katz turned to his daughter. She was balled up in a chair next to the TV where Lips could keep an eye on her, a clothes line tied loosely around her arms and chest.

"Baby," said Katz, "are you all right?"

Holly didn’t answer. She stared blankly out the door, watching for Howie. Katz gently untied the ropes. "You’re a dead man, Turner," he growled. "I ought to dump you in a ditch somewhere."

"I think she put something in the beer, boss." Turner burred and sank hopelessly back into the armchair.

"Shut up!" Katz yelled. "Just shut up before I tear your slobbering head off!"

When Holly Jr, still in pajamas and blinking at the sudden brightness of the living room, came through the door hand-in-hand with Howie, Holly felt hysterical—like laughing insanely and uncontrollably at this picture and the whole situation. What had they done at Denise’s? Why hadn’t she got away with Holly Jr? Had they shot their way through the slumber party? Was anyone left alive?

"Mommy," said Holly Jr, "it’s my Grandpa! He came to visit us with Uncle Howie, and he says we’re gonna visit him all the way to Cincinnati." The girl seemed innocent of the palpable menace that had swamped the room like a tidal wave. She gently pulled away from Howie and reached for her grandfather’s hand.

"Okay," Holly said to her father. "You win. You’ve got my daughter brain-washed, and Turner will just tie me up again if I..."
Here was a new adventure! Going on vacation—with all her and lacey canopied beds she had seen in her picture books. It would be like the towering castle with a moat and servants as she about this sudden trip to a mansion in a big city. Maybe the hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

Katz aimed a few choice ultimatums at Lips as they drove back to Cincinnati. Like suggesting he’d clap his hands around a welding rod. Or break beer bottles over his knuckles. Holly was no longer surprised at her father’s crudeness—by now he was just another hoodlum she’d grown up around.

Holly Jr, wide-eyed throughout the trip despite it being hours passed her bedtime, surveyed her toys, the boxes of clothes, the strange men who, by simply claiming they were relatives, held no threat—even though one made several grisly-sounding visits to roadside ditches, and the other two had so nearly a visible charge of electricity between them it made the hairs stand up on the back of her neck.

But as she sat in her mother’s arms and watched the night and the yellow beams of on-coming traffic slip past the window she could feel Holly’s racing heart pulse against her cheek. Her mother, the little girl was sure, was just as excited as she about this sudden trip to a mansion in a big city. Maybe it would be like the towering castle with a moat and servants and lacy canopied beds she had seen in her picture books. Here was a new adventure! Going on vacation—with all her toys and stuff—to her Grandma’s and Grandpa’s house. And Daddy might already be there to join them; after all, hadn’t Grandpa said how welcome he would be?

don’t cooperate. Can I at least leave a message for Robbie so he just doesn’t think we’ve run off into the night?”

“Number one,” Katz said, looking sideways at a cowering Sausage Lips Turner. “This bozo is in serious trouble—and I’m sure will not be causing any more grief to you or anyone else. Ever. And second—yeah. Leave your husband a note. Brief and to the point: that you and Holly Jr. have gone home to live. I think he realizes how welcome he is at the house if he should ever show up. And tape your note to the refrigerator—apparently that’s the only thing we won’t be taking with us.”

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He Liked My Hair Up

Reveal the curve of the jaw line,
the long neck, the creased ear,
the face usually hidden
behind waterfalls of hair.
That approving glance, that smile.
A mutt being judged in a pedigree dog show.
Inspect my gums, my teeth, the roof of my mouth,
the slope of my torso, my thighs, my groin.
Proportions unsuited for a blue ribbon.

Wear heels instead of flats.
Tread lightly, control your clumsy gait.
It does not endear him.
Stop putting your clothes back on
in the middle of the night.
He’ll wake to a glare
and curse the disheveled blankets,
the fabric between our bodies.
I imagine the odd folds of skin,
the scars, the moles,
his sharp virility deflating at the sight.
Another night in his arms,
one foot on the ground,
one hand on the door.

That text one morning,
It’s not you, it’s me.
Those days in the office,
the ones you know he won’t be there,
pull it back: low buns, high ponytails, braids.
Never let him see your neck.
That vulnerable collar bone.
Open your eyes and wake to a dream.
Retrace your steps
dissolved in a puddle of concentric circles.
The question of facing forward,
legs going the wrong way,
or staring down the bullet
lodged between the whites of your eyes
rushing back to the barrel,
to the chamber,
to the finger on the trigger,
to the hand on the grip,
to the scared little girl
afraid to fire the first shot.
Ben

No warning signs,
save for the flap of a cape.
Superman giving up in mid-flight.
The scope of our lives in a kaleidoscope:
sticky fingers licked by popsicle tongues
and naked feet on hot concrete.
Swallowed up by willow branches,
a wooden marker. Not even your name.
Store bought flowers, your favorite song.
Good Vibrations trying to reach a place
I’m not sure it will find.

Your words ripped the sky
as they disappeared in the descent.
But no one looked up
until the sound of a rushing body
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Macbrie’s Apparel

Macbrie’s Apparel had an entire department devoted to me. Polka-dot dresses and jeans and footie pajamas all Hallie-sized, or close enough that a belt and a sewing machine could make it work. They kept all the inventory folded in a musty-smelling Rubbermaid bin on a shelf, and every year the merchandise changed.

My sister introduced me to the store. The first really cold day of fall, when I wanted to go rake a pile out of the good leaves before the bad ones started falling, Margo said, “Here we go again. Mom’s about to take us to Macbrie’s Apparel,” (which was really the basement.)

The furnace down there toasted things right up, the burnt air making my throat itch. The sump-pump gurgled as Mom rearranged the plastic bins with our names on them, setting mine in front of me. Inside, I found Margo’s floral Easter dress from last year—the one she wore in the photo over the mantel.

“That’s mine.” Margo snatched it out of my hands, the tulle kicking up a cloud of dust.

“Hey!” I cried through my coughs. I looked up at Mom, who’d cracked open Margo’s box and begun sorting out the turtlenecks.

“This is your box, Margo,” Mom said, then gasped as she pulled out Maryanne’s Christmas gown. The train of the gown kept pulling and pulling out of the box like a magician’s handkerchief. “You get Maryanne’s clothes when she outgrows them, and Hallie gets yours.”

“It still fits, Mom.” Margo pressed the dress flat against her body, like a paper doll outfit. “I’ll show you.” Bundling it up in her arms, she darted into the basement workroom, slamming the door behind her. From my box I pulled out a sweet DEBORAH ROCHELEAU Macbrie’s Apparel

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“It still fits, Mom.” Margo pressed the dress flat against her body, like a paper doll outfit. “I’ll show you.” Bundling it up in her arms, she darted into the basement workroom, slamming the door behind her. From my box I pulled out a sweet
camouflage hoodie, gallons too large, but which might fit me one day when I grew as big as Margo.

