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## **ABSTRACT**

A lot of different people call small, briny Pembroke, MD home. A retired school teacher lives here, an aspiring filmmaker, an expiring pharmacist, crews of crab fisherman, shifts of factory workers, mothers, fathers, a lottery winner, and a witch doctor. It's not a particularly charming place, this Eastern Shore town, and the citizens aren't particularly good or happy, but they're here, for the time being. These are their stories.

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## Caught

You go around spending too much time in a place and it starts to get inside you, gets under your skin, in your head. When I've tripped twice in any town I know I've been there too long, because you fall for a third time, you might stay. Find a job, a nice apartment, a dog, a girl, a few hobbies and that's when the devils come and find you, stick their long needle-claws in the soft parts of your neck and shoulders, caress your ear with slick, forked tongues.

I've been there, had the job, the apartment, the dog, the girlfriend, and the devils always sticking me, pricking me. Never had enough money, enough free time, enough nice clothes, enough TV channels, which were all just little distractions from the BIGGEST BAD GUY who was stalking me all the time, who swallows a man up whole. His name is BOREDOM.

So I'm done with it. Started riding coal cars ten years ago and haven't stopped since. Been the best decision of my life.

So please, please, don't arrest me for this one, Officer, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with this lovely town of Pembroke, sir, but I really can't afford to sit around reading books and pressing iron while the state decides if I've been rehabilitated or not yet from the wandering life in this big wide world.

I'm clean, yes, yes I am, Sir. Only dirt on me is the coal dust. Thank you, yes, you have a good day too, now.

## Grenade

Lou prepared for the marines by setting the egg-timer to five minute increments and doing sets of push-ups and crunches on the kitchen floor. He worked out before and after school, his skinny, rosy muscles stretching and pulling in his immature arms, his socks slithering around on the tile. Mom stepped around his struggling body with margarine spread loaded onto her knife, making coffee and burning her toast, but Sarai made a point of having breakfast cross-legged on the floor, leaning against the cabinets across from her brother.

Spooning cereal into her mouth, she bored her gaze into the top of his head. Sarai hoped this would make her brother to look up, look around. She wanted him to turn his focus from the grey tile below him to her, his little sister, to the red accent wall in the kitchen, to the fly swatter magnetized to the refrigerator, his own name scratched into the counter under the sink, just anything in the room around him. She thought if Lou could do that, he could give up on trying to join the marines. If he saw the pinch pots they'd made in summer art camp together sitting on the windowsill, he wouldn't want go to Afghanistan and get shot and die. He might not die, even, he might just lose pieces of himself in a roadside bomb. He might come back with PTSD and quiver like a feather in the unnatural air. He might lose a hand, a foot, a section of skull and brain, he might lose his eyes.

But Lou didn't look up at Sarai. He didn't attune to the thoughts and worries she tried to transmit through her gaze. He went through his exercises, stopping only to rewind the timer and grab his backpack off the floor when the bus came. He wouldn't give her a straight answer about why he wanted to join even. When she asked

him about it, he would say: “I just want to,” with a shrug and keep staring out the bus window at the interminable fields of winter rye and silage and winter rye and winter rye.

Sarai fried bacon in the kitchen while he worked out, she took the batteries out of the egg timer, she hid the egg timer in the fruit basket, she washed and waxed the tile floor to a high gloss, so that even Papi in his running sneakers slipped and skidded on it like an ice-skater. But Lou still huffed and puffed and twisted his body into strange shapes over the floor, and Mom took Sarai aside and told her to stop. “It’s a great opportunity for your brother,” she told Sarai. “Don’t discourage him.” Sarai objected that there were lots of great opportunities, that Lou didn’t need to get shot at to find steady employment or prove his worth or help his country or travel or whatever else he thought he was doing, but Mom wasn’t buying it.

And somewhere in the weeks and months of senior year after she’d been forbidden to interfere with Lou’s preparations, Sarai’s frustration and curiosity became, understandably, a little misplaced. These feelings passed from Lou himself to the army and navy recruiters who set out flyers and free pens on a table on the far wall of the high school’s cafeteria. Why were they allowed there? Were they very successful at recruiting? Didn’t they ever get tired of wearing full dress uniform to dispense small rations of advice and ArmyStrong® stress relief balls to slouching teens?

Sarai tried to get into the vice-principal’s office to talk about it, but there’d been a rash of rude cartoons doodled in the locker rooms that week, and Mr. Everly was too busy confiscating Sharpies and shouting at people to see her. When she asked her guidance counselor during their yearly consultation how the recruiters got permission to set up a trifold in the school—when her own mother couldn’t go beyond the secretary’s

desk in the front office to pick her up from Art Club—the perky little counselor perked up even more and said he was glad she’d noticed them. Had she considered enlisting? The Army was a great option!

By March, Lou could do clapping pushups and five hundred jumping jacks in one go. Sarai glared at the recruiters at the far table against the wall all thirty minutes of lunch period as her friends chatted around her and scraped silverware against their plates. When the boys in the back of her Latin class snickered and tried to think of a good senior prank, Sarai turned right around in her chair and told them to let everyone know there’d be a food fight the last day of class.

“We were gonna do a greased pig, though,” the tall one said.

“Do you have a pig?” Sarai asked, wondering what a person “greased” a pig with.

“Well...no. But we could borrow one.”

“From Luke.”

“Yeah, Luke’s uncle’s got a pig farm.”

Sarai looked back and forth between the boys. One of them had a faint smudge of moustache growing on his upper lip and the other twos’ shoes were untied. “You guys bring the jell-o,” she said. “I’ll make cupcakes.” And she went back to conjugating verbs.

As daughters go, Sarai behaved dutifully most of the time. She often obeyed her curfew, she took out the trash when she was asked to, she put gas in the car after she drove it around. And as familiar as she’d become with the faces of the army and air force recruiters over the last couple months, her friends and family might’ve expected her to feel a few probings of guilt as she mixed up batter and whipped heavy cream the

afternoon before the last day of school. She knew all the recruiters' different walks, their little habits; she'd named them from afar: Horse Face, Beefcakes, Waving Hands, and The Ethnically Ambiguous One. But with Lou flat on his back by her feet, gasping for air after a bout of mountain climbers, Sarai had no shame and no sadness.

Mom drifted in from the hall as the egg timer dinged and Sarai pulled the finished product out of the oven. "What're those for?" she asked, nudging Lou's inert feet aside to get into the freezer.

"My Latin class is having a party," Sarai said, looking down at the two trays of fluffy, Funfetti™ cupcakes cooling on the stovetop. She imagined them decorated with pastel icings and tiny M&M sprinkles, she imagined each sitting snugly as a grenade in her hand; the explosions of crumbs they would make across the front of Horseface and Beefcake's uniforms. Waving Hands and the Ethnically Ambiguous One ducked as bursts of sprinkles spattering across the walls, cupcake liners fluttered, caught on epaulets and buttons and medals, the recruitment officers grabbed their posters and fled the cafeteria under heavy pastry fire. On the floor, Lou heard Sarai plug in the mixer, the buzz of heavy cream being whipped into icing, and sat up.

## Baby Teeth

Eddy Larkins had not thought that this is what fatherhood would be like. But here he sat, in a corner booth at the Red Rabbit diner, across from his good friend Paul Pope, and together they looked down at the baby tooth resting on the edge of his plate of cheese steak and fries. A tiny, spiky pearl. It looked like the odd bit of rock or shell you might find washed onto the beach, tangled up in reeking seaweed.

“I don’t think,” Paul said, his knife and fork hovering above his plate of flapjacks. “That was advertised as a side.”

Eddy frowned at his friend. Paul had seen all the souvenirs pass across his friend’s plate mat over the past few years—trimmings from a baby’s first haircut set next to the water glasses, doodles and 1<sup>st</sup> grade report cards tucked into napkins, a pink sliver of birthday ribbon curling around the saltshaker.

“Don’t usually bother you,” Eddy said.

“Ain’t usually teeth,” Paul replied, going back to sawing apart his pancakes. “Makes me worry I might find something crunchy in my hash browns.”

Laurie, their waitress, pattered over to refill coffee mugs and Eddy tucked the tooth in his shirt pocket. When he was a child, his mother collected his baby teeth as they fell out and kept them in her jewelry box among the jumble of earring backs and thin gold chains. “They’re precious,” he remembered her telling him as she scraped a quarter from the bottom of her purse to exchange. This little object he would drop in the gravel of the Red Rabbit’s parking lot or flip out the window like a used cigarette butt as he drove. He caught Laurie’s soft elbow as she bent to serve him.

