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Tales from a Secondhand Minivan / War Child

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Tales from a Secondhand Minivan/War Child

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Jennifer L. George

2018

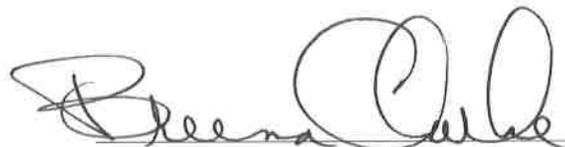
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 1, 2018

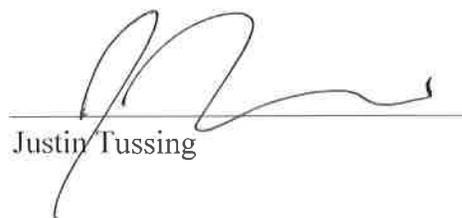
We hereby recommend that the thesis of Jennifer L. George entitled *Tales from a Secondhand Minivan/War Child* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts



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Accepted



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Abstract

Tales from a Secondhand Minivan/War Child is a collection of stories written in the front seat of a 2006 Chrysler Town & Country.

Inspired by the author's lifelong wanderlust, this collection of flash and short fiction stories explores themes of escape, release, mortality, mental illness, and war. Roads and cars are prominent in these stories, serving as settings, objects of obsession, and even as characters. *Tales from a Secondhand Minivan/War Child* also travels beyond the end of the road, reimagining popular culture's theories of the afterlife and offering a look at children who suffer the effects of adults' wars. These stories experiment with form and voice, and they employ poetic devices such as repetition, rhythm, and alliteration.

Acknowledgements

Once upon a time, there was a child who amused herself by making up stories. Her mother began tucking away the poems the child scrawled on scraps of paper when she was six years old. Her oldest sister acknowledged the writer blooming within the child and helped her find a starting place. Little by little, the child recognized her love of words and began to accept herself as an observer of the world, as a writer. To these people, the child was forever grateful.

The child grew up and became many things, including a wife and a mother. She had a husband who loved her and encouraged her to go to grad school, accepting his wife's reclusiveness and her near constant need to sit facing the ocean as she wrote. Her children told her they didn't mind frozen pizza for dinner three nights in a row because their mother was doing great things instead of cooking. To these people, she was forever grateful.

The child-turned-wife-turned-mother became a student once again. Her faculty mentors calmed her fears, telling her that she could indeed manage this task. They encouraged her, asked her tough questions, shared wisdom, and helped her stretch her writing muscles. Her classmates surrounded her with kindness, acceptance, and help. To these people, she was forever grateful.

Thank you, Mama, Tammy, Tim, Eric, Alex, Suzanne, Breena, David, Sidney, Darcy, Shellie, Kathryn, Morgan, Jess, Jen, Loren, Kate, Mary, and Rhiannon.

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Preface

Okay, Google. Where am I?

[Service unavailable]

I am in my minivan with my husband and children, passing through Erie, Pennsylvania on my way home from Illinois. My mother is sick, and we took a road trip to visit her. In the near future, I may need to drop everything to be by her side for the last time. But not yet.

It's funny what can change the pace of your life. Since my mother called me with the news of her diagnosis, whatever I was planning to do before does not seem important. I am not planning for Christmas or next year's vacation. I am not planting fall bulbs or learning to can fruit like I was going to do. I am planning Last Things.

This road trip requires more than thirty-four hours of driving, which is more soothing than it sounds. I'm in motion, reaching something instead of waiting by the phone for bad news. I think best on the move. Even during good times, I enjoy long hours in my rolling sanctuary, meditating on highways and hills, contemplating trees and farms and cities and bodies of water. On the road, I roll away from distractions like the internet and its incessant flow of mostly unnecessary information. I wrote much of the material for this thesis in my minivan, parked in the ocean-facing lot at Bug Light Park in South Portland, Maine. This parking lot makes its literary debut in "End," where Claudette Powers makes peace with the end of the world by throwing her mementos into the water.

Oddly enough, I wrote "End" a full year before Mama got sick, before I would need to make peace with my own "end of the world," so to speak.

Where was I?

In my late twenties, I discovered Jack Kerouac's novel, *On the Road*. I was trying on the role of the quiet, middle-class Midwestern wife and mother, a role I had not yet stretched into a comfortable shape. It squeezed me in strange ways. Rather than join playgroups and go garage sale hopping, I wanted to climb into an old car and roll westward to find out if those "papier-mâché mountains grew red as the great sun rose from the eastward plains," as Kerouac described it. I wanted to find the place where the mountains comb the sky, where the vastness of nature reminds humans of just how small they are, especially on toddler meltdown days.

Instead, I traveled vicariously through Jack Kerouac's carefree, barely fictional crisscrossing of Beat era United States. Every April, as Illinois shook off the last of winter's snow and tentatively embraced spring's warmth, I lay on a blanket in the yard and read *On the Road* from cover to cover. Read it? No, I breathed it.

On the Road moves with an frantic energy, carrying me away from reality at wild speeds, carrying me through the world my long-deceased father knew during his lifetime. Sometimes this energy shows up in the plot as characters move along the road with a constant sense of urgency, a feeling of being at the edge of something huge and important. Much like the view from a moving car window, the landscape, names, and faces blur.

Other times, Kerouac sped up the pace of the book through grammar and mechanics, including a stylized disregard for comma rules. *Gasp! You can do that in prose?* Oh, little Jen, you had so much to learn.

Kerouac's grammatical and mechanical playfulness are apparent in his description of a cowboy Sal meets in *On the Road*: "He came booming into the diner, calling Maw's name, and she made the sweetest cherry pie in Nebraska, and I had some with a mountainous scoop of ice cream on top...And he threw himself on a stool and went hyaw hyaw hyaw hyaw." I can hear Sal's voice in this rambling narration. It feels like I'm spying on him as he tells a story, not reading something he wrote. It takes a little getting used to, a little bit of stopping to go back and read a passage again. I finally let go of strict grammatical adherence, which inhibited me from enjoying the book, and Sal Paradise's voice swept me up and carried me along on a story that did anything but go straight from Point A to Point B.

My apologies to Phil Angelo, the managing editor of *The Daily Journal*, the newspaper I worked for just after college. He asked me to let go of conventions a little bit for the sake of conveying meaning in my stories. I made "never start a sentence with a conjunction" my hill to die upon. Just a few years later, I learned from poet-turned-novelist Kerouac that no part of language should be a hill to die on. Instead, language is a raw material, a clay from which I can sculpt an experience. It also showed me that my first love, poetry, did have a place in fiction writing. I felt like my writing became more fun and easier to read when I embraced the freedom to play with story form and broke grammatical rules like I did in my poetry. Phil was right. And the joke was on me hyaw hyaw hyaw.

Similarly, my faculty mentors at Stonecoast encouraged me to let go of whatever held me back in my writing, whether fear or self-doubt or a martyr-like commitment to domestic life. In my first tearful conversation with Suzanne Strempek Shea where I

confessed that I doubted I could handle going back to school, Suzanne encouraged me simply to write, to generate new material. She introduced me to flash fiction, which I didn't even know was a real genre. For a while, she suggested that I not even worry about editing, at least not until I had spent a few months writing new pieces. She helped me get from "I can't even" to "No time to worry. On to the next story." I found joy in this journey, and it continued as I worked with my second mentor, Breena Clark, with whom I explored writing from different points of view with compassion, fairness, and accuracy. Breena helped me to make characters deeper and more believable through clear, relatable details such as Mary Ann Hart's painfully arthritic back in "New Mexico, George Clooney" and the narrator's annoying trickles of sweat in "Return."

One of the stories in the *War Child* section of this thesis, "Liebschön-Berlin, 1941," is an exploration into letting go of grammatical convention for the sake of telling a compelling story. Almost all of the sentences are fragments. Prior to writing this story, I read Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, which also uses many sentence fragments that convey an image and pull emotions from the reader. In my writing, it felt right to keep the reader in the moment and in the child's mind by keeping sentences absurdly short, each one conveying a single image, not a complete thought. I held my breath, thought of Phil's amusement at my refusal to write incomplete sentences, and dove into this unfamiliar, yet surprisingly gratifying style of writing.

Eventually, I did get to travel. When I did, I found myself identifying with Kerouac's Sal Paradise. Sal was fascinated with his odd duck of a friend, Dean Moriarty, as well as the other strange characters he met along the way. Like Sal, I too found that "the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk,

made to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.”