She reemerged, the dress stretched taut around her hips, the straps leaving red tread marks around her neck. The skirt stopped at her knees. Mom shook her head.

“Look at all of Maryanne’s clothes you’re inheriting,” she said, unfolding a knit purple sweater with a gold trim. “You’ll look so grown up.”

“I’ll look like Maryanne, Mom,” Margo sighed, the floral pattern on her tummy filling out and sinking back. “If I can’t have new clothes, at least let me keep the old ones I want.”

Mom looked down at the two piles of wrinkled clothes I’d made, one to give away and the other of things I wanted to keep. I threw a tie-dyed tee on top of the camo hoodie in the keep pile, thinking that Margo would rip that dress to threads trying to squeeze into it before she gave it to me. Mom stuck out her lip and shook her head at Margo.

“You’ll have to wear leggings with it,” Mom said, refolding the sweater over her arm. “And sooner or later, Margo, you’ll have to give it up.”

At Maryanne’s graduation dinner, in a stuffy Italian restaurant with too many relatives for our reservation, I looked through the photo album of senior pictures on the table, Macbride Apparel’s catalogue out three years in advance. The name “Maryanne Macbride” was scrawled across every photo in dazzling fonts. She modeled all of their clothes: the cowgirl jeans and white blouse, the orchestra suit, and the glittering purple dress she wore right now as she accepted gift cards with a smile. Margo wore the floral dress over gray leggings and a shrug around her shoulders, because of the cold. I was young enough that Mom let me get by with jeans and one of Margo’s old dress shirts. The hoodie would have kept me warmer, but, enough that Mom let me get by with jeans and one of Margo’s shrug around her shoulders, because of the cold. I was young

Margo wore the floral dress over gray leggings and a shrug around her shoulders, because of the cold. I was young

A smile. Margo wore the floral dress over gray leggings and a

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Good thing, too. The waiter dumped chicken marinara all over Margo and me.

One year, Macbride’s Apparel just went out of business. I opened up my bin and found only a khaki skirt and a T-shirt from three summer camps ago. Margo didn’t come to Macbride’s anymore, and I didn’t tell Mom about the closing until a few months later, when I went into my closet and found my clothes gone, all except the camo hoodie, the empty hangers rattling like dry bones. Mom explained that my clothes were too ratty for a rat and, although I disagreed, I accepted her offer to send me to the store with Margo.

Wearing my last plaid shirt and a belt to keep my jeans up, I waited while Mom slipped a hundred and sixty dollars into the pocket of Margo’s denim jacket.

“Don’t go crazy, Margo,” Mom said. “Just because senior prom only comes once doesn’t mean you can spend like there’s no tomorrow,” Margo slipped her sunglasses on, but from my angle, a sliver of her face visible, I saw her roll her eyes and wink at me.

The clothes were crammed into the store in no order, sleeves sticking out of overstuffed racks like hitch-hikers bumming a ride. Mannequins stood in conquest atop mounds of folded camisoles in a dozen alternative patterns. Even the changing rooms had torsos hung up on the doors, displaying scarves and cardigans and belts like nothing I’d ever wear.

“How do you find what you’re looking for?” I asked.

“You don’t,” Margo said, huffing a little as she slipped off her movie-star shades. “You stumble upon it.”

In the crammed line of clothes on a rack, I spotted a sliver of green, same shade as my favorite tee, now buried in Mom’s trashcan. I compressed the surrounding shirts like an accordion to get a look at it. It turned out to be a dress with a little pink hearts around the middle. Not a chance. I tried another, only to find a candy-cane tube top. Out of curiosity, I pulled out a candy-cane tube top. Out of curiosity, I pulled out a candy-cane tube top.

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Margo-esque formal dress in a pale blue. Pinching the sheer, silky fabric, I saw my fingertips clear through. I stuffed it back onto the rack, wondering how I’d ever find replacements for my old clothes in this store.

Despairing, I poked my head up over the aisles to look for Margo. Seeing her disappear into one of the changing rooms, I ducked behind the rack facing them and began flipping through the hangers without looking at the clothes. Above me, the music thumped more than sang, percussion-heavy and played so low the swish of fabric drowned it out.

Margo came out, wearing a purple dress just like Maryanne’s from her graduation dinner, only baggier. She stood in front of the triangle mirror, straightening her back while she tried to hold the gown up. Then, glancing at the tag, she sighed and went back into the dressing room. This time, her body seemed to deflate under all that fabric.

I never went to Macbride’s Apparel again. Margo, however, became a frequenter of Hallie’s Boutique.

“Where’s that black shrug, Hallie? I can’t find it in your closet anywhere,” Margo said. I smelled her perfume—the kind Mom wore to funerals—before I saw her, peeking over the edge of the top bunk. Her hair fell in gold-laced curls, like the spines of old books. A black camisole clung to the sink hole of her stomach, her hips not filling out her frilly skirt as well as I remembered.

“Which one?” I asked.

“The one I handed down to you last year. You never wear it.”

She slid open my closet door, the hangers going tap, tap as she flipped through them. She found what she was looking for, hugged it to her chest, and with a “thanks, Hallie,” clacked out the door on two-inch heels.

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I stared down at all the clothes that had slipped off their hangers, splattered in grisly patterns on my closet floor. Picking them up, the sweatshirts, the yoga pants, the patched jeans and tennis shoes and the dress I’d tried to hand down to Margo when I outgrew it, a thought came to me. Crab-crawling across the floor, I stopped in front of Margo’s closet and slid the door open.

Her ebony prom dress hung in a bag, quarantined from the other clothes. In the corner under her mismatched shoes, I spotted a familiar floral pattern. It smelled like feet down there, but I knelt down and reached back to retrieve the dress. I held it up, smoothing out the creased fabric, the ghost of a marinara stain still visible on the ribbon. Sneaking into the bathroom, I locked the door and tried to squeeze myself into the dress. Nope. Wasn’t going to happen.

Years later, Macbride’s Apparel became a sort of museum, its boxes archiving the possessions of the famous people who’d live in this very house. Maryanne’s graduation cap. My salvaged green tee. Margo’s baseball mitt from before she got sick.

Mom felt nostalgic one rainy weekend and decided to haul it all up without anyone’s permission. I bore the box with the photo albums to Margo’s bedside. Some had so much mildew growing on the yellowing pages we had to throw them out before even taking them into Margo’s room.

“Cleanliness is next to godliness!” Mom loved to say. Which was why she did a load of Margo’s clothes twice a day, to get out the blood stains.