“Where did she lose it?” he asked. He remembered the surprise of losing his first tooth. The incisor had popped out over a water fountain in elementary school when he bent down for a drink. With a tiny rattle it followed the rushing water through a hole in the drain.

Laurie frowned at him. This wasn't part of the arrangement. “The living room,” she said. “She tied one end of a string to it and the other end to a door knob and had her brother slam it.”

Laurie straightened and left, Eddy's coffee still empty, and over the rattle of Paul's silverware and the clink of glasses and mugs and ketchup bottles, Eddy tried to catch the thunk of the slamming door, the strangled child's cry.

In the parking lot, Eddy held off the beagle, the mutt, and the red setter with one arm as he opened the Ford's driver side door and clambered up in.

“Get back,” he told the dogs, turning his head away from the waving tongues. “Go on, sit down.”

The three dogs scrambled back into the passenger side of the car and sat down, excited, expectant, looking like they might break into three part harmony. Eddy put his hands on the steering wheel, stared at the little Ford logo in the middle, and sighed. His daddy always told him to respect women, and he had; loved and respected a fair number of women. Maybe he should count his blessings that this was the only kid he had to hide from Nessa and Carson. But as he felt the little tooth scratching his skin through the shirt, he did not pitch it out the window of the truck like an unlucky penny, not yet.

Eddy got home from his shift at the packing plant around seven, smelling like tomatoes. Nessa, still in her scrubs, lounged on the couch in the living room balancing an ashtray on one knee and a cigarette glowing between her lips. She was painting her nails a deep maroon, “Head Mistress” was the name he’d seen on her dresser the other day, and she lifted her eyes from her hand as he closed the front door.

Eddy had always been surprised by his wife’s ability to multitask. When they were newly married and just had Carson, Eddy would come home to Nessa bouncing the baby in the kitchen with the phone between her ear and her shoulder, snapping her gum, talking to one of her girlfriends and repining her hair one handed. The first few times this happened he pecked her on the cheek and gathered the baby out of her arms, a little concerned in case she dropped him, or over-bounced him, or held him too tightly. But then Nessa would blow him a kiss and just start deboning a chicken or slicing onions with her free hand, and he finally decided that the baby was just as secure in his wife’s arms as he would be anywhere else.

“Hey there,” she said.

“I got beer,” Eddy hefted the thirty six-pack of Yuengling.

“Oh,” Nessa said. “Yeah. Wow.”

It was on the tip of Eddy’s tongue to offer that tonight they could relive their high school years. In their teens, when he and Nessa went to friends’ parties, he’d give her rides home. They only lived around the block from each other, and he thought it was cute, the way she drew little four leaved clovers and hearts and dollar signs in the steam on the car windows. When they drove home in the early morning, the streetlamps cast ovals cast of light flowing over the windshield and Nessa’s hair fell in fine strands out of

her ponytail. During these rides, Eddy felt like he could tell her anything. He told her about his little brother who'd died at two weeks old, how small the casket was at the viewing, the size of a shoebox. He told her about how he wanted to be a stunt car driver in the movies, about why he'd dropped out of the football team for the way the boys hazed each other. He could never be sure if she remembered all the things he told her. When Nessa got drunk, her cheeks grew shiny and her eyes big and distant, and he never cared to ask her if she did the next day. For graduation she gave him a Got Crabs? bumper sticker as a joke, and he'd asked her out on a date to the bowling alley. The sticker still clung to the Ford's bumper.

Therefore, this had seemed to him one of the better ways of telling his wife about the baby tooth still rolling around in the pocket over his heart. Drunk, he could be honest and he could be sorry and maybe they would both forget the whole thing the next morning.

“You gonna invite people over?” Nessa asked.

“No. Yes,” this was not how this was supposed to play out at all. Eddy pushed his baseball cap back on his head and faked a confused, goofball-husband grin.

“Actually, I don't know what I was thinking.”

“Ah,” Nessa blotted her nail polish brush on the lip of the bottle and her eyes slid back to the Suzie Orman show. “Well if you put some in the fridge we can drink them tonight.”

Eddy grunted and slunk into the kitchen.

The first time Eddy had seen Laurie at the Red Rabbit, home of the locally famous Bunny Burger, he figured she was twice as wide as any man he'd met, and pleasantly so, like a large, well-designed piece of machinery. She'd look you right in the eye too, not like the college girls home on break who flipped their ponytails and gazed out the window as they scratched down your drink order. Eddy liked that. That day, he tipped well.

Eddy flirted with Laurie, called her Rosebud, Sweet Thing, talked her out to his truck to look at the snapping turtle he caught crossing the road one day and put in the bed. She didn't seem to mind the attention, she called him Apple Pie for his favorite dessert. The day he wrote his number on the receipt, she chuckled, turned a bright shade of pink, folded it up, and tucked it in her bra.

She liked high-end perfumes. She prayed a constant mantra while she drove after her aunt died in a car crash. She wore Crocs around the house instead of slippers, She believed in ghosts. She ate her oysters raw with a dash of hot sauce. She was married to the fry chef of at the Red Rabbit, and together they had a young son. In Eddy's mind this was probably for the best—a married mother, by his reasoning, would be less likely to try and talk him out of leaving his wife. Eddy knew a good thing at home when he had one.

Their affair ended in quite the opposite way, in fact, one rainy spring afternoon in the Motel 8 the next town over. Eddy was clicking through the channels on the motel's TV when Laurie walked in through the unlocked door and flicked the pregnancy tester across the room at him. It dinked him in the side of the head, and when he picked it up off the nylon comforter he saw it had the little green + sign showing in the little screen.

“Hunh,” he said.

“Baby’s your’s,” Laurie said, shucking off her rain jacket and purse into a pile on the chair.

“Oh. Shit,” Eddy said. He looked at the + sign again, and the small room with its prefab furniture, its flat carpet, its paintings of flesh-toned bouquets hung on the walls, all seemed to become very distant. “Are you going to keep it?” he asked, unsure if he wanted her to say yes or no, unsure if he wanted to be a part of that decision at all.

“Quentin and I have been trying to give Arnold a sibling for a long time now,” she said. She landed herself on the end of the bed, facing him, and he muted the TV.

“You want this—our baby to be that sibling?” He scooted into a sitting position.

Laurie doodled her finger across the familiar bedspread and sighed through her nose. “Yes,” she said. “Yes. I do.”

He felt out of his depth, this had never happened with any of his “extra ladies” before. His socked feet kept sliding into the dent Laurie made in the mattress, he felt prompted by her seriousness to act serious in return. It felt unreal, dramatic, like something from *Days of Our Lives*. “Well, I don’t want this kid to grow up a stranger to its father,” he said.

“Quentin can’t ever know about us. You can’t be coming around the house all the time.”

Eddy chewed the inside of his cheek. “Okay. But I still want to know what it gets on its spelling tests and stuff. I want to know when it makes varsity team.”

Laurie fiddled with her wedding band, as she often did when she got agitated. “I’m sure we can think of something,” she said. “And you’re a great guy and everything.

But I'm going to need to spend more time working, and at home. With a new baby and everything . . .”

“It's a lot of work,” Eddy finished the thought for her, taking her hand in his own. This he knew. This he could handle. The first rule of seduction: sympathy, sympathy, sympathy.

Laurie nodded. “Too true,” she said. “But it's free birth control too.”

“Can't get pregnant when you're pregnant,” he agreed.

But after they'd finished and lay cuddled up, watching some televangelist or another expound on the bounties of the Lord, Laurie unwound one of her long, dark hairs from Eddy's chest hair and posed an uncomfortable question. “Are we doing the right thing about this baby, Eddy?” she said. “I mean, it seems good.”

Eddy, interpreting this as the beginning of one of those arguments that would end with an ultimatum about things he should tell his wife felt his shoulders go tight, and to mask his distress, stretched and reached for his phone on the nightstand. “I think we've made the only possible one, given the circumstances baby,” he said.

If getting plastered drunk with his wife was not an option, Eddy decided, he could at least get her in a good mood before he broke the news.