I wanted to find my Dean. The more I traveled, I began to find Deans everywhere.

Okay, Google. Where am I?

[Service unavailable]

The interstate is quiet in the morning. In rural areas, cars move at a good clip. Trees, fields, cloud formations, and signs fly past. With no effort on my part, every mile of blurring white dotted line carries me to a different version of myself—more widely traveled, more connected to the world in which I never sit still. I forget to love my country until I am driving through it.

Traffic slows near the larger cities. When it is my turn to be the passenger, I watch my temporary companions: people staring straight ahead, sipping coffee, talking on cell phones, singing along to their music, having animated conversations, crying. At these times, I feel like I am watching a mosaic of silent films, hundreds of individual dramas playing on screens the size of a car window.

I feel connected to them, part of the mass of steel and rubber and fiberglass and humanity moving at a walking pace between guard rails and cement dividers. There is meaning to what I watch through my van window. I zoom out the lens and take it all in.

These little road films remain with me, as do the fascinating vignettes of individual people I meet in my travels. The “mad ones.” The Indianapolis hotel clerk and closeted writer who celebrated with me the night I found out my first novella was going to be published. The former hair band drummer who swam with me in a hotel pool a decade ago. The Orlando hotel clerk who told me with wide, watery eyes that Michael Jackson had just died. I keep these people, these fascinating studies in humanity, in my mind. They tell me their stories. My Deans, these meaningful and prismatic people I meet on the road are a source of inspiration.

Where was I?

I grew up in a small town on the prairie, nestled between cornfields and a river. Houses were one-story, trees were small, and the hum of traffic on the nearby highways was always present. I was not far from Chicago, but I seldom had the desire to go there; give me long, empty roads leading nowhere instead. Give me the silence of the lesser traveled, the time and distance needed for thinking.

The teenagers in my once-booming industrial town talked about leaving after high school. There were no good jobs left since the factories moved away. There was nothing to do. The people who made it out of there were regarded both as traitors and heroes. Those who stayed behind were casualties. My oldest sister, Tammy, applied to be a nanny to a family in France. She ended up working as a portrait photographer at the department store half a mile from our house. Like my sisters, I wanted to get away—not

to France, though. Maybe to the ocean instead. Or the mountains. Or some big city far away. I don't think the destination was as important to me as the act of going.

As a child, I owned just a few books, which I read over and over. One of them, *The Something-Special Horse* by Lynn Hall, was about a young boy who ran away from his rural Indiana home on his beloved mare to save her from the auction floor and certain death. When I was eight years old, I decided to run away from home, too. I packed a snack and rode double on my friend's bike to the highway, where my parents forbid me to go. I remember the thrill of being on a noisy road that led to places I had never seen. I didn't get very far that day, but the highway has sung to me ever since.

The theme of running away flows through my writing even though I am grown and have nothing to run away from. In this thesis, both "New Mexico, George Clooney" and "Intersection" feature runaways. In "New Mexico, George Clooney," Mary Ann feels trapped by her adult son who won't move out of the house, so she dreams of running away with her favorite actor. In "Intersection," both main characters are runaways. Jasper is a fugitive killer who is also trying to escape the murderous urges within, while Kyle is running away from the sense of failure he feels at receiving a medical discharge from the Marines.

As far as childhood books go, I was even more attached to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, a story about a young girl traveling across the Great Plains with her family in a Conestoga wagon. This story, while less loved today because of racist statements, offers a view of the uncluttered West, miles of sparsely populated grassland far away from the rumble of cities, a place with nothing to block the cloud formations. I stayed up late at night, making a blanket fort out of my bed and pretending

it was a horse-drawn wagon carrying me off on adventures. As I grew, my love for Laura Ingalls Wilder turned to a love for the classics. I read Charlotte Bronte and Charles Dickens and Harriet Beecher Stowe. I loved John Keats and Cicero. I pretended I loved Shakespeare and Dante. To this day, I rescue copies of the classics from library sales and giveaway piles as though doing so will keep them from receding into oblivion.

My appreciation for historical literature makes a brief appearance in my thesis. “On Pearl Street” whisks the timorous, supernaturally haunted Marlene back to the late nineteenth century, where she must confront a killer before he kills. “Ruta--Liepāja, Latvia, 1941” and “Stormy--Lawrence, Kansas, 1972” both occur before my lifetime, the former in Nazi-controlled Europe, and the latter in the Vietnam War era United States. Both of these flash fiction pieces required research in the form of articles, news reports, movies, and musical recordings. These pieces of historical fiction have shown me that it is possible for me to write about history, and that the research process is anything but dry or boring.

Okay, Google. Where am I?

[Service unavailable]

My family is asleep as I drive across New York state. I am alone with my music, my thoughts, and the landscape. As I round a bend in the Interstate, the vista before me opens into a series of valleys among the steep foothills of the Catskill Mountains. I catch my breath and let it out slowly. I am blessed with a panned-out view of something much

larger than my day-to-day problems. I see humanity nestled in the arms of enormous, powerful nature. Road trips grant me this perspective. The road with its dramatic landscapes and characters, the chaos and calm through which I travel—this is what shows up again and again in my creative work. I did not notice my fascination with the road until I surveyed all the stories that came to me unprompted through the course of my MFA studies. “Intersection,” “Dust,” “Pearl Street,” and “Return” are set on roads. “End” and “Return” are set in cars and parking lots. In “Front and East,” the street itself is the narrator. “New Mexico, George Clooney” is all about the desire to leave everything behind and take to the highway. “The New Empress” is set in Kansas City, Missouri, the first city I moved to as an adult, when I finally escaped the black hole gravitational pull of my hometown.

Where was I?

One summer evening when I was about twelve, I stood at the picture window at home, mesmerized by the sunset reflecting off a puddle. I pointed out the sight to Tammy’s best friend, Becky. She looked with me for a while and said, “You’re going to be a great writer someday.”

Me? I had never thought of becoming a writer. Sure, I wrote poems and stories, but those were just something I did to amuse myself when I was bored. I had never given a moment’s thought to what it would be like to be a person who writes books. Do you just sit down at a typewriter, and words happen? Do important people magically receive

those words and think, “How cool, let’s show everyone else those words?” (I’m pre-Information Age. Don’t judge.)

A couple of weeks later, Tammy knocked on my bedroom door, an event as special as receiving a summons from Queen Elizabeth herself. Tammy was nine years older and light years cooler than me. She wore all black and kept much of her life a secret from the rest of the family. Her friends wore mohawks and went to Jesus and Mary Chain concerts. I enjoyed rare audiences with the Mysterious and Venerated Teenage Sister, listening to her extensive alternative and punk music collection, dancing to R.E.M. and brooding to Depeche Mode.

She invited me to sit down because she had something important to tell me. A shiver rose at the small of my back because I was pretty sure I was about to receive Mysterious, Top-Secret Teenager Information. She told me that she wrote poetry, and she thought I should learn how to write it, too. I had never thought about poets or how they did what they did. The only poems I had ever seen were the Shel Silverstein ones my second-grade teacher read to the class. As we sat together on my bed, she taught me how to write a poem in iambic pentameter with four-line stanzas and ABAB rhyme scheme. She then handed me a priceless treasure, a spiral-bound notebook filled with her own poetry. I held onto that book for a day or so, studying her bubble-round handwriting, reading about the trials and triumphs of Mysterious Teenager love, memorizing the meter, admiring how the words fit so neatly into the rhyme scheme. Some of the poems didn’t rhyme, but I let that slide. She might have meant to write it that way. Again, Mysterious Teenager stuff.

I began penning my own poetry immediately. It was terrible, fraught with clichés and overdone subject matter. I wrote an awful one of which I was immensely proud, and I sent it off to a poetry contest hosted by a vanity press. Spoiler: it was chosen for publication. My parents couldn't spring for a thirty-dollar hardcover book with my poem in it, so I never saw the poem again. But I wrote more, slipping away to write as far away from home as I dared—the woods along the riverbank about a mile from my house. My father thought I was on drugs because I started wearing black and constantly carried a little notebook around with me. I thought I was just being a writer.

Okay, Google. Where am I?

[Service unavailable]

I don't even know where I am at this point. I never took geography in school. One wall of mountains and foothills gives way to another—is it the same range? It doesn't matter as long as my car is pointed oceanward and Canada-ward. I'll get there.