In the sickroom, Margo propped the fat scrapbook on her belly, a heavy quilt covering her doily-thin body. Her pretty sapphire veins shown through, like my hand through that blue belly, a heavy quilt covering her doily-thin body. Her pretty sapphire veins shown through, like my hand through that blue belly, a heavy quilt covering her doily-thin body. Her pretty sapphire veins shown through, like my hand through that blue belly.

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photo, Margo held a present over my head, wearing the floral dress, still stain-free.

“Ever notice how we all look the same in these old pictures?” Margo asked. I crawled up beside her in the bed, easing myself onto the same pillow. Our heads sunk together as we studied the album. Right there, under her finger, was the same picture I’d been looking at. Same icing-smeared girl. Same floral dress. The caption read, “Margo’s seventh B-day.”

“I thought that was me.” I said, pointing to the birthday girl.

“Could have been,” Margo coughed. “It’s like we’re interchangeable. One thing’s for sure, the one in the dress isn’t you. You’d never be caught dead in a something like that.”

“I’ve got you to thank for that.”

Our shoulders shrugged together, neither one of us making an effort to sit up. I compared our arms, hers frail and mucus-covered, mine with the camo sleeve no longer reaching to my wrists. I’d outgrown it, after all.

“Wear jeans to homecoming for me, will you?” she elbowed me with her bony arm.

“Planning on it,” I said.

I asked if we could bury her in the floral dress, but she didn’t fill it out anymore, plus it was stained. We could have found another one in the same style, but Machride’s Apparel had long ago gone out of business. So we bought her a brand new one from the shop in town, something princess-y that she’d like. I made sure it wasn’t purple. Maryanne came back from school for the funeral, wearing a black gown I’d never seen before. I don’t remember what I wore.

We stood for hours by the coffin as family, then friends, then church members passed by. Most of them gazed into the propped-open coffin, lips parted and eyelids fluttering, and I wondered if they thought what I was thinking when I looked at her.

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We stood for hours by the coffin as family, then friends, then church members passed by. Most of them gazed into the propped-open coffin, lips parted and eyelids fluttering, and I wondered if they thought what I was thinking when I looked at her.
Laying there, hair curled, her pillow no more than a folded floral dress, she didn’t look much like Maryanne. Or Hallie. In that pretty sky-blue dress, the kind that suited her better than it ever would me, she looked like Margo.
The image shook as Amar tried to hold his hands steady. He shifted left and then right, and finally centering in the small digital screen was the image of a man, gravely injured or dead, lying face down in the street. From a concrete building across the way, a long piece of rebar reached out and tried to pull the wounded man to safety. The rebar came from an open doorway, from which the shadow of a man laid across the tile floor.

Amar took a deep breath and clicked “video”.

He watched through the screen as the piece of rebar finally hooked the wounded man’s upper arm and began to drag him toward the shelter of the building. But the wounded man rolled and the piece of rebar had to come back and find another place to hook. The end of the rebar was conveniently bent like a horseshoe, and reaching across the body, it found a grasp beneath the wounded man’s arm, and again, the rebar began to drag the wounded man toward the shelter of the doorway on the far side of the street. All the while Amar focused on keeping the image centered in the small digital screen, and keeping his hands steady.

He stood in a building foyer, out of the sights of the sniper, with both feet planted shoulder width apart and his arms straight out before him. He could hear someone yelling down the street, but he could not make out the words. A distant gunshot caused him to flinch but he quickly re-centered the image and resumed his stance. Slowly, the rebar worked, pulling, tugging, slipping, reaching back for another grasp, and finally heaving the injured man to safety of the building.

Amar looked at the face of his smartphone, touched the save option, watched for the confirmation, and then tucked the phone in his blue jeans. He disappeared into the doorway.
behind him, hurried through an empty corridor, and came out on the opposite street a block away. He looked in both directions, and when he saw that all was clear, he sprinted down the sidewalk in the opposite direction from which he had come.

After three blocks he slowed to a brisk walk, turned a corner, and stopped mid-block beneath an open window.

Amar made a whistling sound. A head popped out from the window, looked in both directions down the street, and then down at Amar. Amar tossed the smart phone up, and the man in the window caught it using both hands. The man disappeared into the window, the window closed, and Amar walked inconspicuously down the street toward his apartment.

Inside the building, the smartphone was hurried down a hallway to a secluded room. There, was a makeshift office designed to receive and transmit video dispatches to the media world outside. Two men sat at two tables with a laptop computer in front of each of them. The smartphone was promptly handed over to the nearest computer operator, who promptly connected it to a USB cord, and with a stroke of the keyboard, the video was uploaded onto the laptop computer. A webpage was opened, a message link was clicked, and the man began typing in English. The other two men watched over his shoulder as the message formed on the screen:

"Freedom fighters try to rescue fallen protester, shot by Assad’s henchmen, in Hama, Syria. 4th August, 2011."

Using the mouse, the man attached the video to the email, clicked the send button, and the message was sent out via satellite internet. The recipient’s email address - Al Jazeera News - flashed back on the screen, confirming the message had been successfully sent.

The three men looked at one another and exchanged congratulatory smiles.

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Amar entered his apartment to find his room-mate, twenty-six-year old Murhaf Rahman, in the kitchen fixing lunch: a sandwich of pita bread, humus, and meat. Leaning against the counter was an AK-47, recently smuggled in across the Turkish border, compliments of Turkey’s Military High Command.

“I told you I don’t want guns in here,” Amar said.

Murhaf took the rifle, opened the kitchen closet, and tugged the gun away inside. He then resumed fixing his sandwich.

“We having a good day, brother?” Murhaf asked.

“Yes, it has been a good day, brother,” Amar replied.

Brothers they were, but not by blood. It was the five-month-old rebellion that bonded them; though they had differing views on exactly how the rebellion should be conducted.

Murhaf, a member of the Free Syrian Army, was committed to taking up arms while Amar, one among a self-proclaimed group of internet warriors, relied on technology and internet connectivity in their fight against Damascus. Here, in a country where foreign media was banned and local coverage was severely restricted, the only way the outside world could see what was really happening in Syria was through the efforts of Amar and his comrades. Until now, the best they could do was upload grisly homemade videos onto YouTube: of victims mangled by gunfire, and other unsubstantiated events.

Despite their different ways, Amar and Murhaf were both freedom fighters, until then, known to the World’s media as the Opposition—Syria’s anti-regime protesters.

But Amar knew it was not really an opposition, it is the whole of Syrian society.

“We will be meeting this evening,” he said in English. “I would like you to come.”
Murhaf was surprised at the invitation since the two had frequently exchanged their opposing views on the rebellion.

“I want you to see what we do. I want you to meet Hazem,” Amar continued.

“I think it would be a waste of time,” Murhaf said.

“He is a wise man. If you hear his words…”

“Why? Because he speaks English?”