“Paul,” he said when Paul opened the front door of his lemon-yellow trailer the next morning. “I need to borrow some cash.”

Paul squinted down at his friend. Tall, with a constant five o'clock shadow and the hunching shoulders of a man uncomfortable with his height, Paul Pope had won the

lottery at the age of twenty-three. He promptly retired to this trailer in the Happy Acres Mobile Home Park and pursued a life of leisure. Paul ruffled up his hair and sniffed the air. “I think the Freemans are making bacon,” he said as he held the door open. “Come on in,”

While Paul puttered around with the French press coffee maker, Eddy laid out his plan.

“We’re going to go the Washington Inn, have dinner, have a few drinks, leave Carson at home.”

“Sounds good.”

“Probably bring home flowers before that. But then, after dinner we go home and curl up on the couch. We watch a chick flick and Nessa falls asleep in my arms.”

“Okay.”

“So? What do you think?”

Paul pulled a pair of mugs out of the cabinet. “Where in all that do you break the news to her, again?”

Eddy put his elbows on his knees and spun his keys around one finger.

“Not sure yet.”

Outside the small kitchen window, the line of pink flamingoes Paul used to section off his yard from his neighbors wobbled on their wire legs in the morning breeze. Staring at the edge of Paul’s peeling toe-molding, it struck Eddy that Carson would be learning to drive next year. In the pit of his stomach he felt the sudden stops, unexpected turns, the blinkers flipped much too late or too early. The year after that, his

son would be going to prom, taking pictures in the living room. Nervous smiles, bright boutonnières, the date's manicured nails in a line up Carson's shoulder. There'd be blue mortarboards in the air for graduation, then piles of boxes as Carson moved out of Eddy and Nessa's house, computer cords matted up and mashed into a pillowcase, the U-Haul bottoming out at the end of the drive.

Eddy saw himself and Paul still going to the Red Rabbit every Thursday, growing greyer, chewing slower, and all the meanwhile, that little girl of his and Laurie's growing up too, maybe happy, maybe not. But even if he were to stop her on the street tomorrow, tell her his name, their relationship, everything. She'd remain separate, unclaimable, still that little piece of shell tumbling around somewhere in the bay.

## A Fine Edge

On this high-ceilinged summer day, you remember, the orchards and fields lay hot and glistening under sun so bright it hurt the eyes. The world smelled of white clover, horses galloped and thrashed their tails in the pastures. The grass germinated in long wiry-green wands, bursting into tassels of seed at the ends, which hissed and shook when the wind brushed them. The shaggy catkins on the chestnut tree sloughed showers of pollen on your legs and your work; the bare barn beams set up on sawhorses.

Your naked feet swinging, lightning beetles abuzz over the chestnut flowers, you chiseled slots in a beam for the joining yet to come. The sly chisel hummed, so sharp, so clever in your hand. You marveled at its quickness with prying open unseen spaces in the grain, the way it found the weakness in the solid places, in one hundred years of oak strength. You hummed too and swung the mallet high, then down in a crackle of splinters, all afternoon.

But on one upswing, a dizzy beetle tumbled past your ear, or maybe a distant horse screamed, and the mallet landed funny. Clumsy, fumbling, the chisel bounced, cut air and pollen and into the softness of your inner thigh. And it didn't hurt, no. Such was the fineness of the edge. It surprised you. You did not know your body held such colors; royal red and a pink, curling lip of torn skin. It was not the first time you bled, no. It was not even the worst time. It just felt so warm under the tree that day.

## Difficult

When my father was a young man, he told us, he once saw a man pull a freight engine over a mile of track on his very own. The man hooked two chains to the engine, joined them with a spring clamp, and then pinched that to his tongue. He folded his hands over his groin and drew the engine while walking backwards, big muscles bulging in his thighs. “Amazing,” my father declared. “Better than the circus—and some advertisement for Canadian National.”

But of course the very next day my father was out in the garage, pouring used motor oil into washed-out pesticides jugs without spilling a speck. I was sorting recycling and I waited until he’d folded his legs in a lotus and levitated himself in the air. He tipped the bucket of oil ever so slightly to begin and I said, “Dad, what would you do if I got gauges?” because I wanted to see if his hair would catch fire or if he’d lose his grasp on gravity altogether and go zipping through the roof. Instead, he missed the mouth of the jug by a few centimeters and dripped oil on the newspaper he always laid out anyway and said, “I’d get my grommet-remover from work and pop them right out again.”

Well, I finished sorting the recycling, and went back inside to see if I might have better luck with my mother. I found her in my little brother’s room as she reached up to pinch out the sun between her thumb and forefinger, so my little brother would settle down and take his nap. To my question she offered a counter question, “Ah, yes. Honey, why not also throw out all the job applications you’re ever going to write while your at

it?” And so you see when I was young I often felt it was difficult, growing up with such conventional parents.

## Chesapeake Princess

Isaac and Adiel took the truck the night Jeanine left, so I had to ride horseback to Whistler's to get properly drunk.

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I should have cut off my pinkie toe before I ever got involved with Jethro Hendricks.

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Didn't bother to properly saddle the thing. I just sort of carried the tack out of the barn, threw it on the ground and cussed it. Then I got on that roan and left.

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They're one of those deep-Appalachian families, you know? They come down out of the mountains into Pembroke, all the cousins and second cousins living on one piece of land in trailers and pop-up campers, the parents in the old farmhouse.

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I had not gotten so drunk in a long time. A bitch, my baby. A bitch.

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Jethro's mother, God, she had this glare that could scorch the earth around your feet. And his father had a slow way of turning his head to stare at you while you were out in the yard. It made me uncomfortable for a while. I thought he was looking at my ass. But he put that odd eye on his sons and daughters too, put it to the dogs.

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She giggled at me in the mornings; told me I talked in my sleep, told me all the things she said I said. The second night we spent together, she emptied out my dresser and hid all my boxers in the freezer. I made pancakes in a towel. She tied her hair up in messy buns and knots and tattered ponytails with tangled ends. She had one crooked tooth, right up in front. It made her not want to smile in pictures, but I remember that one cockeyed tooth, always getting out of line.

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At Shear Perfection the girls raised their eyebrows when I told them I was seeing a Hendricks boy. They wanted to know if he was handsome or good in bed or what? I said Jethro wasn't either of those things particularly: his nose was too pointy and his lips too thin for beauty, and his kisses were all teeth and tongue. But he called me princess, and he put up with my tempers, and his laugh shook the mattress. I said I loved making him laugh because every time he did, it sounded like it was the first time he'd ever laughed in his life. It was like such a thing never existed in the whole wide world and he'd just discovered it.

Tanya looked at Rae and Rae looked at Dani and Dani rolled her eyes. That's *so* sweet, they said, too bad he's a no good thief liar thug. I closed my copy of *E!* and set it on the counter. I told Tanya and Rae and Dani that all the rumors they'd heard about the family were true; that the Hendricks had been selling the same International Harvester to different people for two years now, stealing it back as soon as the checks went through; that they had a trafficking arrangement with the Zetas through La Tienda Mexicana downtown; and that there was a man cut into pieces and buried in the Hendricks's basement in 207 individual Ball Canning Jars. Jethro, I said, had taken me down there

and dug one up. It had a hand inside, withered and splotchy, but more or less preserved in the sealed environment of the jar. I gazed mistily into the middle distance and added that, propped up against the inside of the jar, its fingers seemed lifted towards me as though in greeting.

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So you understand now why I needed to medicate heavily with the Jack Daniels. I don't recall much after midnight that night, but somehow I ended up on the horse again, headed down Main Street during the darkest hours of the morning, screaming Jeanine's name. I guess I thought maybe she would hear me if I got real loud, or maybe if I rattled the window panes in heaven, some merciful god would put me out of my misery.

But I guess God's a heavy sleeper. Maybe Pembroke folk are too. No lights went on in town as I rode through. No one called the police, but no one came outside either to catch the horse's bridle and say: *That's enough now. You come sleep it off on the porch swing, we'll put the horse in the back yard.* When my voice broke, I rasped her name, begged, gasped. The heat of the drinking hung on my face, my body, burning me up, and the roan scraped her iron feet over the asphalt. When we reached the traffic light on Fifth and Main, she lay herself down in the intersection and wouldn't get up.

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Between me and you, I don't actually know if all the rumors were true, so you can save your opinions. But once, while we were waiting in line at the Getty Mart, I asked Jethro about the dents in his pickup truck.