I find myself marveling at how, as I cross New England, I feel right at home. I have lived in Maine for only three years. From the second I followed the moving van into New England, I recognized the shadows from the mountains, the small towns and gas stations, the farms, the pine trees and thick bushes, the abandoned buildings. I had been here before, at least in my mind. Small town New England is like something straight out of a Stephen King novel—not because any of it is scary, but because King describes a typical rural small-town so well in his books. I was able to map out his fictional town of

Derry long before a map of it was published in the 2010 novel, *Under the Dome*. Thanks to books such as *It* and *Insomnia*, I could trace the route from the airport to the Derry Public Library, from the library to the Barrens, from the Barrens to the canal. I would guess King's fictional towns are composites of those he has lived in or visited over the years. That's how I dream up fictional towns such as Holly in *Return*, which is a mixture of my Illinois hometown and another town I passed through often.

I had a steady diet of Stephen King's work to read and re-read during the two years I spent in a tiny Arkansas town with an inadequate library. While I am not a fan of gore, I thoroughly enjoy King's characterization, as with Ralph, Bill, and Lois in *Insomnia*, and his setting, as in all the books that revolve around the invented town of Derry. Sai King taught me that having a good feel for the setting of a piece is only eclipsed by the ability to communicate that feeling well.

Where was I?

Mama had a thing for horror movies. She told me that, growing up, she would stay up after the rest of her family went to bed, watching whatever late-night horror movie was playing. When I was little, she kept that habit. I would often lie in bed, listening to the horrified screams of the unfortunate victims of masked killers or supernatural entities. At first, I remember being terrified, imagining that the monstrosity of the week lay beneath my bed, waiting to grab my exposed ankles. I heard sounds! Surely Satan was about to get me. Spoiler: It was the cat roaming beneath the bed. Eventually, I started to stay up

with my family and watch horror flicks through my fingers, my hands thrown over my eyes. I was still terrified, but at least I could see what was killing everybody.

Let it be known: Never let a young child watch *The Exorcist*.

Tammy handed me a copy of *Misery* by Stephen King when I was eleven. She thought I would like it. I didn't, but it was a grown-up book from my Venerated Mysterious Teenage Sister, so I read every word carefully. I began reading her other books, as well, having been freed from the law of "Don't touch my stuff." John Saul and V.C. Andrews joined King as my summer reading. I did not live near the library, so when school was out, I read whatever people gave me, whether I liked it or not. I was intrigued by the dark ambiguity of the unexplained, by the idea that something exists that even educated minds cannot grasp.

On R.E.M.'s most recent greatest hits album, *Part Lies, Part Heart, Part Truth, Part Garbage 1982-2011*, front man Michael Stipe sang, "We all go back to where we belong."

I got a last-minute call from Justin Tussing, director of the Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing program. He asked me if I could turn in two manuscripts to be considered for the program, stat. I panicked inwardly, but I said calmly, "Of course."

In reality, I only had one manuscript that seemed good enough to use. I would have to write a second one fresh within three days. I retired to my art studio and began to write with desperate fury. I had no grand ideas, so I had to write whatever came to me most quickly and naturally. Somehow, words happened, and before I knew it, I had the first version of "Corners," a tale where mental illness and the supernatural are

indistinguishable from one another. Um... okay? When I am writing as though to save my life—which was what that felt like—I gravitate toward the unknown.

When I let go of inhibition and allowed myself to explore my natural inclinations during my time at Stonecoast, I ended up with several ghost stories, such as “Dust,” “Sword’s Cross Inn,” and “On Pearl Street.” “We all go back to where we belong.” This is how I came to write ghost stories.

Okay, Google. Where am I?

[Service unavailable]

The night before I left for home, Mama and I went through boxes in her closet, looking for treasure she wanted to give me—a small, green metal lock box full of my father’s mementos. The box was army issue from sometime between World War II and Vietnam. In it were photographs, cufflinks, watches, and my father’s Expert Rifleman pin from the Army, which he earned during World War II. We also found numerous pins that he wore on his American Legionnaire cap.

I was in an unusual position as the child of a World War II veteran during the 1980s. My father was fifty years old when I was born. I don’t remember a time when he was not a senior citizen. I spent a lot of time with my father’s senior friends at American Legion Post 85, where he served as commander. These friends were kind to my sisters and me. They let us ride in the back of the post’s convertible during the Veteran’s Day

parade. They let us help during potluck banquets and invited us to be a part of all their events. They told me their stories.

I write about elderly people because it comes naturally. I organically absorbed an appreciation for their experiences. I learned what concerns them most. I saw them as friends before kid-society could tell me to view them as dumb or weird.

During the day, the bartender, named Harley Davidson—I kid you not—gave my sisters and me clear plastic cups of 7-Up while we waited for my father to make phone calls or answer letters in his office. We played hide-and-seek in the mostly-empty rooms, clattering up and down the stairs, daring one another to go into the darkened banquet hall upstairs. Big, dark rooms full of old things could be haunted, after all.

When I stood in that banquet hall, I imagined I could hear the music from the dances the Legionnaires held on weekends in decades past. I imagined my father's friends to be much younger, dressed up and smiling at one another from across the room. I made up stories about them. I convinced myself I could hear echoes of the past. I looked out of the ten-foot-tall windows and imagined classic cars parked all the way down the block.

At some point, I noticed that my father's friends, the people I imagined as young dance-goers, began to grow frail and die. Some of them forgot their families and friends. I found myself feeling deep empathy for those whose minds and bodies were failing them. My father manned a rifle for the twenty-one-gun salute at each funeral. He folded flags and handed them to bereaved spouses.

In *Insomnia*, Stephen King described Ralph's wife's terminal illness as "being dragged drunk through some malign carnival where the people on the rides were really

screaming, the people lost in the mirror maze were really lost, and the denizens of Freak Alley looked at you with false smiles on their lips and terror in their eyes.” I have seen how the horror of illness and the dread of loss turns elderly friends into frightened kids as they try to navigate the medical system and the insurance industry. The truth of it is, elderly people are not calm sages who serve tea and give young people advice, and neither are they doddering nitwits who forgot what it was like to be young. They are people—people like me who look at their aging bodies and wonder what the heck happened to them. They still feel like they’re seventeen inside, or twenty-three, or thirty.

During my time at Stonecoast, I let myself explore writing from a senior citizen’s point of view. I wrote stories for Pauline (“Corners”), Claudette (“End”), Marlene (“Pearl Street”), and Mary Ann (“New Mexico, George Clooney”) because these characters felt real to me. I like each one. I can understand Pauline’s fear, Claudette’s sadness and release, Marlene’s terrified act of courage, and Mary Ann’s desire to hit the road and leave everything behind. I didn’t have to stretch to see the world through the eyes of people many years older than me.

Okay, Google. Where am I?

[Service unavailable]

The family is happily engaged in their electronics now, and my rolling sanctuary is making excellent time crossing Massachusetts. I am thinking about the box of my father’s belongings. It is tucked safely among blankets and suitcases in the back of the van.

Before Dad died, he told me how he earned his Expert Rifleman pin. He said he knocked down a sign by shooting the wires that held it in place, from a distance. He often told me the funny or interesting stories about his Army years—how he lied about his age and enlisted at sixteen, how he hitched a ride on a cargo plane and parachuted into the Kankakee Municipal Airport to surprise his parents for the holidays. He never told me the sad stories, the scary stories—at least not while he was awake.

In his sleep, my father called out the names of his fallen friends. He begged them to duck, to avoid gunfire. He begged them not to die. In his sleep, my father told the whole family what he would never tell us otherwise—that war was hell. Forty years after World War II, my father would awaken in tears. I heard his nighttime torture through my bedroom wall.

As the United States once again broached the topic of war with yet another country while not yet fully disengaged from the war that had been raging in the Middle East for decades, I could only think of my father's terror. He was just a kid, not even voting age when he pledged his life to Uncle Sam's service. As I began to see images of Syrian children bleeding and covered in dust from the rubble of their bombed towns, I grew angry. I am a mother. I would rather die than let my children see such horror in their lifetimes. When will people understand that war is a hell that can be prevented? When will nations understand that traumatizing entire peoples, military and civilian alike, does not serve any good purpose? The answer is obvious: apparently never.