“No, because he speaks words that make better sense than any man I know.”

“I’m sorry. I do not understand this kind of warfare,” Murhaf said.

“How do you know unless you come and listen?”

“It is time wasted.”

Amar stared at Murhaf in a pleading effort. “Perhaps you will find it in yourself to join us brother?”

Murhaf said nothing.

“We will be meeting at the safe house on Friday,” Amar said.

And he said nothing more.

On Friday the meeting took place as scheduled. Hazem Saleh, the leader of this rogue band of cell-phone journalists, stood at the front of an improvised meeting room. He was a distinguished-looking man, middle-aged with graying hair and a graying beard, and was dressed in a business suit which had obviously not been pressed for some time. He had worked as a media supervisor for the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression before it had been completely abolished by Damascus, and had been a senior foreign correspondent for BBC World News, before foreign news had been outlawed. He had since utilized his skills to organize and orchestrate media

Murhaf was surprised at the invitation since the two had frequently exchanged their opposing views on the rebellion.

“I want you to see what we do. I want you to meet Hazem,” Amar continued.

“I think it would be a waste of time,” Murhaf said.

“He is a wise man. If you hear his words…”

“Why? Because he speaks English?”

“No, because he speaks words that make better sense than any man I know.”

“I’m sorry. I do not understand this kind of warfare,” Murhaf said.

“How do you know unless you come and listen?”

“It is time wasted.”

Amar stared at Murhaf in a pleading effort. “Perhaps you will find it in yourself to join us brother?”

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coverage to the outside world, trying to bring some sense of professionalism to a band of gypsies.

There were several men seated in metal folding chairs, among them Amar. Near an opened widow was a portable, twenty-inch satellite dish pointed skyward. It had been skillfully mounted on a camera tripod and positioned far enough from the window so that it could not be seen from the street below. A wire ran from it to a box of wires on a nearby table.

Hazem addressed the men in Arabic.

"It is a good day, my friends, my brothers. The sun is out. We are alive. And the fate of Syria is securely in our hands. The longer the revolution lasts, the better chance we have for freedom."

A noise came from the rear of the room and all eyes turned back to see Murhaf standing in the doorway.

"Welcome brother," Hazem said.

Amar greeted Murhaf with a smile and offered him a seat, but Murhaf found a place against the back wall where he leaned his shoulder and remained silent.

Hazem took the laptop, opened it, turned it on, and set it on the table. As the screen lit up he turned it so that all in the room could see. He then clicked on a desktop icon.

On the screen appeared Al-Jazeera English showing grainy images from a mobile phone of detainees being beaten by Syrian soldiers. The reception, which was poor to begin with, went hazy and then vanished. A young man sitting next to Hazem near the front of the room got up and played with the satellite dish until the feed came back and the images came in clearly.

Hazem clicked on another icon and a second video began to play. Amar quickly recognized it to be the video stream he had captured on his smartphone, that of the long piece of rebar coverage to the outside world, trying to bring some sense of professionalism to a band of gypsies.

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reaching out for the wounded man. Along the bottom of the screen within a blue stripe were the words, BBC Worldwide News. The announcer, a very British-looking, well-dressed woman with blonde hair, spoke in King’s English: "President Bashar Assad’s bloody crackdown on protesters has taken an ominous turn over the weekend. In the city of Hama, an armored attack on thousands of protesters killed at least 150 civilians on Sunday. There were also reports of attacks by the army in at least four other cities with dozens more killed. The increasing violence has raised eyebrows in the West. The number of people killed in the bloody repression of an uprising against the government in Syria has now risen to at least thirty-five thousand, awakening leaders of the international community…"

“It is exactly what we need!” Hazem said. “To open the eyes of the West, to find support of the international community. It is our path, our way to freedom, and we are the window to the world, God’s spies on earth.” Hazem’s eyes searched and found Amar. “And thanks be to brother Amar, whose courage and steady hand has brought us this recognition.”

Hazem turned back to the computer screen and watched for a moment as the announcer continued. “Once-friendly nations have now criticized President Bashar al-Assad…” the announcer’s voice spoke. “And French President Nicolas Sarkozy has demanded his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad to step down for overseeing massacres of his own people.”

Hazem gazed across the room, his eyes smiling. They had secured an audience in the Arabic world already with many news reels airing on Al Arabiya. Now, they had found an English audience as well.

Hazem turned the screen off. "It is success, my friends,” he said. "It is a new milestone. Now it’s only a matter of time and Assad will fall.” His eyes

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glanced down at the table-top. “And today, we have been afforded a new tool to advance our crusade.”

On the table were two small boxes. Hazem took one of the boxes, turned it over and held it so that all could see the image on the cover. It was an iPhone 4. He turned the box to its side and showed the printed words, “Apple - iPhone 4S.” He flipped it and began to open it, and half way through the process he tossed the second box into Amar’s lap.

Amar looked up and smiled, and promptly followed suit, opening the second box as well.

“It has enhanced camera and video,” Hazem spoke, now holding the iPhone in his hand. He waited for it to light-up. “Much higher resolution, thirty frames per second, longer battery life, and enhanced HD quality. With this, we can take media-quality video.”

He turned the iPhone so that all could now see the lit touchscreen.

“CNN… Anderson Cooper… here we come!”

The room erupted with applause.

In the back of the room, Murhaf stood restlessly. He saw no reason to celebrate. It was not the path, he thought. A new phone, sure it was nice, but it was no match to the weaponry of Assad’s regime.

“No rebellion was ever won without violence,” he spoke loudly.

All eyes turned back at him.

“It is silliness to believe you can win a war with a phone.”

The men exchanged glances and then turned their eyes up to Hazem. They all knew Murhaf and knew of his resistance to their media focused rebellion. After all, Murhaf was a member of the emerging Free Syrian Army whose doctrine was dedicated to the use of force, not to diplomatic change. It was dedicated to the use of force, not to diplomatic change.

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his kind that brought great wonders to men like Hazem, not that anyone questioned the FSA’s dedication to the revolution. It was sectarian war that troubled him: the fear that Murhaf and his comrades, in their quest for liberty, would push the country into a civil war—a war that, once started, could not be stopped and would result in the destruction of Syria.

"Then our rebellion will be the first," Hazem said boldly, finally breaking the silence.

"Assad will not fall to an image on a smartphone," Murhaf replied fearlessly. "Ask the people of Libya."

"Maybe it was true in Libya. But this is Syria. And we are Syrian people, and if we can find justice through diplomatic means... through peaceful means, without Syrians spilling the blood of Syrians, shouldn’t we choose peace?"

Murhaf looked with cold suspicion at all of them. He was a believer in self-reliance, in the one truth that all things that must be changed, must be changed by one’s will to resist. Defiance was the path, he thought. Waiting for a diplomatic resolution, requesting help, especially from the Western World, was not only hypocritical but just short of cowardice.