Me: How come there's so many of them around the headlights and the taillights?

Jethro: You know, I ain't ever ate one of them Little Debbie Oatmeal Cream Pies before.

Me: Haha, uh, what?

Jethro: You want one? I'm buying. [Sets two on the checkout counter along with the jug of windshield wiper fluid we came in for.]

You don't hang around with a family—I was crashing in Jethro's trailer for a few months there—for that long without noticing how few of them had jobs, and how little farming got done on “the farm.” Old Mr. Hendricks raised beef steer and Dobermans. He claimed this was a good combination because he could feed the runty calves to the dogs. If it was any indication of his abilities, there were more dogs than cows. Some of the cousins painted a house or put up a fence now and then, and Jethro's sister did secretarial for an attorney in town, but that was about it.

And look here, I was dumber then, and I don't think I would've much cared if they were cooking meth in the pole barn with a puppy mill on the side. I thought that if you loved a person it didn't matter who they were (or what they did). There was something pure about love, and you should treasure it and keep it because there was something about the love itself which was good and worthwhile. Also, I was just plain crazy about that man.

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Sitting on the lump of the horse's back there, I thought of the things that could've been between me and Jeanine and I tried to let them go. If I could let go of part of us, I thought, I could let go of the whole. I said to myself it didn't matter, that living together wouldn't have worked out: Jeanine didn't want kids, I like kids; Jeanine wanted to travel,

go see Bermuda and California and France, and I'd rather stay home. Jeanine had a little crabapple-sized bit of goodness in her, and I think I must have none. But it wasn't any good, why even try to feel okay the day after the one you love leaves you? And I cried into the roan's mane, and I knew I wouldn't be okay again for a long time, and I decided that if I could, I'd at least try to save a little bit of my pride if I could.

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That day in April, Mrs. Franklin come and found me at the Acme. You don't see Mrs. Franklin in town much. You don't really see her at all unless she comes looking for you. If you're foolish enough to go down to her trailer yourself, you'll find it empty and those big, ugly swans she keeps around will try to kneecap you with their wings.

I know this because Mom went down once. I had a case of the measles so bad two doctors and Grams' barley water baths couldn't fix it. Mom said she tried all the doors on the trailer but probably Mrs. Franklin was in the shed down by the water. A light winked in its filmy window but my mother didn't try the door of the shed, whether for fear of the bathtub gin fumes, or what I don't know. Anyway, she came back pink-eyed and her shins all bruised up, and all she would say when I met her at the door, hopping on one foot, healthy, and demanding scrambled eggs was: *there's places you shouldn't trespass on in this life, Honeydew.*

Anyway, I picked up a jar of mayonnaise from the shelf and when I turned to put it in my cart, Mrs. Franklin was standing in the middle of the aisle. She looks like she's crumpled over the years rather than aged, like there's great geological forces at work on her body, so short and bent and bowlegged and wrinkly she is. That day she wore heavy, cabled sweaters, several of them at once, all in different colors and all of them sprouting

small holes. For looking like she was just scraped out of a lint trap, there's something about her that makes you stand up straight though. You shut your mouth, you don't slouch. Your pores feel very open, like your skin is picking up threads of electricity crackling off her.

She stood for a moment there, very still, small and stringy haired and entirely silent, and then she turned to me. Her moonshine-blind eyes hit me full-on, like high beams on a dark road, and she said: "I smell your perfume, Jeanine. Speak up, now. Speak to me."

"I'm here ma'am," I said. "You need help reaching the pickles or something?"

"I'm not in a pickle for pickles, I'm pickled as it is!" She squawked with laughter and her eyes rolled in her head and her head wobbled on her shoulders. "Jeanine, you ought to leave your man."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I'm sure your mother and your girlfriends have been after you about this. 'Oh, you could do better,' 'Oh, he'll only break your heart.' Listen to them." She smiled up at me, the knobby mole on her upper lip wandering into the wrinkles around her mouth.

"What I do with Jethro Hendricks is none of your business, Mrs. Franklin," I said. "With all due respect."

Well, I guess she didn't like that too much because her eyebrows bent down and her face scrunched up and she stomped her foot on the floor. Behind me I heard a squeal of hinges and smack of popped seals as every door in the frozen food aisle flew open. A great hush of cold air tumbled through the supermarket, and the hairs on my arms stood

up on their ends. Folks stopped pushing their carts midway down the aisle, stared at the freezer section, stared at Mrs. Franklin. "I didn't have to tell you this at all," Mrs. Franklin hissed at me. "So don't make me tell you twice. Now when he and his brothers head out tonight, you walk to the McCallum's house and call a taxi to the train station. You don't carry anything with you and you don't shed no tears."

A shop boy scurried by, apologizing and slapping the doors shut on the wall of freezers.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Good," she said, and tottered away.

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I guess the night of our breakup I mostly remember the light that blared across the used car lot. They had big, stadium lighting rigged up in there, making the paint glitter and the windshields glow. It was like the light had substance to it. The boys and I felt a little bashful coming out into it I think, and we all stood around on the other side of the fence for a while, sticking our fingers through the chain link like little kids. From the other side of the fence we could see the ruby red 60's Jaguar, sitting out there on display like a cherry on the frosty top of a sundae.

We jacked it. And the roads around Pembroke at night, they run so bent and twisty in some places, with leafy vines overhanging the street and the crickets sawing away on their fiddles. And they run flat and straight as a stock car track in others, just you and the glowing dashboard numbers out there. Princess Jeanine, if you'd seen such a car and driven it on such roads, you would have done the same thing. You would have laid a thin arm on the window sill, and shook out your hair in the night wind as you did it.

I know you, and I know (I sold dope to you in high school, remember?) that you're not afraid to break the law for a good time.

So I hope you're never pretending you were in the right, that what we did was shitty and stupid and bad, something you would never do. This is a piss-poor excuse, but it seems to me it was exactly the kind of thing you would do.

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Something like that shakes you up a little. And although I wasn't about to just walk on out on my man, it got me wondering what had Mrs. F all worked up. It didn't seem like she'd just picked that day out of the blue to come and wag her bony finger at me—she could've come and warned me off Jethro in any of the earlier hundred days we'd been dating. So I figured something had to be up. I was curious even, I'd imagined pretty much every possible terrible thing about Jethro and his brothers, so what could it be? After Jethro and the boys left that night, I followed them on foot, feeling like a detective in *CSI*.

I walked down the streets and roads of the township without seeing a soul. I passed the Getty Mart on the corner, the Utley's windmill, and I came to the bridge over the Tarkill reservoir. Half way across it, I heard a car engine coming up the hill in front of me. I hopped up on the railing of the bridge, because the shoulder wasn't wide, but the headlights of a car, when I saw them, went bouncing through the spruce trees off to the one side of the road, hazy in the fog. I figured the car was heading towards the clearing above the cliffs where teenagers sometimes dared each other to jump, off the cliffs and into the reservoir, so I started jogging, figuring that whatever was going on over there would be interesting if not exactly the thing I looked for.

Instead, before I got three steps, I heard the driver gun the car engine, and saw the car fly out of the trees and off the edge of land, tires spinning, throttle wide open, and headlights wobbling all over nothingness. I heard the driver, the passengers, shout, I heard Issac's nit-brained Indian war-whoop thing he does, and the car crashed into the reservoir.

I stood real still with both hands clamped over my mouth, feeling like my mother and thinking: *he could have killed himself. My God, he could have died doing that.* But the second thought that I had and the one that hit me like a shovel in the stomach was this: *They went and did that without me. Sonofabitch and what the fucking hell. I haven't ever been left out of something fun like this before.*

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We all clambered up the rocks, sore-assed and soaking. We laughed, we spat water, we cracked a few jokes. I turned my head to hear Benjamin saying we ought to do the same thing next week, and I saw someone standing up on the bridge. Someone with tattered blond hair and ripped jeans, someone who wore plum blossom perfume and tugged at the heart pendant on her necklace. Baby, what were you doing?

I looked out in the direction of the reservoir, wondering how much she saw and there the Jaguar was, pristine, perfect under the water. Lovely like a swimmer fallen asleep in mid-stroke, and incriminating as anything.

"Where'd you get that car, Jethro?" she asked over the boy's chatter, in the tone of voice what the wet cat uses to address the bucket.