My two sons were born almost ten years apart during the same war. These excerpts from *War Child* were born from my dismay at the realization that my children have never known peacetime. They were born adapting and re-adapting to life in a

country at war. The *War Child* stories span decades and miles because the story is the same everywhere through all of time. While governments and troops are busy positioning and raiding and bombing and fighting over boundaries and beliefs, the children are the ones who must not only live through it, but also clean up the mess if and when the wars end. *War Child* is my flash fiction anti-war manifesto.

Where was I?

Late one night in 2009, a friend directed me to a video of slam poet Anis Mojgani performing his National Poetry Slam Individual Champion-winning poem, “Direct Orders.” I’m not sure how many times I watched that video, but I do know I could eventually quote parts of it. Mojgani has a penchant for addressing feelings I can’t quite name, and instead of trying to name them, he describes them in accessible images that appeal to all the senses: “Rock out like you were standing on a rooftop and the city is as loud and glowing as a river flowing below you.”

Throughout my time at Stonecoast, faculty mentors have emphasized the need for a story to appeal to as many senses as possible. I referred to Mojgani’s work often, rereading *Songs from Under the River*, *Over the Anvil We Stretch*, *The Pocketknife Bible*, *The Feather Room*, and most recently, *In the Pockets of Small Gods*. How could I get that sort of imagery, as full, juicy, and ripe as tomatoes off the vine and popping in the mouth, into my prose? I don’t know if I have attained that fully yet—do we ever reach

perfection? But I feel like I have made progress. In “Ruta--Liepāja, Latvia, 1941” from the *War Child* collection, I explored depriving the main character of the sense of sight so I could work on describing the world exclusively through the other four senses.

Whenever I write a new story, I try to remind myself to focus on what the characters perceive with their senses, such as Jasper’s arousal and Kyle’s dehydration and heatstroke in “Intersection,” the feeling of sweat trickling into the waistband of the narrator’s jeans in “Return,” the smell of unwashed bodies in “Ruta--Liepāja, Latvia, 1941,” and the sound of the otherworldly whispers in “Corners.” To do this, I meditate on each story. I sit with or become the character during this exercise and make a mental note of everything the character senses. Then I open my eyes, choose the strongest images, and write.

Okay, Google. Where am I?

[Service unavailable]

“We all go back to where we belong...”

Even as I am writing this preface, I have gone back to poetry for help. My inspiration came from the structure and themes of Mojgani’s two most recent books, *The Pocketknife Bible* and *In the Pockets of Small Gods*. I have relatively little experience with personal essay form, but it made sense to break the piece up into smaller sections divided by space or symbols, as in Mojgani’s poetic autobiography, *The Pocketknife*

Bible. It felt natural to let this preface wander from past to present like my thoughts on this cross-country trip.

Mojgani's newest book, *In the Pockets of Small Gods*, addresses grief in blunt, relatable terms. I am currently experiencing grief's pregame show in all its heartache and small beauties. If this is to be an honest account of what led to my current thesis work, I would be dishonest if I did not acknowledge the role of grief and loss.

This particular type of grief makes its debut in "Return," where I create a character who skirts around the feelings she really wants to deal with, resulting in two false starts before the "real" story. The character eventually faces her grief head on as she pulls into her mother's driveway. I wrote this story in my head as I rolled toward my hometown in a borrowed car and faced Mama's mortality head-on for the first time. *In the Pockets of Small Gods* inspired me to be open about what breaks my heart. I didn't know it was possible to write about grief without sounding like a self-help book. I love how *In the Pockets of Small Gods* essentially says, "Hey, this hurts, and I have to live with this hurt for a while" instead of "Here's how to grieve."

Okay, Google. Where am I?

Your destination is on the left. You have arrived.

We pulled in to the driveway after eleven o'clock at night. My husband carried our youngest child up to bed, and I set about the task of throwing essential articles of clothing

into the washing machine. I dragged the suitcase filled with clean clothes we had washed at Mama's house up the stairs.

It's been three weeks since I last saw Mama. My suitcase is still sitting on my bedroom floor. I stub my toe on it when I get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I should put it away. I should take out the headbands, the extra T-shirts, the pairs of socks, the barely-worn belt. But I don't.

I am not ready for the trip to be over. It's almost as if leaving the suitcase partially packed is a way of stopping time, a way of refusing to engage with the present and the future, when my mother's health will fail and I will lose her.

I should put the suitcase away, but I know I won't. Not yet.

I am nearly finished with my Stonecoast education. I have completed most of the trip, and my suitcase—the body of work I've produced—lies open in front of me, subject to inspection and introspection. I see where I started, where I've been. All I can do is move forward. I will keep writing. I have begun work on a novel that features physical setting as a character, which is both mind-bending and fun to write. I will continue to write flash fiction. I will indulge my spooky story-loving side and play with horror here and there. I will continue to experiment with form in my writing.

Most important, however, is that I *do* something with all of the stories that I am writing. It is not good enough for me to write stories and hide them in a drawer or a computer file folder. I want these words that mean so much to me, to mean something to someone else. So I will submit, submit, submit. I have already begun.

I came home from work today to find that my husband had emptied the suitcase for me. He needed it for his next trip. With the suitcase gone, my road trip is officially over. I can't control time. I can't keep a moment, my mother's health, or my work in stasis. I have to put away the socks and sundry items that are now stacked neatly on my bed. I have to accept that my mother may not be with me very long. Life has not stopped; I must keep moving along with it. Likewise, the day after I turn in the final copy of this thesis, I have to show up at the keyboard and write.

Tales from a Secondhand Minivan

Return

This is how it happens.

You ride back into town, not on a horse, but in an old pickup truck that you swear must be equal parts duct tape, Bondo, and prayer. Well, you don't exactly ride; you bump and sputter into town. Your truck is named Bess, and your prayers go like this: "Oh God, not now, and not on the interstate. Please don't let this hunk of junk die eighty miles away from anywhere. Come on, Bess!"

You keep jugs of water and coolant on the passenger floorboard in case of emergency. The drive from Tucumcari, New Mexico to Holly, Illinois has stretches of road where you could become vulture vittles before you'd see another car. You'd be sun-bleached bones before one of those cars would stop to offer you water or a ride into the next town. The desert is far behind you now, and you're out of coolant.

You bought Bess off your old landlord in Tucumcari for five hundred dollars, and you're proud of her. So what if she needs new hoses, shocks, and AC? Not that you would replace the AC. You're going to roll your windows down like you did when you were a kid because a little hot air never killed anybody. You'll have everything else fixed up before the inspection sticker comes due. You can afford that much, but not much more.

Bess makes it most of the way to your hometown when the temperature warning light turns on with a deceptively innocuous *ding*. You mutter, *Stupid piece of crap*, but you immediately apologize to Bess and stroke her dashboard. You tell her you know she's tired. You're tired, too. You pull in to the Walmart parking lot at the edge of town.

Sweat trickles down your sides like fingers tickling your skin as you lean forward, resting your forehead against the steering wheel. More sweat runs down your back and pools beneath the waistline of your jeans, making its way to your underwear. You shudder and rub at the stream through your clothes. Future thoughts slip into your mind before you are aware of them. You will need a job. A decent set of clothes. A funeral dress. Do you have to wear a dress? Maybe a pantsuit, though that's just as ridiculous as wearing a dress. But maybe just once. Respect for the dead and all that.

No. Not yet. Your mother is not dead yet. You take a deep breath and let it out slowly. *In, two, three, four. Pause. Out, two, three, four. Pause.* You think about pulling the thick summer air into your lungs for a couple of minutes. You wonder if that's how your mother is breathing at this moment. She was sick for a year before she knew it.

Thunder rumbles in the cranky sky. You count the seconds away—*one Mississippi, two Mississippi*—like you did when you were a kid, but there is no flash. The storm is well outside of town. The air is hot, wet, and hostile. Maybe you're making up the hostile part, but maybe not. The clouds off to the west are black like a cumulonimbus temper tantrum waiting to happen.

You never wanted to come back to Holly. Why should you? There are not many jobs to make a career of. The few friends you had got out of town the second they got their hands on their high school diplomas. And those who were left—well, you don't really want to think about them. It is good enough to say that high school was not the best experience. You don't miss anyone but your mother, and she comes out to see you in New Mexico at least once every winter. Except for this year.

Thunder rumbles again, and you remember why you are in this parking lot. Bess is hot and needs a drink. One more focused breath, and you are ready to get out of the car. You wiggle your keys out of the stiff ignition and open the truck door, slinging your purse over your shoulder as you go. You don't bother locking Bess up, though. Everything you own is underneath the blue tarp in the truck bed: your easels and canvases, finished paintings you did not sell or give away, and plastic totes full of paints and brushes, jewelry making supplies, odds and ends, and clothes. If someone really wanted to put their grubby hands on your stuff, they could just undo a few bungee cords and help themselves.