"A brother falls and you photograph it?" Murhaf asked. He paused, glanced over all of them, and then repeated his words, "A brother falls and you photograph it? You photograph the blood of your mothers and fathers, the blood of your brothers and sisters, and your children?" Again pausing, looking over the silent group. "When will you fight back? If not today, if not tomorrow, then when?"

"We fight back, every day," Hazem refuted calmly. "With a picture that paints a thousand words and a pen that is mightier than the sword. And with the will of the people, and the will of the Creator, we will succeed."

They were elegant words, Murhaf thought, but overused in the course of human history and not worthy of a response. He remained silent.

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“It is through international pressure and intervention,” Hazem continued. “With the might of the West and the support of the Arabic states, Assad will crumble.” He looked at Murhaf. “Are you for the revolution?”

“Of course.”

“Then take this weapon,” Hazem said.

To the surprise of the other men in the room, Hazem held out the second iPhone, offering it to Murhaf.

Murhaf stared at it.

Hazem’s arm extended. “Here. Take it. This is our implement of war.”

For a moment Murhaf’s eyes remained locked on the iPhone. The other men watched, waiting to see what he would do. It is such a small and simple device, Murhaf thought. Not a device for overcoming oppression or stopping tanks from rolling over defenseless protestors.

He shook his head. “I don’t believe in the power of the pen,” he said. “I believe in the power of the sword. Give the phone to someone who believes in it.”

Hazem slowly withdrew his arm.

The meeting ended, uneventful and Hazem took Murhaf’s advice, later presenting the second iPhone to young Rami Ibrahim who had demonstrated bravery and cleverness in capturing aerial-like shots of protest-busting soldiers from rooftops. There was the normal handing out of assignments, and because there was to be a great demonstration in Assi Square in three days, Hazem took special care to coordinate full coverage of the event. He had a large map of the square, had sectioned it off into quadrants, and assigned the men to strategic spots within the plaza.

After everyone had left, Amar and Murhaf walked back to their apartment silently.

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“Why come to the meeting at all if you are going to cause
problems?” Amar finally spoke.
“A man educated in the West?” Murhaf mumbled to
himself. He had a little half-smile he used to show disdain, and
he wore it now. “It is only because he was educated in the West
that you trust him.”

“Why do you say that?”
“Since when do Syrians follow Western ways and Western
words?” Murhaf said and then stopped. “Crusade? Who’s
crusade?”
“It is because his way is the just way, under the eyes of
God,” said Amar. “Some Syrians resist violence. Why have a
problem with that?”
“You have forgotten your American history,” Murhaf
huffed. “Democracy never came from peace. It comes from
war. It is a fact of history. All great nations have risen from
blood. If Lenin waited for a peaceful demonstration, Russia
would still be ruled by Czars. If Libyans relied on iPhone
images, Gaddafi would still be laughing. And if you turn the
other cheek now, Assad will roll over you with his tanks.”

“Murhaf, I pray that you do not destroy us.”
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Hazem could not be replaced, but as they had done in the past, the rebel effort regrouped and refortified. As safe houses were raided and destroyed, new ones popped up. As equipment was seized or destroyed, new equipment was donated or smuggled in from Lebanon or Turkey along the many smuggling paths which linked one safe house to another. And as leadership was lost, new leadership was found.

The massive demonstration in Assi Square had begun in the morning hours as scheduled, but had turned deadly by early afternoon. The number of demonstrators had swelled into the thousands, too many for the government to stand by and tolerate, so tanks and armored vehicles rolled in and seized the square. Some of the activists tried to stop the advancing armored columns with makeshift barricades, but they were no match to the military might. Amar had watched, and had filmed as the demonstrators scattered and fallen back. Some of them, the fighters like Murhaf, had stayed in the square, throwing stones at armor. But the regime released their snipers, and their mafia-like gunmen known as “shabiha” who operated as hired guns for the regime, and they began to systematically cut down any pocket of resistance.

Amar stood back from it all in a small building alcove. He held his iPhone out steady before him and filmed what unfolded before him.

From behind the barricade, he saw a man stand up and raise his fist at the armored vehicles.

“Freedom forever, despite you Assad!” yelled the man.

The man was promptly shot in the head, fell to the ground, and his blood ran in the street and glistened in the sunlight.

Another man who sprang to his aid was also shot, and he fell diagonally, cross-bodied over the first.

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“Now Assad,” Amar said to himself disdainfully. “How will you explain this?”

Another demonstrator threw a rock which bounced off the windscreen of one of the armored vehicles. The rock was answered by a volley of machinegun fire, but the man had wisely ducked down quickly and escaped injury, for the moment.

Then the barricade was overrun by the shabiha, who came from all directions with clubs and guns and riot gear, and began beating, indiscriminately, any activist who failed to flee. Those who had fallen to the ground were kicked and dragged back to the armored vehicles.

Amar watched and filmed as another demonstrator fell to his knees with men over him flailing with their clubs, striking him against his arms which he held up to protect himself until his arms could no longer take the beating and fell to his side, and then his head was bare and unprotected and the clubs came against his head until finally he dropped, lifeless, and was dragged off with the others.

“And this? It is Islamic extremists? The world will now see Assad! The world will now see how you really are… and all your lies!”

It is brutality, Amar thought, and in that moment he reflected back on Murhaf’s words. It is true… It is I standing by as my brother falls. It is I watching the spilling of Syrian blood and doing nothing about it. Is it reprehensible? No! It is necessity. We film, not because we liked it, but because it is the path to freedom. It is the only way to defeat this monster.

Then, through the small digital screen, Amar saw one of the government thugs turn and look his way. Some of the other militia turned as well, and before Amar knew it, one of them had his rifle raised and pointed at him. Amar quickly ducked back into the alcove, breathing heavily. When he poked his head back around the corner, he saw the remaining

“Now Assad,” Amar said to himself disdainfully. “How will you explain this?”

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demonstrators fleeing in all directions, and the shabiha coming his way. Amar turned and ran, as hard and fast as he could.

In the minutes that followed, Amar could not remember much, only running fast and breathing hard, until he was beyond the earshot of the carnage. He found himself in a protective alcove trying to catch his breath. He was sweating heavily. His mouth was stiff and dry from fear and from all the running. He looked down and realized his leg was shaking and he held his hand against it until it stopped.

He stood there and watched as the people ran past until there were no more. He snuck a glance around the corner and down the street. The street was deserted. He knew he needed to build his courage to return to the square. It was there that were the journalistic gems that would turn the tide of this rebellion.

“You must be brave,” he said to himself.