"Now don't get upset," I said. "I, well, we. . ."

“I hate you Jethro Hendricks!” she hollered. “You ruin a perfectly good car like that and you don’t even take me along? You think I like sitting around watching *The Price Is Right* with your parents while you’re out knocking over Gillyards Auto? Fuck You.”

Issac and Adiel and Benjamin all ducked their heads, looking a little surprised. Jeanine is usually the sweetest little thing, you’d have no notion the kind of temper she’s got on her.

“Baby,” I said, but she covered her face with her hands and walked away.

I should have let her go, I know. But how do you let your girl just wander off, maybe even out of your life? I called her name, and when she heard me coming after her she ran too. She slapped me in the face when I caught her, said that she’d call the cops on my parents, on all of us, get us taken up before the judge for theft and destruction of property and insurance fraud and whatever else, and, well, then it became a family thing. Hard to know how much she did or didn’t have on us.

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When we were little, my friend Adam and I walked out some nights, all the way to Freeman’s Junkyard. Mr. Freeman claimed he got tired of just taking cars apart all the time, and that he felt inspired every once and a while to put them together. So if you climbed the fence and wandered back a ways, you’d find yourself in a kind of sculpture garden of old cars that had been welded into spires, big unbalanced-looking Jenga towers. Salvaged hoods fanned together into peacock tails, engine blocks tumbled out of disembodied car trunks, and tires sliced like fern fronds went curling and climbing over the stands of rebar and leather seats scattered throughout that strange place.

Adam and I liked wandering under and around the monstrous shapes, crunching chips of paint beneath our sneakers, and once or twice we scrambled up one of the towers. Up there the stars looked twice as close as they did on the ground. I swear you could feel their tiny warmth prickle your skin. Adam said he'd like to work for Mr. Freeman when he got old enough. I said I'd like to race against Dale Earnhardt Jr. in the Indy. And we'd fall asleep up there, forty feet off the ground.

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She spent two days tied to one of Ma's kitchen chairs, most of the time looking at me like I'd pulled the small wings off her heart and stomped on it with my boot. Ma kept saying we ought to feed her to the Dobermans, and when I shook my head *no*, she said *well you'all'd better marry her then so she can't testify*.

On the third day, we all went out to a church picnic and Jeanine beat the chair to pieces against the wall and ran. Borrowed the neighbor's telephone and called a taxi, and well, I reckon now I'm glad that she got away. I think she'd feel equally about marrying me at that point as about being puppy kibble. Which is not a fate a man likes his hand in marriage to be compared to, but I know what I am. And the things I'd hoped for don't much signify anymore.

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I bring up Mr. Freeman because I wonder now if at the highest point in the jump, whether Jethro and his brothers got close enough to feel that heat off the stars. I wonder this because I might have the slightest bit of sympathy for them if they did. I don't, specially because I can't go home any more. But I do get tired of living in bitterness and anger. It's hard to live with emotions like that in a train station and a bus depot, hard to

feel enraged at anything except the stale coffee cup of mornings as they arrive, shoved into your hand day after day.

I saw the swans flying over Calgary two winters ago and I wondered if I might chance it to go back, see my Mom again. There are not many people more powerful than the Hendricks in Pembroke, but there are a few who might look after me.

## A Girl's Mistakes

The full moon hung hazy and greenish-grey above the Basque-Waters Construction Site. It looked like a *Wuthering Heights* or a *Hound of the Baskervilles* moon; on a purple moor tonight, a young heir or a middle-aged gamekeeper was being strangled to the cold ground.

But we were bumping along the gravel drive between earth-movers and sand mounds at a construction site, and that felt safer. The big rusting hulks of machinery, all plugged together with black rubber hoses and their Caution!/¡Cuidado! labels flaking off felt like great sentinels of modern civilization. The stack of cement pipes each the height of a man, and the shadowy gravel pits, the weedy earth piles, the pallets of cinderblock, the surveyor's spyglass on a tripod overlooking it all; this was progress. With the backhoes and earthmovers here, John Basque's dad was turning the wetlands outside Pembroke's city limits into townhomes, and the phosphorous hell-hounds and dark, tormented heroes Mrs. Peterson never shut up about could go find other marshes to wander in.

John parked his white mustang beside the site boss's trailer and left the iridescent blue underglow, the radio, and the heater on.

"I'll be right back," he said, winking at me. "Don't let the Chupacabra get you."

And because it was our fourth date, and because I was a good little idiot, who went to a nice catholic all-girls high school an hour away from here, I blushed and

nodded. I wouldn't wonder where he got the bankroll to flash at the bouncer of the Washington Inn, or the money to pay for top-shelf drinks and a room that night. I wouldn't question that he still had some left over to bet on the races at the Susquehanna Tracks the next afternoon. I think I just assumed he had a big allowance, and then lost more money than I'd ever held in my hands on a pretty red roan called Junebug.

John disappeared into the trailer and I bopped my head along to *The Wanted* and chewed on tic tacs. John had told me tonight would be "really special" and I was all sweaty palmed about having sex with him, but a lot of that was more me hoping to impress him with my matching dotted bra and panty set than the actual act itself. Tonight I would show that I wasn't just a well-ironed school girl, but that I read *Penthouse* and *Cosmopolitan* sometimes and my brother's copy of *How to Succeed with Women*.

I was reviewing the different positions in my head, when something big and black and moving fast slammed into the back corner of the parked mustang. The whole car rocked back and forth and I slid across my seat, fingers scrambling to shove down the electronic door locks. In the rearview mirror, by the light of the underglow, I made out a man in a brown Carhart coat and a knit cap, having some kind of fit on the ground next to the car. I sat unmoving, mouth open, heart tap dancing against my ribs. 10<sup>th</sup> grade health class had not prepared me for this. Should I call 911? Should I stuff a sock in his mouth so he didn't swallow his tongue? Should I get out at all? Was he safe to be around? I rolled down the window enough to stick my head out.

"Hey," I said. "Hey, are you okay?"

The man's neck snapped in my direction, and his glazed, his unseeing eyes flashing at me, round and staring as if he'd seen a spirit, and then they snapped away to the darkness beyond the trailer. His hands clawed the ground, and his legs rolled back and forth, disengaged from the rest of his body. His back arched sharply, once, and he fell on his side, lay still. I stared at the body there, shivering, still uncertain, when John appeared, silhouetted against the light in the door of the trailer.

"Molly?" he said, and then saw the man. "The fuck."

I got out and together we stood side by side next to him. His mouth was open, and there was a wet patch of piss on his jeans. I kept glancing behind us, wondering what had just happened, what made a man act like that.

"I think he's one of the Wilkinson brothers," John said. "Whole family's got that wall-eye."

I looked, and his right eye did hang a little to the side—to us—shivering in the freshening breeze.

"Dad fired one of them last week, they're all of 'em pretty useless. Lazy, basically, they mouth off a lot too." John knelt beside the man and started patting down his pockets.

"Is he epileptic or something?" I asked. "Should we call the police?"

"He's dead, Molly." John said, and I could see by Wilkinson's stillness that this was true. John, who'd been busily lining up pill bottles and little bags of vitamin-things from the man's coat, freed a syringe from Wilkinson's pocket and swore venomously when it stuck in a fold of fabric and pricked his finger.

“Then we should definitely call the police,” I said, my voice rising a little.

A man had just died, right here, right now, and I didn't like the careless way John handled his body. I didn't like being outside the car either, it was cold, and the moonlight wasn't as bright as it had been when we arrived. The shadows of the earthmovers looked deeper and darker, the drop-off behind the trailer precipitous.

John tapped the syringe against his fingernails, a thoughtful look in his eye. “Dad's licensing is already on the line,” he said, his head tilting upwards at me at a curious angle. “There's been seven safety incidents in the last three days, a bunch more last month. He's paying off the township solicitor, the guy who does the perk tests, half the zoning board, and if the police come in to do an investigation on a dead body we found here, they'll shut down the whole work site. This guy,” he continued, rising and nudging Wilkinson with his foot in a way that sounded more like a kick. “Could cost my dad a lot of money and time. Could cost us our permits.”

I looked at the still body and then away, at the branches of the pines beside the trailer, at the gravel in the parking lot, at the mist crawling up out of the settling ponds.

“I need your help, Molly,” he said.

I hugged my stomach and shook my head.