A cool wind kicks up, and goosebumps cover your sweaty arms. The air above parking lot's blacktop no longer shimmers like it did when you first pulled in. Storms move quickly across flat land. You climb back into the cab to roll up the windows by hand. It will probably be pouring when by the time you come back out. No need to show up at your mother's house with a wet butt.

You hit your head coming out of the truck because you notice someone passing. *Is it? No. Wait, yes.* It's him. Brandon Harmon. The years have changed him. He isn't wearing his ball cap, so you have a full view of his bald head. You dated him freshman year of high school and made out with him a few times sophomore year, mostly at those awkward cast parties that went on after plays. He glances up, looks right through you, and keeps walking. Of course he doesn't recognize you. Fifteen years is a long time to be away, and you probably look different. Your last visit to Holly was five years ago, and you slipped in and out of town like a thought that almost reaches the tip of the tongue.

Before you stop yourself, though, you say, "Brandon?"

He keeps walking. Did he hear you? Does it matter? A little tow-headed boy is skipping along and holding his hand. He probably has a pretty wife and a few more curly-haired cherubs at home waiting for him to bring back diapers.

There was a time when you could have become that pretty wife. That perfectly girly, giggly, cute little thing running around in borrowed boy hoodies thrown over sundresses. You could have been that perfect girl who wanted nothing more than to marry a sweet, beautiful boy and stay home to raise sweet, beautiful cherubs. But that was a long time ago.

You clear your throat to speak again, but the wind carries your voice away.

That's not how it happens.

You blow into Holly, Illinois ahead of a storm. Your old truck Bess barely makes it to the Walmart parking lot before that awful burning smell starts. She needs coolant, or she's going to start smoking. Rubbing the dashboard every now and then, you coax her into a parking spot and cut the motor. You think you see smoke coming from under the hood, but you aren't sure if the movement you see is actually that or the heat shimmering off the pavement.

You get out of the truck and pop her hood before you go inside, hoping that moving air might cool the engine a little. At least you run out of coolant after the desert, after the plains, after you reached a state that had towns within thirty or so miles of each other along the highway. You won't end your life crawling across the sand, gasping,

“Water!” and watching the circular flight patterns of the buzzards waiting overhead for you, their dinner, to lie still.

You hurry into the store and know where you are going, thanks to the standard Walmart layout that makes shopping while traveling a lot like walking into Catholic church service. No matter where you are, you know where to stand, when to kneel and what to say.

On your way in, you pass a man you recognize, and a little ball of nervous energy bursts in your stomach. You loved that man once, back when he was a boy and you were a girl. You know his lips tasted like Dr. Pepper and cigarettes. He made your heart race. The child he has with him is waving a toy racecar in the air. You have things to do. You mutter the name *Brandon* to break the spell of memories, instead turning a polite smile toward the little boy. The man pulls his son away from you. Brandon, the man who was the boy with the Dr. Pepper lips, never looks you in the eye. You see your reflection in a mirror as you pass, and you understand why.

Walmart smells like rotisserie chicken and baking bread. Your feet carry you to the automotive department, and you grab the first bottle of coolant you see and get out of there. Or you would get out of there if the checkout line was not so long. As you wait, you peer into the face of each passing customer, looking for someone you might have known way back when—a teacher, a playmate’s mother, the mailman, your dentist.

Your staring eyes find someone who is staring at you. You aren’t sure of her name, but you remember her. She was one of the flannel-and-ripped-jeans crew at school, maybe a year or two younger than you, the one who got into a skateboarding accident and spent a summer with both legs in casts. Wearing the ubiquitous “May I Help You”

employee vest, the woman is straightening out the endcap, removing discarded DVDs and putting Snickers bars and Skittles into their proper spots on the shelves. You wouldn't have caught her staring at you if you hadn't been staring at her, too, so you don't judge her.

"Hi," she says in a squealy voice like she's talking to a dog or a little kid.

"Hi," you say. The woman keeps staring and smiling, so you add, "Can I help you?"

"Oh, no. No. Sorry. I—well—I think I remember you from high school." Still smiling.

"Yeah. I recognize you." You wish you had a phone to stare at like everyone else in line. Yours is dead because you lost your car charger.

"You've been gone a while," she says.

"Yep." You try to check your watch. Who are you kidding? You don't wear a watch. You look at her again. Her silver hoop earrings go halfway down her neck. You remember when she wore them all the way down to near her shoulders. You make hoop earrings, but usually they are smaller and have some sort of stone dangling from them, either turquoise or quartz.

"How are you feeling?" Her eyebrows are lifted so high, you wonder if her ponytail is too tight.

"Um, I'm fine. Why?"

"I was just wondering how you were doing after—well, you know—after what happened." She flashes a small smile at someone behind you. You turn around to see who

it is, but the person behind you has their head down and is thumb-typing away on their phone.

“What do you mean? What happened?” You left for art school quietly and never moved home afterward. Nothing big has happened to you unless you count a less-than-profitable art business and a few relationships that failed to launch.

“You know,” she says, stepping closer and dropping her voice low. “The cult?”

“Sorry, I’m not following you.” You try to smooth your hair, and when you raise your arm, the smell of your armpit attacks your nostrils. You put your arm down.

“Melody Heller said you had a breakdown or something, and you joined a cult out in Arizona.”

“A . . . breakdown?” The light on the checkout line sign starts flashing.

“Yeah,” she says.

“That’s your problem, right there. You’ve been listening to Melody Heller.”

Melody Heller was your friend until the end of eleventh grade. Then she started sleeping with a boy you’d been dating. Not Brandon, but Kevin. Melody Heller said your boyfriend was about to leave you anyway because you were too weird and scary.

The flare of anger you feel traveling toward your fist surprises you. You tighten your grip on your bottle of coolant so you don’t punch this girl in the throat. Screw Melody Heller. Screw small towns where adults spread rumors as though they were teenagers.

“And if by ‘breakdown’ you mean going to college and doing something with my life, then I’d say I’m fine.” Maybe you didn’t do something spectacular with your life, but at least you got out of this town like you always said you would.

The girl whose name you still can't recall winces, but you are not sorry for what you said. That boy you dated probably sits around in his garage, wishing he'd gotten out of this black hole town while he'd had the chance.

Salvation comes in the form of a green light atop one of the self-checkout lanes you had not noticed before. You step out of line without a word and complete your business in the self-checkout.

Wait. That's not how it happens.

This is what happens.

You drive into town alongside a short-lived storm, surprised that it happened that way because that is how you always imagined it. You have dreamed of crossing the wide-open prairie-turned-farmland with ominous rumbles and the distant threat of heat, electricity, and water. This is nice; things rarely happen how you imagine them.

You had imagined an idyllic life painting and making turquoise jewelry in Tucumcari, running a little junk shop for tourists to visit and enjoying the sunshine. But you hadn't imagined that the desert would eventually become boring, that you would feel guilty leaving home to live alone on the other side of the country, that there would be few tourists despite the importance of the highway that goes past it, that you would miss grass-covered flat lands and rivers with gorges that are only deep enough to impress the locals, that you would dream of cornfields even though their pollen makes you sneeze.

Your experience growing up in a town that neither valued nor welcomed you did not prepare you for the day when you would need to return.

You also hadn't imagined that your mother would get sick and need you. You will be staying indefinitely.

Your awareness of the cinematic nature of your entrance is fleeting. The wide sky landscape and loud rumble of your ancient pickup truck have lulled you into the trance of dreaming a thousand possible futures. Road-dreaming is what drew you to Tucumcari. It has sustained you through the long drive that could have been filled with worry. As the wild, free, only recently familiar West gives way to the green Midwest you have always known, the dreaming ends. The speed limit lowers somewhere on the other side of Kansas. Your ears pop as you coast down steep hills and level out on lower altitude of the prairie. You know this world, the murky Mississippi River, the green clumps of woodland separated by miles of flat nothing interrupted only by signs for the Foot-High Pie restaurant or the occasional antique mall.

You are almost home. Your brow lowers into an involuntary glower. Your stomach, empty and previously considering the merits of a twelve-inch-tall slice of lemon merengue pie, turns sour. Every so often, adrenaline pulses out from your heart and shoots along your nerves to your toes before making its way back up to your stomach. With your free hand, you dig around in your deep woven purse until you find a little package of antacid chews. You peel it open with your teeth and flip a chew into your mouth, swerving across the center lane and correcting quickly.