He looked again and saw no one. Then he stepped out into the street and began walking forward, filming images of burned buildings and rubble-strewn streets empty of people, yet four blocks away from the square.

A man emerged from behind a building and yelled as he ran past, “It is not safe, brother! Save yourself for another day.”

Amar continued, and another man came running past.

“Turn back,” the man yelled. “The entire Syrian Army is coming.”

Ahead Amar heard distant screams and gunfire, but could see nothing. He ducked into another building alcove, debating whether to continue or not.

“It is time for war, brother,” a voice said behind him.

Amar turned and saw Murhaf standing there, leaning against the wall. His AK-47 was in one hand and a can of Red Bull in the other. Murhaf smiled, brought the can of the Red Bull to his chest and took a drink.

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lips, and tilted his head back to get the last drop. He then tossed the skinny can to the ground.

“Come brother,” he said. “I will help you get your pictures.”

Amar was surprised to see his friend, but relieved nonetheless. In the midst of all this chaos, he was not alone.

He nodded his head.

Murhaf held his rifle in a defensive position and peered around the corner. The protruding façade of the building allowed for a commanding view in both directions. Now he could see the last barricade, a half-kilometer ahead, and he could see movement behind it. The last of the demonstrators, those who had pulled back from the square, had assembled yet another wall of toppled carts and lobby furniture, beyond which it was difficult to see because the air was filled with teargas and smoke.

Murhaf never liked this street. It was too big, and too wide, he thought. It was the financial district, built to show political might. It reminded him of all those who were in power. It was a street for the government elite, he thought, not for the
common person. But he knew they needed to cross this street in order to be on the south side of the square, and this was as good a place as any.

Ahead they heard gunfire, and they saw a demonstrator running to the opposite side of the street. Another gunshot sounded and a bullet ricocheted off the pavement near the man as he made a last leap onto the sidewalk and into a building. Murhaf looked up and saw the dark outline of a head just above the roofline on the opposite side of the street. As soon as he saw it, the head went down.

The demonstrator, safely in the building, peeked out a broken window and then disappeared.

Murhaf looked at Amar. “It’s our turn,” he said.

Amar nodded.

Murhaf looked up at the roofline and saw nothing. “Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

And without further delay, they bolted across the street, and as they did, midway through, something fell to the ground. It clanged to the pavement, and when they looked back, they saw the iPhone there in the middle of the street, lying there exposed like a flayed rabbit.

Amar reached into his pocket, disbelieving it had fallen out. His pocket was empty. In his mind, he was thinking of all the images it contained; among them the most striking video recordings of Assad’s brutal tactics taken to date.

“I must get it,” he said quickly.

“Wait.”

“I must get it,” Amar said again, and without hesitation, he began to move forward.

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“Wait!” Murhaf said, holding his hand out against Amar’s chest. Murhaf already knew of the sniper above them. He checked the buildings down the street. Along the roofline of a tall building on the left, another head showed itself. The head stayed up for a second and then went back down. That makes two, he thought.

He huddled there for a moment, thinking.

“There’s another one up there,” he said, motioning with his head.

Amar looked up but saw nothing.

They looked at one another speculatively. For the moment, they were safely out of the sights of the snipers; their heads and bodies were behind the wall of the building. Murhaf looked back at the cell phone shining in the sun. There within, he thought, were the pictures to paint a thousand words. Amar looked nervous and was sweating profusely. Further down the street, Murhaf could see the last barricade with only a few remaining demonstrators behind it. There were distant sounds from the square beyond, rattling machinegun fire and distant shouting, and he could tell by the way the demonstrators were crouched down and taking cover, something was coming, something big. In his mind he made the decision to retrieve the phone, not because he preferred it over charging ahead and spilling the blood of the Alawite thugs, but because he knew Amar was determined to get it at any cost, and that he, Murhaf, was better equipped of the two to engage such risk.

“Stay here,” Murhaf said.

Amar did not challenge.

Murhaf took one last glance at the rooftop. He saw nothing. Then he took a deep breath, gripped the AK-47 tightly in his hand, and bolted into the street.

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116
A single shot of a sniper’s rifle stopped Murhaf, mid-stride, like he’d been hit by a ghost or something. He staggered two more steps and dropped to the pavement.

“Murhaf!” Amar cried.

For a second, Murhaf tried to pull himself up. But he fell back down and he laid there flat on his back, facing up, his rifle an arm’s length away from his extended hand. And now, Amar could see blood coming from beneath him and pooling in the street.

“Murhaf!”

Amar impulsively leaped into the street. He fell to one knee beside his fallen friend and looked down at Murhaf’s lifeless face.

“Murhaf,” he cried.

My good friend, lost now too to this uprising? The pointlessness of it struck him suddenly.

The fatigue of hopelessness showed on Amar’s face. He felt himself shaking; he felt the emptiness that came from it all. The rebellion is crumbling, he thought.

The rattling of gunfire caused Amar’s hands to impulsively grab at Murhaf’s rifle. In an instant, he found himself standing alone in the street clenching an AK-47 in his hands.

A shot rang out and a bullet ricocheted off the pavement near him and when Amar looked up he saw the head again above the rooftop. Amar pulled the rifle up to his shoulder, leveled it and fired. The rifle recoiled violently, splattered out several rounds, and the head quickly dropped back down below the rooftop.

The droning sound of on-coming tanks, once heard, it is not soon forgotten, and now Amar heard this sound, in columns, ten-fold. It is the sound of doom, Amar thought. It is the sound of military might. He felt the vibration of the earth; he could

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hear the slow, steady, creaking noise, the mechanized hum of powerful engines, the clacking of tracks against pavement.

Through the smoke and haze of gunfire and teargas, he saw the tanks emerging, rumbling down the street directly toward him. The last of the brave demonstrators were now scattering from the barricade in all directions.

He looked down at Murhaf, his beloved friend, brother in the rebellion no more, the blood still fresh on his lips. Beside him lay the iPhone 4; there within, images that could change the course of the rebellion.

He felt his hands tighten on the wooden stock of the AK-47. He felt the blood welling-up in his head and the adrenaline pushing through his veins, he heard the sounds of rattling gunfire, and then he charged, into the haze, toward the advancing tanks.
Crosses

Lately, I’ve been seeing crosses.

In fence pole and rail
on the farm where Jasper lived.

In the limbs of the big oak
where we shared secrets--
crossed our hearts and hoped to die--
then sealed them with a first kiss.

In the telephone poles and lines
that ten years later carried the news
from house to house.

In the window panes of the kitchen
where we waited, grateful for the warm spring light
but shivering as we took the news,
our fingers uncrossing.

And yes, in the village where Main crosses Market
and stopping is required
for choosing: left, right, forward
or simply go back.

It didn’t happen there, thank God.