“Please Molly, if they lose their permits, they won't be able to build anything. That's my tuition out there. That's my parent's house, mortgaged on these ones here.”

I squatted down next to the bumper, wrapping my arms around my knees and staring at this Wilkinson “boy.” John's parents had a nice house, I'd been once when

he had to pick something up after school. John wanted to go to Virginia Tech, he'd told me on date number three, to study engineering or architecture or business, he wasn't sure yet. He wanted to work and live in the city, New York or Chicago or Los Angeles (for the hip hop scene). He squatted down next to me and kissed my ear. I wondered sort of distractedly if I'd be able to get the smell of Axe out of my jeans and blouse tomorrow.

"C'mon Moll," he said. He knew I was too star struck about dating him to deny him much of anything, too in love with his wavy dark hair and swagger and mouthful of sharp-edged swear words. And it was just a precaution, moving the body. We weren't breaking any laws, just saving Basque-Waters some embarrassment and bad press. John assured me with this as he grabbed the head and I got the legs. He rubbed it into my back and smiled it at me as we drove out of the construction site with Wilkinson crumpled into an irregular lump in the back seat, his knit cap tossed on top. John reminded me of it while he rolled Wilkinson into a ditch along the road frontage of the golf course where he would (sure he would!) be found the next morning. Found and returned to his family and given a decent burial.

I wanted to ask John why we couldn't just drive Wilkinson to the police station or the hospital, say we found him along the side of the road, but I didn't want to seem naïve by asking questions. The Washington Inn was ten minutes up the road from the golf course and I couldn't formulate my thought properly in that time. Once we got in, the Mai Tais numbed my mouth into sheer incoherence, and the only thing I remember now of that night was the clatter of pills in John's pockets as he took his pants off.

Later that month, the Basque-Waters construction site would close permanently when the foreman's dead girlfriend was found wrapped in a tarp under one of the settling

fields. Dick Carlton, the foreman, claimed she'd been stealing from him and the company, walking off with the mens' paycheck money though friends and family testified that she'd been clean for a year and a half. Basque-Waters didn't have enough money to restart construction after that, and John's swagger got a little uneven, a little less steady.

I went to confession every day, the week after he broke up with me, feeling like there was something that needed to be said or explained, but the priest and I mostly sat there in silence together. What was there for me to say? The only thing I could think of was a line from *Wuthering Heights* that I'd memorized for Mrs. Peterson's essay exam.

"I wish I were a girl again, half-savage and hardy, and free," I told Father Troutmann on the third day of sitting. Being charged with shepherding several hundred female students through the rocky slopes of adolescence, and pretty overworked besides he encouraged me to look forward rather than back. I should consider how I might grow in Christ into a holy and God-fearing woman, although in that moment I think I sensed it was humans I ought to be wary of.

## Legacy

My brother says, *it's probably easier for people of the same race to date each other*, and baby, I was this close to telling him how right he was, and this close to telling him to shut his face.

It's been worrying me though, again. I been dreaming about the Klan. I grew up knowing to wrap crosses in carpet, to douse that in gasoline so it burns brighter, longer. How will I love you knowing that? I once found a loose noose of nylon rope in my Sunday school classroom; a study in knot tying, only big enough to hang a doll. How will I hold you, remembering that?

I dream about them coming for you. In the dream the wind flutters the hoods, and it is me and my family at the head of the parade. Soon you'll ask me why I don't take you to my parent's home, the house that's only miles from the Grand Wizard's. I think I am the danger sleeping in your bed, charring cheese omelets at the stove, bouncing through the door with a bag of pilfered persimmons in the afternoon.

I woke up this morning and rolled over to check that you were still there. With you snoring away with a ring of dried snot around one nostril, I think I loved you, you goofball. Wake up and tell me what you were dreaming of, wake up and tell me you're fine.

## In The Drink

Rebs' in the drink again," my Mom observed to Dad.

Dad hauled himself off a wooden deck chair, Corona in hand, and slumped over to the edge of my Aunt's pool. He squinted into the water for a minute, then stuck a wide hand in and hauled me out by my hair. Splayed on the hand-painted tile, I coughed pool water on his feet and blinked up at him in confusion. It was the third time during the visit that he'd had to do this, and I could see that he was running out of patience with me.

"Reb," he said. "You trying to drown yourself out of spite or stupid?"

My aunt, just coming out of the house with a spoon in one hand and mixed nuts in the other, hurried over, her beach dress rustling and her vast straw hat shading out the sun.

"Did she fall in again?" she asked. "Oh, Rebecca."

I sat up, scrubbing my face with my palms as more chlorinated water leaked out my nose.

"I'm not trying to drown myself," I said thickly, irritably, as though this should be obvious.

Dad tugged at the too-tight waistband of his swim trunks, and I could tell that he, He Who Shot the Rabid Raccoon, He Went into the Basement During Storms to Check the Fuses, felt nervous around my gracious aunt in her big house with its Many Breakable Things.

"Why don't you go play volleyball or something?" he said to me, turning his head to try and locate the net between stands of pool-side landscaping.

“Yes,” Aunt Amelia agreed. “Why don’t you play with Sidney and your sister. Sidney’s showing her dolls.”

I nodded and stood up to go, although I didn’t want to look at Sidney’s dumb doll collection. Kelsey and I were forced to look at the collection every time we visited. I wanted to throw myself into the Philips’ backyard pool again and again and again. It’s vast, glittering surface hypnotized and maddened me; this water that smelled like cleaning fluid burned and scritchd my eyes. I’d never seen a color like that in nature. The only thing like it was the big Apatite stone my aunt wore on the third knuckle of her right hand. I desired to go swimming in Aunt Amelia’s ring, to be submerged and preserved in the bright prism on her finger.

The house, the cars, the 121 piece American Girl Doll collection, any of the other nice things in the Philip’s house, these had nothing on the clear, cool water continuously refreshing itself in the yard, the Cannas blooming fiery red and orange all around. I loved it. Loved it, though I’d never had a swim lesson in my life. Loved it in such a way that when we came over for Christmas, I would go out in my winter coat and sit on one of the mahogany deck chairs in the darkened yard, staring at the blank pool cover. I never joined Sidney and Kelsey making snow angels in the front, and wouldn’t come in at all until darkness had fallen and Dad came out to tell me that the turkey was on the table.

## Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

The spring rains come, heavy and clear, clarifying. They pound down the grass, the early pale leaves of trees, the waxy daffodil blossoms, and start a cold stream running down the middle of the driveway. Carter, with an adult raincoat buttoned to his chin and galoshes that cover his bare knees, tries to captain his small, tippy bark craft down this river. Reefs of acorn caps and leaves and sticks and spilled grain endanger his and his men's progress, but despite this, moral remains high. Carter's daring crew knew what lay ahead when they left the deep, placid puddle at the bottom of the front steps.

A branch blocks their progress, but oops, no, oh, wait, yes, YES! They shoot right over it and down into the fast moving rapids on the gravel drive. Rather than navigating the ship along with the incense stick from the arrangement in the foyer, Carter chases after it as it speeds down the driveway and careens into the string of murky connecting lakes formed by the wheels of work trucks and the backhoe in and out of and around the foundation of the barn.

He hesitates for a couple seconds at the open doorway in the foundation, clay squelching out from under his galoshes as he oozes down and inch or two. He's been warned to stay out of the work area, but it's not under deconstruction just now, the crane operator and the Amish crew and the apprentices all cozy at home. Even Daddy—the giver of warnings—is inside, asleep on the couch with the Orioles game on.

Carter forges ahead into the uncharted territory. A good captain does not desert his men. He finds his ship capsized against a pile of broken cement. He prods at the wreckage with the incense stick before deciding there's not much to salvage. Captain

Carter surveys the landscape with grim and fearless gaze. He and his imagined crew stand within a ring of crumbling monuments, tall, squared-off pillars and blocks. The pillars surround them, imposing into the sky. The weeds around their chipped knees flutter and flash in the rain, and the stone faces of the blocks look towards the strangers, constant, level.

The Captain wanders between these monuments, wanting to reach out and touch, to pick at the chunks and ribbons of mica running through the stones, but knowing that to take another's treasure invites only falling stones on the heads of himself and his companions. In the largest room of the foundation, the rain gathers in great tan lakes, where square-cut nails and the moon-edges of washers lay submerged, relics of a rusting civilization. In one such lake, the Captain bespies an inhabitant of the alien culture which raised the stones and left behind details of their lives. The creature sits on a broken brick, winking its bright, bulbous eyes at him.