You started eating antacids like candy eight months ago when your mother called you with her final bad news. The cancer was at first a "maybe," then a "definitely," then a

quick surgery-and-radiation ordeal. Once and done. Your mother hadn't needed you then. She had her sisters and good insurance. Besides, you couldn't afford a plane ticket. But the cancer became a sneaky, long-fingered monster crawling over her organs, wrapping around her bones, creeping through the porous places, multiplying and claiming every inch of the body that gave you life.

Since that phone call, you broke the lease on your studio with its tiny, attached efficiency apartment, leaving behind the furniture that was never really yours. You sold every canvas you could, traveling twice as far as usual to craft fairs and flea markets. You left some behind in the little junk shop you worked at and packed the rest in totes. You wrapped the bigger ones in blankets and stood them along the cab in Bess's bed. You packed your jewelry making supplies into their own totes. You blew a kiss to the sunset over the buttes and took one last deep, parching, dusty breath, then you set out for home as a penniless prodigal.

Just as you pass the sign that reads, "Holly 8," your truck's thermometer begins to rise. You would normally curse at this, cursing the car, the hole in the hose that makes it drip coolant, yourself for not having worked hard enough to afford maintenance, and cancer for making this whole trip happen. Instead you mutter, "Of course." You press down on the gas and get to the Walmart at the edge of town before Bess starts smoking. The dramatic rays of sunlight bursting through the tall gray and black clouds register in your peripheral vision, so you give them a brief glance. Your attention is mostly on keeping Bess on the road and not in flames.

The air in the parking lot is several degrees hotter and all that much stiffer. You are sweating from every pore, but you only bother to wipe at yourself when the sweat

tickles its way down your back to the waist of your jeans. You wear jeans year round, even in the desert heat. But Tucumcari wasn't stifling like this except for the times you had to shutter yourself into your studio during a dust storm.

You get out without locking the doors, but you go back and roll up the windows when the dark clouds utter an angry, muted grumble. On your way through the squealing, sliding door into Walmart, you pass a guy you are sure you dated in high school. The careless smirk on his face is still there as well as the same blonde, stubbly beard. His name is Brandon, and he was going to get out of this nowhere town and be a roadie for a rock band. Brandon has a little boy with him. All of this registers in the few seconds it takes to pass him. While you could stop and engage the guy in an awkward conversation, you don't. Right now, you could be passing the queen of England, and it wouldn't matter. All you really want to do is get some coolant and get back on the road.

You do not recognize anyone else in the store. You make your purchase, give Bess her drink of coolant, and go.

Your mother has never been interested in learning to take or send selfies. She always appreciates yours, though. Her lack of interest in technology means that you don't know whether any of her hair has grown back into a downy post-chemo fuzz. She was going gray before this whole ordeal started. You're sure she is completely silver by now.

Is your mother wearing the hat your New Mexico friend Sara knitted for her? Is her skin yellowish? Is her body too thin? She has no appetite; she has told you that much. Do her clothes fit? Does it matter? Your eyes start to sting with tears, but you take a sharp breath through your nose and tell yourself, *Not yet. Not now. She is not gone yet.*

The thing about death is, when you know it's coming, there is so much to do, you don't have time to sit around and feel much.

The rest of town flashes past while you go the standard five miles per hour over the speed limit. Hardee's was torn down, and something else went up in its place. There is a car wash you've never seen and several stores taking up the old Kmart building, A hobby store. An extension of a medical campus. A boarded-up pottery painting and scrapbooking shop. A veterinarian's office. When you left this town, there was not much to do except eat at chain restaurants and hang out at the unimpressive mall that could only advertise the fact that it has fountains because the stores were all gone.

The county highway gives way to the business district, then the perfectly arranged blocks of 1990s open floor plan houses with one spindly tree in each yard. A little further, and you come upon the original Holly, twelve blocks of older houses surrounding a courthouse and a little street of cutesy, nostalgia-themed businesses. Your mother owns a two-story red brick house that was built in 1923. She is going to stay there until she dies. She made you promise she could. You promised.

The house comes into view, and you are not ready. Your stomach turns again, but you just ate a freaking Tums. What more could it want? You grip the steering wheel so tightly, your hands hurt. You pull into the driveway, careful to keep the truck away from the uncharacteristically unkempt Japanese spirea bush that has spilled out of the landscaping and over the pavement. This year, weeds stand tall among the bushes, the irises still have their drooping dead heads, morning glory has woven itself into the bush at the corner farthest from the driveway, and the bowl of the birdbath is coated with reddish gunk your mother normally scrubs away each week.

Your mother is standing at the front door, partially obscured by the screen and the darkness of the entryway.

You leave your keys in Bess's ignition and get out. As you climb the steps toward her wide smile, the storm catches up to you. Fat drops of water splatter against the blue tarp covering everything you own.

The New Empress

You drive to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art without meaning to. You were too antsy at home, pacing from room to room, never quite able to settle into any activity. There was plenty to do—honeymoon photos to upload, the last few boxes to unpack, new neighbors to meet, and an open-ended invitation to a lunch group that meets at Café Missou every Thursday. A few weeks ago, you could not wait to move into your new husband's six-bedroom mansion just a few blocks away from the Heinz heiress's estate, a veritable castle of which you were now queen. Rather than curl up on your throne, you wound up parked on Oak Street staring up at the massive museum.

You step through the heavy museum doors. The guard looks at you, blinks a few times, and nods. He must remember that you were here just a few hours ago. You nod back at the guard and pretend nothing is unusual. You breeze past all the galleries on the first floor, passing elementary school field trip tours and groups of art students sketching from the benches at the center of each gallery. Barely noticing them, you follow your feet; they know where they are going.

You pass African fertility sculptures, Greek jars, and Roman reliefs, finding yourself in a room full of white marble sculptures. Your high heeled, double-tapping footsteps echo importantly against the pale audience gathered around the gallery, and you imagine the sound would be the same in a court house or a throne room. The figures gaze at you blankly, their raised chins punctuated with beatific half smiles. Despite the impracticality of your tall heeled shoes, they really were the appropriate choice to go with

your outfit. Your husband often tells you that he loves your fashion sense, so you keep your Louboutins at the front of your closet.

You turn to survey the still-life assembly once more, and your feet stop right in front of the bust of a young man without a nose. You get right up in the marble face to peer at its features, filling in what is missing with your imagination. If the nose were still there, it would be small and rounded to match his puffy, juvenile lips. If he had been alive and had said nose, he would be able to smell the garlic from the pasta you had for lunch on your breath. The guard standing near the far wall breaks his statue-like pose and clears his throat. You remember that you are in a museum and take a step to the side so you can read the placard on the wall behind the bust. No-nose Man's real name was Severus Alexander, one of the youngest Roman emperors ever. You wonder who died and left the kid out of his element and in charge of an empire. He is beautiful, even with his most prominent feature lopped off. Your eyes catch something that bothers you, but you can't figure out exactly what it is. You stare at a spot about two inches below the ear and wait. Nothing.

A throat clears, and you jump. A middle-aged stranger touches his imaginary cap in your direction. You nod in return, your eyebrows meeting in the middle. This room is huge; the guy does not need to stand so close. His hair is mostly gone on top, but he has a long ponytail that lays lankly against the broad back of his leather bomber jacket. He looks as though he is about to speak. The marble audience waits in silence, so you do, too.

“Something’s off about it, right?” The question is quiet, but the voice is far too deep and gravelly for this room of smooth forms and polished surfaces. A glance around at the statues tells you that nobody else minds the intrusion, so you decide to let it go, too.

“It’s the proportions,” the man says into your ear. He has stepped far too close. You wish the carved figures around you were real so they could intervene or at least stare the guy down until he leaves. Besides, he smells like cigars. Your husband gave up smoking six years ago, and it’s a good thing. Smoke makes you sneeze.

Just before you open your mouth to tell the personal space-challenged man where to get off, your eyes finally catch what is wrong with the statue. Severus Alexander’s neck is too big. Or his face is too small. Your eyebrows go up. The stranger smiles and points to the description beneath the placard you just read. Sometimes new emperors had their own faces carved onto the statues of the emperors who preceded them, replacing the old face with the new. You were looking at a recycled homage to a dead teenaged emperor. He forced his form to fit into the role he had taken. He did what he must to make his empire his own.