For a while I only saw the cross we made
from planks pulled from the woodpile,
painted white, festooned with red plastic flowers
we knew would fade to pink in the summer sun
at that place by the road
before fall winds blew it all away
or the county snow plow came through seventeen times--
a record setting winter.

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But lately--this spring--I’ve been seeing crosses in all the other places, especially there, by the road where the accident of light crossing shadow makes X mark the spot.
Who always sing nice and peaceful songs for us

There is this lady
Something over him he never cries or complains
Who can carry thousands of people
Who never moves
Are long, tiny and thin.

Goes down to her brown strong body
Goes down again to her feet which
Are long, tiny and thin.
Tree

Far away there’s this strong man
Who never moves
Who can carry thousands of people
You can beat him, go over him and build
Something over him he never cries or complains
We use him to enjoy the down view
Mountain

There is this lady
Who always sing nice and peaceful songs for us

In summer 2012, Sinclair Professor Furaha Henry-Jones travelled to Durban, South Africa and led the poetry component of the Wright Lead Youth Leadership Institute. For three weeks, she and sixteen learners from Zwelibanzi, Bechet, and a few other schools explored how poetry connects to community service and leadership. The youth named themselves Voice of the Wise, and hoped their work would become the beginning of a new literary movement. We are very proud to publish these poems in Flights.

NOMBULELO DLADLA

Nature
I’m looking through the window
In a hilly place
Where I see all God’s creativity
There’s this mother of all
With the big green hat
That covers all her body
Goes down to her brown strong body
Goes down again to her feet which
Are long, tiny and thin.
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In summer 2012, Sinclair Professor Furaha Henry-Jones travelled to Durban, South Africa and led the poetry component of the Wright Lead Youth Leadership Institute. For three weeks, she and sixteen learners from Zwelibanzi, Bechet, and a few other schools explored how poetry connects to community service and leadership. The youth named themselves Voice of the Wise, and hoped their work would become the beginning of a new literary movement. We are very proud to publish these poems in Flights.

NOMBULELO DLADLA

Nature
I’m looking through the window
In a hilly place
Where I see all God’s creativity
There’s this mother of all
With the big green hat
That covers all her body
Goes down to her brown strong body
Goes down again to her feet which
Are long, tiny and thin.
Tree

Far away there’s this strong man
Who never moves
Who can carry thousands of people
You can beat him, go over him and build
Something over him he never cries or complaints
We use him to enjoy the down view
Mountain

There is this lady
Who always sing nice and peaceful songs for us
Who got angry if this man rain beat her
And allows nobody to pass through her
River

What else we can ask for survival? Nothing
Because they bring about life to us.
Let treat all this with dignity
I’m talking about nature.

What else we can ask for survival? Nothing
Because they bring about life to us.
Let treat all this with dignity
I’m talking about nature.
A True Friend

A true friend is there for the good times
And there when you need them the most.
A true friend will not judge you
By how much money you make
What car you drive
Or what kind of clothes you wear.

A true friend loves and accepts you
For who you are.
A true friend is there
When you need someone to talk to,
They pick you up
When you are down.
A true friend is never
Too busy for you.

A true friend will
Run through a fire just to save you.
And that is what I call
A TRUE FRIEND.
When Men’s Ability Fails, God’s Miracles Begin

When poverty overcomes you
When there is no power, no hope
When thought has gone out of the mind
When there is no more action to take
God’s miracle begins

When strength is no longer found in you
When weakness overcomes your body
When you are so close to death
When there is no helping hand
It when men’s ability fails
And God’s miracles begin
When God turns your life around
When God comes like a tornado
Seeking to help and empower you

When things start to move again
When your cells move again
When the normal breath of life comes back to your spirit

When you come back to your senses
And realize that it’s truly a miracle of God.
It's Too Late

Jst becoz i didn’t shout or yell at you
you thought i wasn’t angry
Jst because i didn’t complain
you thought i was a plain stupid
Jst becoz i covered my scars
you thought i wasn’t hurt
Jst becoz i wasn’t bleeding
you thought i felt no pain
Jst becoz i kept giving
you were only happy to keep receiving
Jst because i ignored you
you thought i had none of your time
Jst becoz i didn’t respond
you were convinced i didn’t hear you
Jst becoz i had much to do
you thought i was man hungry
Jst becoz i came up with a lots of ideas
you thought i wasn’t dying
Jst because i had plan about us
you thought i was hurting your future
Jst becoz i had money
You thought i was taking advantage of you
Jst becoz i had much of happiness
you thought i wasn’t short tempered
Jst because i had dreams
You thought i wouldn’t wake up to see u what you are
for you to say u love me it too late

MINENHLE MELISSA MKLIZE

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The Knowledge of a Cub

Young ageless feeling
Senses wisely spreading
Is it a mind of a cub
or a roar of a lion?
The sound of a cow seemed familiar,
animals feared and the crown appeared

The knowledge of a cub
The tree top I started to see
The butterflies became stronger
In the bush I ran to get my food
and see that I’m no more a cub,
but a wildest beast
Some call me a problem or an
easy finder of feasts
But still … I think…

The knowledge of a cub
They call me a king,
or is it just a family fling?
The strong power I had never seen
like a power line, it brought the light,
in a tunnel it started to shine.
My roar went louder,
My teeth went sharper,
In the world out loud I say

The knowledge of a cub

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or is it just a family fling?
The strong power I had never seen
like a power line, it brought the light,
in a tunnel it started to shine.
My roar went louder,
My teeth went sharper,
In the world out loud I say

The knowledge of a cub
The Place Called the Earth

Right from the beginning
When it was all created
right out of the water we found the land
then we were all able to say
I have a home

We are all blessed to breathe
and watch how nature interacts to create life

it’s the wild life so adventurous
and the sun so warming to all species

the singing of the birds
the roar of a lion
and the trumpet of an elephant
are some of what makes the place called earth
a real home sweet home
to us all
Suicidal Letter

This one goes to my mom
The woman who knows where I came from
She said fell from the plain
Well I wish I died on my way instead of living in this pain
But I can still cut my veins
Maybe that would stop my brain strain

I just want to roar in shout until my soul pops out
I fell like in this world
I no more count
Killing myself would reduce the hopeless amount of people
who are hectic
And don’t have any ethic
I only do wrong than right, always get into fights
I can overdose a bottle of sleeping pills
And it’s one of the best skills to end a good and nothing life
and also stabbing my chest with a knife
I was nothing but now I am something

I was useless hungry;
I was hopeless unhappy am;
but today I am something.