As Carter and his men chase the toad around the big room in the foundation, splashing mud on their raincoats and trying to capture the toad's small, slick body, Daddy finds them. Carter halts, his men waver under Daddy's stare and dissolve. The toad squirms down a hole under one of the walls. Daddy walks over to Carter, one half of his face imprinted with the texture of a couch cushion, and his work boots leaving vast craters in the mud. His hand descends onto his son's shoulder.

“What're you doing, Carter?”

Carter stumblingly tries to articulate his reason for being where he should not. How the boat-building project on their screened-in porch became a great journey down the driveway's rapids. How the boat lost its way, navigated into dangerous waters.

Capsized. . . . Daddy is not wearing a coat or a hoodie although the air is brisk and rainwater soaks his worn t-shirt and moustache. As Carter's explanation trails off, Daddy's gaze ranges from his son's face over to the window frames under a tarp, the wobbly piles of stone and cinderblocks, the sharp masonry screws and broken glass scattered around.

Daddy spins Carter around and smacks him twice on the butt, hard. Then they walk back to the house and Daddy dries Carter off in the screened in porch as he cries. Once out of his coat and boots, Carter tries to make a bolt for his room, but Daddy holds him by his side and smooths down his hair until Carter's shoulders go limp and he lets his tears leak onto Daddy's arm. Daddy calculates that a spanking alone is not enough. He has raised four stubborn children before this one, and Carter is no different. He tells Carter to write a letter to the family, apologizing for leaving without letting Daddy know, for worrying Daddy, and for putting himself in danger.

Shamed, Carter climbs the stairs to his room and tries his best. Letter writing occupies him for the whole afternoon, but the letters he writes, all five of them, get lost among the monoliths, carried off by lost tribes, their words and sentences tangling among the thistle and wild pigsfoot. He finds in the end that although he is sorry for upsetting his Daddy, he is not sorry for chancing an adventure after all, though he has written almost a dozen pages in his wide, looping child-script.

## Lumpy Onions

They say it isn't possible, but I remember the day I was born, every detail. I remember the desperate pain of dragging air in my withered lungs, the heat of great hands drawing me up, into the light, holding me, wiping me clean. Mama told me when I came, they had no cradle, and I remember the rattle and thunk from the kitchen as Grandma pulled the fruit/vegetable drawer out of the refrigerator and shook the few lumpy onions and stray baby carrots to one side. After Mama nursed me, Grandma wrapped me in a dish towel and settled me in with the soup vegetables there. Mama and Grandma were too tired from the 27 hour labor to do anything but smooth the few hairs on my head, crooked as the onions' roots, put my cradle on top of the dresser, and sleep.

I remember Mama when she was younger, with the long chin and long eyelashes like she had her high school cheerleading photos. That morning she was sweaty, veiled in purple shadows with red bite marks looped over her red lip from the labor. The bottle of extra strength Tylenol meant to get her through it all lay open, spilled across the night stand, and the photo of my smiling, bearded father on the wall that might at other times have offered her some succor or comfort, was turned, facing against the wall. Grandma, sitting in the straight-backed chair at the foot of the bed, shifted her bottle of vodka to one side with a heel and slept wrapped in her oilskin.

When my baby comes I wish my mother were here to lend me a hand, to wrap my fingers around and squeeze as I struggle. My grandmother, I have, her ashes in a Christmas Cookie tin on the top shelf in my kitchen, but my mother left nothing in this world but me and her Class of '92 yearbook. All the pundits on TV say *how terrible*, all

the babies who come into this world without a father, without God, The Father. But here and now, I only feel *how terrible* for all the babies who come in kicking without a young Mama in bright lipstick to kiss their faces and a middle-aged Grandma, smelling like a distillery, to nudge the carrots aside and make a little space for them here.

## Youth Group

When I tell people I spent most of my time in youth group getting high, I usually get one of two responses:

1. I beg your pardon?

2. Giggles

But you see, at the time it made perfect and total sense to us. We didn't do it to be funny or disrespectful. Pastor West would be organizing the group into ultimate Frisbee teams or trying to set up a Saturday night bowling event which were always terrible because, duh, going bowling with your youth group is like Jesus-Lord-end-my-suffering. But even with normal sports, we (myself included here) were mostly pretty bad—except the kid who played soccer for his prep school—and I spent most of my time trying to trip him up.

So Laurel Buttermore would raise his hand and say he'd forgotten his LBW in the narthex or his parents car or somewhere and needed to go find it, and then a couple minutes later I would raise my hand and say *Could I please be excused sir?* just so polite and discreet, and then we'd meet up in the Hope Garden on the other side of the parking lot. It was the best place we'd found because it was always deserted.

The only time I remember us giving much thought to the fact that we were smoking up at church was one Sunday in June when Laurel decided to bring up the afterlife. The rest of the youth group was out front throwing a volleyball back and forth over the plastic net and we were on our usual bench behind the boxwood hedge, when Laurel, without preamble, said:

“I don't think there's a heaven,”

I snuffled a little and wiped my nose on the sleeve of my sweater. I knew Laurel's grandfather had been hospitalized the week before with stroke in his left brain. He'd been in the prayer for healing that week, and from the way Pastor Fry shook Laurel's parents' hands after the service though it didn't look like old Mr. Buttermore stood much of a chance of pulling through. So I kept my mouth shut.

"I mean, everyone dies right?" Laurel said, the faint shrieks and yells of our classmates floating in between the shrubbery. "Even Pastors. But how does Pastor West know what comes after that? Does he get some pamphlets from God with little maps and the suggested attractions in heaven and hell?"

It felt like Laurel had gotten in a little deep for me. "Pastor West is full of shit," I offered. This was an observation which arose frequently during our THC-induced meditations in the Hope Garden.

"But if there's no heaven, where do we go when we die?" Laurel waved a floppy hand from side to side and sprinkled ash across the pavers. I wished he'd either take a hit or pass it along, rather than letting OUR joint smolder away into a nubbin.

"Maybe," I shrugged. "Maybe we don't go anywhere."

This seemed harsh as I said it though, so I amended my thought: "Or like maybe it's like that Asian thing where you get reborn as a bug after you die."

Laurel's blond eyebrows became a solid line across his forehead and he held up the blunt to my eye level. "Pops taught me how to roll a cigarette when I was seven, 'cause my dad wouldn't let me learn to ride a tricycle," he said tightly. "There's no way he's going to turn into some stupid bug when he dies."

I avoided his stare and shrugged again, scuffing my feet over the ants running in front of our bench. I wanted to tell him it didn't matter what he thought happened in the afterlife, what would happen, would happen. I wanted to tell him that most people seemed pretty mediocre, morality-wise, and probably we weren't all good enough to get into heaven or bad enough to go to hell. Maybe nothing happened to us, the people who weren't Mother Teresa or the Unibomber, maybe we just floated around in the static of television sets or wandered between ice cube trays and microwavable dinners in freezers where the bulb had gone out. But he was pretty pissed, and I didn't want to agitate him more.

Three or four days later, we heard that old Mr. Buttermore passed away in his sleep, and on account of Laurel and I's friendship, my family went to the funeral. I couldn't see much of it from way in the back where we sat, but I did get to see Laurel walking behind the coffin during the recessional. They didn't let him be a pallbearer because his cousins thought the coffin would be too heavy for his little arms.

I didn't see Laurel too much after that either; he refused to go to church, his mom told my mom, and we attended different high schools. I sometimes still snuck out to the Hope Garden though, to avoid being nominated for goalie or roped into tetherball. I'd lay on my belly on the grey pavers and watch the ants scurry in circles, scratching the tourist attractions of the next life in the dust.

## The Package

The package arrived for Shawna a few days after her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was a big cardboard box, about the size of a kitchen cabinet, and for three days she did not look at it. The postmark said that it was from New York City, from Shawna's older sister Odessa, and still she refused to see it. Eventually, Shawna's mother said if Shawna wanted it or not, she should carry it to her room so it wouldn't be in the hallway.

But the box sat, lonely and unloved for three more days. With still more badgering, Mom got Shawna to roll her eyes and huff her breath out through her nose, and finally, finally pick up the box and take it upstairs. There, Shawna spiked it at the foot of her bed and abandoned it again, stomping out of her room and out of the house to get pizza with Lucy Hall.