The cigar-scented stranger bids you farewell and walks off toward the gallery of Renaissance art. He is holding a hat in his hands behind his back. You linger, staring at Severus Alexander’s head sitting upon its borrowed neck. Eventually, your feet announce that standing so long while stuffed into pointy-toed pumps is killing them. You should have put on the silver sandals you wore every day during your honeymoon. As if awakened from a trance, you realize two things. First, you are thirsty. Nothing sounds better than a cold, sweet bubble tea. Second, you hate the drapery in your new house.

Once home, you step out of your pumps, set the remains of your almond flavored bubble tea on the nearest coffee table, and get to work. You take down the grandmotherly pink and green floral living room drapes your mother commented that she loved the last time she visited. Light and dust particles flood the room, and you start sneezing. Also, you can see directly into the neighbors' second-story windows. You opt to hang blue floral bedsheets, fully aware that those will make their way into the trash as soon as you buy replacements. The former lady of the house was your mother's age, so it was no wonder the house looked like a garden exploded on it.

This is your home now. It is time to take it over.

You spend three hours browsing Amazon for new curtains and decide that none of them suits you exactly. You open new tabs and go to Wayfair, JC Penney, and The Curtain Shop. After much consideration, clicking and unclicking, you almost decide on pale blue and gray striped ones with tasseled tie backs. At the last minute, though, you decide you will get tired of those quickly. You take those out of your cart and add dandelion yellow drapes with gray elephants all over them. You don't know what your husband will think of them, but you figure he probably didn't choose those awful floral drapes, so he won't mind.

With the new curtains on their way to your door, you decide that the pale green walls have got to go. Today. So does half of the furniture. You grab your car keys, slip into the sandals instead of the pumps. A shrine to the family—your husband's family—hangs on the wall near the front door. Five large, framed photos cluster around a bare spot on the wall with a nail sticking out. Your husband has removed the largest of the portraits, a photograph of himself with his deceased first wife. However, one of the small

photos below it is a shot of the whole family, including three kids who happen to be about your age, one son-in-law, and twin grandsons. And the dead wife. You reach up and touch the frames, pulling back your hand as though the cold metal shocked you. Your eyebrows meet again before you reach up and gently lift the dusty pictures off their hooks. You stack them on the hall table, careful not to crack the glass in the frames. You will do something with those photos later. After you go and get some paint samples. White? Blue? Gray? Orange? The sofas are cream white. You can work with those, but the hutch will be posted on Craigslist before your husband gets back from his yearly golfing trip in Spain. There is an interior designer's business card in his desk drawer in the study, but you want to take care of this yourself. Maybe you will hire a painter, and maybe you will not. With your keys jingling in one hand, you open the door, and, with one more glance over your shoulder, march to your car, looking up directions to the nearest paint store.

End

The world was ending, and that was all right by Claudette Powers.

Warnings about the coming end of days had been presented at scientific conferences, global gatherings, and news media outlets for almost a year and a half. At first the public thought the whole story was half-baked, cockamamie pseudoscience. Later, they decried it as fake news designed to terrorize the masses. They changed their minds when several world leaders held press conferences telling the citizens of earth to call upon their gods and hug their loved ones because a planet the size of Mars was hurtling its way toward the bit of rock they called home.

Mirpax, the first private, internationally owned space telescope built after the collapse of NASA, tracked the planet's orbit for eight years before astrophysicists determined there would be an impact event and not a near-miss. Planet MX-1624's orbit around the red giant star Lux988 was so vast, it was due to cross paths with Earth. No guns had been crafted that could blast the intruding planet to bits. It was too massive, and the time frame was too short. No space-launched nuclear explosives. No lasers strong enough to escape the earth's atmosphere, and none stable enough to mount on the International Space Station. Even if it had been possible to blow up the invading planet, the rock chunks falling to the earth would have killed billions. One small expedition of very rich people fled the planet on a privately-funded Mars colony mission, so live or die, those twelve souls would escape the natural demolition of Earth. Schools let out for eternity, and militaries turned from fighting one another to containing their own terrified people and protecting them from themselves. Fake news outlets began to publish stories

about escape pods in the making and the new one-world military scientists' plans for a massive laser they were erecting in Siberia. A few poor, gullible souls found hope in these stories and propagated them as much as they could.

Hordes of panicked humanity, including Claudette's own youngest daughter, Sharon, had already deserted the coasts for any place they felt was safer; some ran to the mountains, while others burrowed beneath the Ozark mountains in enormous caverns.

"I'm not going to outrun the inevitable," Claudette had told Sharon when she tried to convince her to join the rest of the nation's population its flight for the center of the continent. "Besides, this is my home. If I have any say, I want to die on my own terms, in the place that I love."

Claudette grew up playing on the rocks along the Atlantic before they became littered with tourists' broken flip-flops and lost sunglasses. Her hooded, clouding eyes could almost see the old shipyard as it was before the land was filled in and the whole place became a park. She had backed her new-to-her yellow SUV into its usual parking spot at Geezer Row, the name she had given the row of ocean-facing parking spaces on the rocky shore at Bug Light Park. In less doomed times, elderly people parked their cars along in this lot and ate their fast food burgers and drank coffee from paper to-go cups while they watched the ferries go to and from the islands. They chatted with neighbors, walked the short trail around the park, or catnapped behind their steering wheels, returning home in time for dinner. Some days, ten cars would be lined up with nappers. In their twilight years, Claudette and her husband Merton had enjoyed sunrise breakfasts of hot tea and donuts on Geezer Row.

A gust of wind caught the edge of the sweater she had thrown over her flowing, pale blue gauchos and top. They were yoga clothes, a gift from her eldest granddaughter, Reese, whom she would never see again. While it had been a few decades since she had had any interest in yoga, they were the most comfortable thing she owned. She wrapped the sweater tightly around herself to brace against the unseasonable coolness and tilted her chin up, letting the air hit her fully in the face. Let the end come. She was ready for it.

The only sounds that unusually cool late August morning were the ever-rushing wind and the waves hurling themselves at the shore. No police cars or ambulances screamed urgently as they sped through the streets of Portland just across the water. The National Guard convoys were gone, and only a few volunteers remained to distribute groceries and keep the lights on. The Casco Bay Bridge did not sound its whooping alarm to herald its grand raising and lowering. Even the seagulls were gone. While she missed the quiet commotion of her small city, Claudette did not miss the sounds of the now silenced party ferry, which blasted pop music morning, afternoon, and evening during tourist season, promising vacationers a riotously good time out on the islands.

After a few more moments taking in the world as it was, Claudette went back to the SUV and opened the hatch. It was time to let go. The trunk was packed tightly with her belongings, mostly small things that she had kept around the house for years. What to release first? She pulled out a framed family photograph. It was taken on the day that she and Merton, God rest his soul, had dressed their three children in matching green jumpsuits and taken them to the department store photo studio. The jumpsuits did not last long; that day, Tabitha tore hers, and Sam dropped his chocolate ice cream cone down his chest.

Tabitha hadn't spoken to the family in the nearly thirty years since she ran off and married that fast-talking con man with even faster fists. Sam had flung himself off the bridge not long after he had learned of MX-1624. For just a moment, Claudette wished so desperately to chase after Sharon, or to hold Tabitha and Sam again, or to spend one more night wrapped in Merton's arms. She choked up with tears and hugged the picture to her chest, letting sobs shake her body. She lifted her head to wail once, but the wind carried the sound away.

When her crying stilled, she said, "I'm letting you go." She kissed her husband and children's faces and tossed the photograph into the water like a Frisbee. It sailed beautifully before another gust of wind forced it down to the water. The frame floated for a few seconds before it went under. "Goodbye," she whispered.

Next, she pulled out the vase that had always held the flowers Merton gave her. On his way home from work many Thursday nights, Merton would bring home a bouquet of whatever blooms were in season. The crystal was cut in an intricate pattern of diamond-shaped facets. Because she kept it so clean, the vase reflected rainbows onto every wall from its sun-soaked place on the kitchen table. Claudette smiled again and kissed the vase, wondering at the feeling of its many dull points against her lips. Then she hurled the vase, as well. She did not quite have the strength to get it all the way into the water, so it smashed against the rocks below her. The next wave swept it away tidily.