I used to sleep with empty stomach
I used to be cold;
I used not to have money
to buy school stationery
But today I am
Something am proud of

I used to work for people
And get nothing in return;
I used to steal in order to survive

People used to call me names
People used to laugh at me
But I realized that if I didn’t
ignore them
I wouldn’t be who I am

They used to tell me that
I am nothing and I will
die nothing

But that didn’t stop
me to fulfill my dreams
as now I respect I was
nothing but now I am
something.
If only you knew my pain, my past and my curves
You would understand
Not many people have a cellulite skin and an amazing smile and know how to work their hips, her legs are as big as a turkey and smooth as molten chocolate
If only you knew my pain my past and my curves
You would understand
She dresses in the Plus Sizes Stores but can make a man go wild like a checker her eyes glitter her shine like glasses that glitter and her teeth are so bright shine like the moon on a dark night ow man what a beautiful sight
If only you knew my pain my past and my curves
You would understand
Her face is cute and chubby like a chunk of chocolate mixed
with coco for her skin
she is full figured and not folly
about fashion

if only you knew my past, my pain
and my curves

you would understand

with coco for her skin
she is full figured and not folly
about fashion

if only you knew my past, my pain
and my curves

you would understand
**You Sing Me a Song**

When the words you say collide
When you bring with you your heart
You sing me a song

A song that breathes a rhythm
To my hearts beating
A song that holds a reason
To my believing
A song I want to hear

But when words collide I fear
I might have no time
I might lose my heat
I might not survive cause words collide
You sing me a song that promises beauty
That shows courage
That brings me spirit
That lends me hope

A song that breathes a rhythm
To my hearts beating
A song that holds a reason
To my believing
A song I want to hear

You sing me
To survive
To be reminded of my past, to live life, to learn
to allow my heart to move on.

I LOVE IT WHEN YOU SING ME A SONG

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**You Sing Me a Song**

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I LOVE IT WHEN YOU SING ME A SONG
Voice of the Wise Poetry Institute 2012

You made me 'cause I chose to be

Once I was low and bruised
hidden away from the world
insecure of my words
once I was laughed at and broken
once I was dull and weary
unmade
ungreat
living in regret
I was at my last mission
my wit’s end had come

I had lost my vision
but you made a path
a path laid out by life
to change me and make me better

I have taken part in it
You made me 'cause I chose to be

I now lead with leaders
with leaders who make a change
without changing who we are
I walk with pride
even though I don’t wear Prada
I am more than nada

I am a leader
You told me to be empowered
Because the world needs empowerment
'Cause the world is in need of wise words
You told me that lust and love never agree
Because they are different
So I have a choice to make a shot
and no time to wonder
like colors of countries
that are intertwined
I am left in line not to live a lie
but to make my life shine
You made me
'cause I chose to be
I am now wiser
stronger
better
'Cause I have a voice
I am kinder
nicer
fonder of life
'Cause you told me
it is nice to be important
but more important to be nice
Now I am because you are
You made choose
I choose to be

Composed by
Voice of the Wise Poetry Institute

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CHRISTINA DENDY teaches in the Communication Department at Sinclair Community College. A frequent contributor to Flights and an avid writer and photographer, this is her first time publishing fiction.

KATHY AUSTIN is a retired graphic designer, recently having moved to Dayton from Yellow Springs. She has received awards for poetry from the Iowa Poetry Day Association and the Paul Laurence Dunbar Memorial Competition. Her poems have appeared in The Writing Path I anthology published by the University of Iowa Press, and also various local publications such as Nexus magazine and Mock Turtle Zine. She has been featured on WYSO 91.3 Conrad's Corner and enjoys giving poetry readings in the area. She describes herself as a Buddhist, half-hippie tree-hugger who enjoys biking and gardening.

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WILLIAM CASS has had forty-eight short stories accepted for publication by mostly smaller literary magazines and anthologies. He lives in Coronado, California.

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KAREN DEPINTO has been a public school teacher for the past thirty years, and still loves it! She has been an adjunct instructor of English and English as a Second Language at Wright State University and Sinclair Community College since 1997. When she’s not spending time with her family, she enjoys traveling, skiing, horseback riding (her greatest passion) and writing. She is currently working on a series of horse stories for children in grades 2-4. Her favorite writers are Charles Dickens and James Joyce.

JONATHAN GREENHAUSE is the winner of *Prism Review*’s 2012-2013 Poetry Prize and finalist for this year’s Gearhart Poetry Contest from *The Southeast Review*. He has received two Pushcart nominations and authored *Sebastian’s Relativity* (a chapbook from Anobium Books, 2011). His poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Hawai‘i Pacific Review*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *The Moth* (IRE), *Popshot* (UK), *Regime* (AUS), and elsewhere. He and his wife are currently being raised by their newborn son, Benjamin Seneca.

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women’s anthology *The Moment I Knew: Reflection from Women on Life’s Defining Moments*, and her “Two Sides of the Same Coin” is included in their 51%: *Women and the Future of Politics*.

**JAMES REED** lives in Hamilton, Ohio. His stories have appeared in *The Nebraska Review*, *Country People Magazine*, *Perceptions Magazine of the Arts* and *The Feathered Flounder*.

**REBECCA RITCHEY** is a loan officer at Telhio Credit Union by day and an English Major at Sinclair by night. She is currently working on a collection of personal essays and a novel. She lives in Columbus, Ohio and blogs at darlingyourhead.tumblr.com.

**DEBORAH ROCHELEAU**’s short story, “Rootless,” won first place in the Sinclair Community College Short Story Competition. Her work has also appeared in *A Clean, Well-lighted Place*.

**FRANK SCOZZARI**’s fiction has previously appeared in various literary magazines, including *The Kenyon Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Nassau Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Pacific Review*, *Reed Magazine*, *Folio*, *Ellipsis Magazine*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, *Foliate Oak Literary Journal*, *Hawai‘i Pacific Review*, *Chrysalis Reader*, and many others. He was a winner of the National Writer’s Association Short Story Contest and has received three publisher nominations for the Pushcart Prize for Short Stories.

**SHARON SHORT** is the author of *My One Square Inch of Alaska* (Penguin Plume, 2013), *Sanity Check: a Collection of Columns* (Cornerstone, 2012), and two mystery series. She was a recipient of a 2012 Ohio Arts Council Literary Artist’s Fellowship, and was a 2013 Featured Author for the Ohioana Book Festival. She is currently Executive Director of the Antioch Writers’ Workshop in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and is the publisher nominations for the Pushcart Prize for Short Stories.

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**VOICE OF THE WISE** is the name chosen by a group of young South African poets who studied with Sinclair Professor Furaha Henry-Jones last summer. They are: Nombulelo Dladla, Malachi Nagel, Nhlakanipho Zulu, Minenhle Melissa Mkize, Lwazi Ndimande, Sithabile Ndlovu, Unique Lady, Nozipho Ndlovu, Sphelele Mpungose, Bongiwe Nyawose, and others.