Odessa left home to work for Wilhemina Modeling 5 months, 2 weeks, and 3 days before the package arrived. In that time, the box itself was her first communication she'd sent Shawna. It wasn't that Shawna was mad about the silence, exactly, she and her sister had never talked much, never had a lot in common.

While Odessa moisturized her skin to a glow, filed her nails to a point, and spent hours doing Pilates to improve her posture, Shawna slouched around the house eating cheerios and wearing cargo pants. Odessa picked her hair into a voluminous afro, Shawna flat-ironed hers over her face. Odessa did used to fling fashion magazines on her sister's bed if they had goth photo shoots in them, but mostly they limited their communication to shouting at each other through the bathroom door.

So the trouble wasn't in the lack of letters or postcards or emails exactly, but more that Odessa left in the first place. She'd run away. She'd left the shouting matches and the unannounced hair-styling contests, and Shawna didn't know what to do with herself around the house now. She laid on the couch and snapped her gum, she watched TV, she refused to open the birthday box. That would be some kind of forgiveness.

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All summer, from May to September, Main Street smelled like fish. The raw, briny smell rolled off the fishermen's pickup trucks as they drove through town in the early morning, every morning, stacked with coolers and spare bits of gear. A rusty anchor hanging off a fender, a bundle of straps balled up on a dashboard, and on the handles of doors and tailgates, smears of fish scales bright like sequins.

Having stayed up all night watching *Mullholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* and *Lost Highway*, Lucy and Shawna crept out into that early morning darkness to sit on a park bench in the little park at the corner of Mason and Main and watch the streetlights go out together.

By the dull rumble of the Fords and Chevys and Toyotas they rested, jelly-eyed like deep-sea creatures, and sucked Cheeto orange off their lips.

"Sawnee," Lucy started to say, but then she lost her thought and fell silent.

"Lu-lu?"

Lucy seemed to make an effort to gather her ideas. "Sawnee, do you think those movies were real, like, based on people he knew?"

Shawna considered this, picking at a bit of skin on her lip. "Yeah," she said.

"We should do something like that."

The first streetlamp, on the far side of the park, flinched and went out. “We could never do David Lynch.”

Lucy considered that. “Sure we could.”

“Nu-unh.”

“Yeah.”

“No way.”

“Hurm,” sitting on the back of the bench, Lucy squeaked her flats across the seat of it. She had delicate ankles, the bones prominent and pointy. Looking at them, Shawna felt the urge to reach out and touch the soft little indentation between Lucy’s ankle bone and Achilles’ tendon.

Lots of girls at school asked Shawna if she could set them up with her sister’s modeling agency in New York, and she would shrug, disinterested and annoyed. It occurred to her now that Lucy looked really pretty this morning. Lucy could move away to New York and model if she wanted to, probably, maybe. Not that Lucy had ever expressed any interest in doing so, in the past. But the possibly floated there now, wafting through the air with the wicked, metallic smell of uncooked seafood.

Shawna felt her small, lace fringed heart contract under her Ramones t-shirt. “You going to school today?” she asked.

Lucy shook her head, watching another streetlamp flicker. She often skipped school, sneaking home in time to take the phone off the hook before the office secretary called, and then to the library to check out as much of their DVD collection as she could carry.

“Welp,” Shawna said, hopping off the bench. “I better go. Gotta get breakfast before the bus comes.” Her mind ticked over this new problem: WHAT TO DO IF LUCY LEFT TOO? This called for a pre-emptive strike, action must be taken.

“The bus doesn’t come for another hour,” Lucy said as Shawna brushed off the butt of her jeans. “Don’t you wanna hang for a little more?”

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In her room, Shawna ripped the packing tape off the cardboard box with such force that the packing peanuts in the top of the box became airborne for a moment in a foamy cloud and then hailed down all over the carpet and her furniture. From underneath more peanuts she pulled a gauzy blue dress, then a leather skirt, a pile of polos, more filmy dresses, jackets, scarves, extras, as far as Shawna could tell, from Odessa’s photo shoots and runway work. Although clean and high quality, Shawna balled each piece up and threw it across the room as she unpacked them. She was sure now Odessa was making an apology for her cowardice; for Shawna’s last birthday, when Odessa was still home, her sister got her a deodorant stick with a post-it note that said “USE ME” on it.

At the bottom of the box, Shawna found an envelope:

Shawn, (the letter read)

I know I haven’t been real good about keeping in touch the past couple of months since the move, but I’m fixing that with this birthday card now. happy birthday.

So the city’s real big and everything’s super expensive. I almost got run over by a garbage truck the other day. Some of the other models are pretty cool though, yesterday a couple of the guys and I went and made butt-prints in the wet concrete at the

construction site across the way and autographed them. The joke there being that are butts are like super valuable. My butt is worth thousands of dollars now I guess. Tell mom I miss fried oysters.

This is stuff from some of my photo shoots you might like. You can have my straightener too if you want, it's in the top drawer in the bathroom. (Shawna snorted that, her sister's flatiron spat sparks across the kitchen sink every time you plugged it in. It had that very morning.)

If you and some of your friends wants to come up some time, let me know and I'll make up a bed on the futon.

Love ya,

Odessa

Shawna scampered downstairs in her socks and grabbed a pen and a sheet of computer paper of her dad's desk:

Odessa,

It'd be cool to come up some time. Lucy's been talking about Madame Toussade's since forever, and I'd like to find out how much of a trip it is to get up there. Might make a regular trip of it if it's not too bad. Adventures! Church potluck next week, the oysters send their regrets.

Kisses,

Shawna

At the bottom of the note, Shawna drew a picture of an oyster waving a handkerchief for extra emphasis. It wasn't very recognizable, so she labeled the parts: OYSTER and HAND and HANKERCHEIF. She looked around at the chaos of clothes and foam peanuts on top of the usual clutter of her room and began to calm down a little. Correspondence to New York City was easy. All it took was a pen and a piece of paper and the postal service. Was travel as easy? She scampered back downstairs to warm up her dad's laptop and search for bus ticket prices.

## At The Harrisburg Train Station

They have Public Service Announcements on loop. *Safety is everyone's responsibility. If you see something say something. Please report unattended packages to security personnel, and remember: safety is everyone's responsibility.* The voice actor sounds like she's asking us to share the crayons and paste. I shift around on my square of wooden waiting bench and narrow my eyes at the other passengers sitting with me.

The boy on my right has a snake and a crown inked around his neck and a black eye the size of an orange. The woman to my left is carrying her life in plastic garbage bags. The little girl across the room wobbles a little, her feet balanced over the space between the floor tiles. Next to her, a couple who must be her grandparents sit side by side, holding their breath in oxygen tanks. No one looks like a terrorist, I think, but the Public Service Announcement reminds us that: *There are no suspicious people, only suspicious behaviors.*

Somewhere outside the station, a church bell chimes, and below us, a train hushes into the station. I look down at the cuts on my hands, places where the green brier got me while we were clearing brush this weekend, and try to imagine why someone would wrap themselves in explosives and walk into a train station, or a temple, or down a city street; why a person would hurt themselves that way. With a finger I prod the bright, bubbling burn on my wrist where I brushed the chainsaw's exhaust vent. I am the youngest daughter in my family and the smallest, still 5'2" at 22. There's only one pair of work gloves in my size at home and I can never find both of them. Perhaps, circumstances sometimes conspire against a person.

At the far end of the platform a woman is trying to quiet a baby. It's been wailing for the past hour, and I figure it's probably cold. They don't heat the waiting area in the Harrisburg Train Station though it's January and fifteen degrees outside.

*Please report suspicious packages to security personnel.* The gentle-voiced actor says. *Safety is everyone's responsibility.* I put my itching hands in my pockets, tuck my chin into my scarf, and try to calculate how large this "everyone" is. Does it encompass the station master who controls the thermostat? Are our local Congressmen, sitting in session only blocks away also part of this everyone? These men and women who might pass legislature to provide medical care for the elderly, shelter for the displaced, job opportunities for those of us who want to keep our noses clean for once, do they feel our safety is part of their responsibility? I wiggle my chin down farther in my coat and close my eyes against the Harrisburg Train Station's waiting area. What're they're trying to do, warning us with death by unattended luggage?