One item at a time, Claudette emptied the trunk. The waves, which were much more violent than usual for this normally calm harbor, carried off picture albums, vinyl records, baby toys, a DVD or two, house plants, her deceased dog's squeak toy, her wedding china, Merton's glasses, her mother's rolling pin, knickknacks, the children's

report cards, assorted old clothing, and the family Bible. She kissed each item before tossing it, admiring pictures, reading her mother and grandmother's handwriting in the Bible. Her arthritic shoulders and elbows began to ache, but she did not stop until everything was gone.

She sat down on the edge of the open hatch and watched her lifetime of memories, good and bad, float away. The early morning fog had burned off now, and she tracked her former belongings with her eyes until they sank or grew too small to make out against the sparkling water.

"It feels good, doesn't it? Just letting everything go." Bob Trask stepped around the side of the car. He did not wear his customary fisherman's cap. The top of his bald head was shiny and pale, unaccustomed to exposure, much unlike his tanned, weathered lobsterman's face. He still wore a jacket, and he kept his hands comfortably in his pockets.

"Strangely, it does. Gosh, I thought I would feel so guilty, but I don't," Claudette said in a small voice. She slid over, and Bob hopped up next to her and let his legs dangle over the edge.

"See? I told you. All those things we've clung to all our lives amount to this--" he motioned to her belongings in the sea, "a bunch of junk floating in the water."

"Like skin cancer?" Claudette asked, lightly touching a scar just behind Bob's hairline.

"Let cancer have me if it wants," he said with a chuckle. "It won't have long to do its magic!" Bob had just had a cancerous mole removed. Six years before, his wife had died from pancreatic cancer.

Claudette returned her gaze to the water. “Fort Gorges is gone,” she announced at length. The abandoned historic fort that sat a small distance out in the water looked like it was simply gone. A bluish haze had formed at the horizon, which was not all that unusual. The unusual part is the near opacity of that haze and how close to the shore it had crept. Even on a cloudy, foggy day, the fort was visible from Geezer Row.

“I know. Isn’t it something?” Bob squinted into the distance.

“It’s definitely something.” Claudette put a hand to her racing heart, and her normally pale face flushed a bright pink. Bob slid closer and put his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, smelling his Old Spice and feeling the slightly damp warmth of his body. He was sweating despite the chill in the air.

A sputtering vehicle approached. Claudette and Bob turned to see who was coming. The huge white Oldsmobile that was probably as old as Sharon shuddered its way into the parking spot next to Claudette’s car and died. The doors squeaked open slowly, and out wobbled Alice MacLeodd, supported by her longtime companion, Jesse Norton. Alice and Claudette had been playmates since the third grade, when Alice’s family moved to town. Bob had tagged along on their childhood adventures, two years their junior and happy to have been included.

“All finished?” Alice asked.

“Yes, just now,” Claudette answered.

Alice’s tanned, wrinkled face smoothed into a wide grin. “You’ll feel better soon.”

“I suspect you’re right.”

Alice held out a hand to Claudette and gently pulled her to her feet. Bob followed,

and Jesse led the way. The four carefully made their way out onto the rocks, relying on one another for balance. The blue haze was growing, and the waves, instead of receding as the tide went out, grew larger. They stood looking over the water for a long time, arms linked, waiting for the end of the world. At long last, Bob broke his childhood friends' silence.

“I've got a kettle and enough propane to last us. Let's go back to my place for tea.”

New Mexico, George Clooney

Mary Ann Hart had just clocked out when the tornado sirens started screaming.

Debating whether to stay put or leave, she stepped into the employee restroom and switched from her prisoner orange uniform polo to a pink T-shirt. Some Saver's Choice employees wore those awful polos all over town after work, but when she was off the clock, Mary Ann didn't want to think about work. For the past fifteen years, the store had owned her thirty-nine hours a week, and not one second more. If a tornado came down and her number came up, the last place she would want to be was there. And if she was going to die in a storm, she didn't want to do so looking like she belonged at the county jail.

Tornadoes were common enough in Illinois, practically a spectator sport. People sat on their porches with iced tea and cameras, filming twisters until their own properties were in danger. Saver's Choice had never been hit, but today, the sky looked like it might open up and suck the whole hundred thousand-plus square-foot store right off the ground like some kind of nightmare vacuum cleaner. Even though she had grown up watching the winds swirl, a little wad of uneasiness sat in Mary Ann's stomach.

All morning, Mary Ann watched through the front windows of Saver's Choice as the boiling green-black clouds cast a sickly twilight over the store and everything within several miles of it. Two funnel clouds had touched down just outside of Pekin the day before, and the badly damaged Route 29 bridge was closed. Half of the town was without power, but idiots were still out on the roads, ramming into each other where the signals

were down. If Mary Ann had her druthers, she would be one of the idiots out on the road. Except she wouldn't be in Pekin. She would be miles away with George Clooney, heading down I-40 and I-44 toward New Mexico. They would find a mansion—or, heck, even a trailer—in the middle of the desert and hole up. Leave the world to itself.

She had always wanted to travel. Before a heart attack took her husband Jerry at fifty-six years old, they were planning to buy an RV and spend their retirement years motoring round the Southwest. Now Mary Ann was left with nothing but pictures of places she hoped to visit someday and a thirty-year-old son who refused to grow up and move out of the house. So much for the golden years.

But she didn't want to think about that right now. *George Clooney. New Mexico. Someday.*

She looked away from the clouds and blinked a few times before turning her attention to the customer who stood machine-gun popping a piece of gum in front of her. The woman wore tan-from-a-can and her hair thrown up in a tangled knot on top of her head. She thumped a case of bottled water onto the conveyor belt. The case was ripped open with some bottles missing.

“This is pathetic!” the gum-popping woman huffed. “There's, like, no water left, and what *is* there is like this,” the woman flipped the flap of torn plastic wrap. Mary Ann nodded and murmured something that sounded like an apology as she rang up the water with a thirty-percent discount. The woman harrumphed and muttered as she paid. The next person followed several boxes of crackers and a Lynyrd Skynyrd CD along the conveyor belt, grumbling that there was nothing left on the shelves.

“It’s the storm,” Mary Ann said without looking up. “The bridge is closed. Trucks can’t get through.”

“Yeah, well.” The person swiped a debit card, and Mary Ann handed over the receipt without another word. Why encourage the conversation? She couldn’t fix the bridge or drive a semi. She thought of those poor drivers stuck on the side of the road, waiting out the storm while funnel clouds went past. The customers, of course, didn’t think of that. They just got upset because the Pepsi was sold out.

When Mary Ann was first hired, she was happy to chat with anyone who came through her checkout line. Not for too long, of course, because Management complained if customers lingered too long at her register to talk about their families or the weather. But now the entitlement generation had taken over the stores, whining very loudly as they did so. They didn’t like the prices. They didn’t like the produce. They didn’t like the layaway policy. They didn’t like where the toilet paper display was set up.

The old-timers Mary Ann knew had migrated over to Meijer on the other side of town, taking their friendly conversations with them. Now, nobody knew her name even though it was printed right on the tag pinned to her chest, and nobody had patience for an old woman who couldn’t wave a magic wand and grant their wishes. Her supervisor and only work friend, Fritz, now took two medications for his retail-related ulcers. Mary Ann didn’t need ulcer medicine, and she didn’t need to say “om” or twist herself up like a pretzel to calm down. She needed only to smile and repeat her mantra in her mind: *New Mexico. George Clooney. Someday.*

In her daydreams, George Clooney didn’t care that she was a fifty-nine-year-old widow who worked full time at a minimum wage job when she could have been living

off Social Security and her husband's army pension because her good-for-nothing kid was still mooching off her. No, George Clooney was on the lam from the law like his character in that heist movie, hiding in the middle of nowhere down some abandoned highway, and he wanted her to be a part of his adventures. The image of a gray-black highway weaving around buttes on a wide red landscape brought her blood pressure down, which made her doctor happy.

Between the beeps of items crossing the scanner, Mary Ann heard bits of the emergency broadcasts that interrupted the FM oldies station. Fritz had brought in his own radio, which Management frowned upon. Personal items were forbidden in employees' work areas.

“...reports of downed power lines on routes Nine and Twenty-nine...*beep... beep... tornadic thunderstorm in the area.... beep... strong winds, golf ball-sized hail...beep... keeping an eye on cloud rotation... beep... beep... beep... funnel cloud sightings... beep... beep... beep... residents are advised to take cover...*”

The cell phone Mary Ann had sneaked in her jeans pocket vibrated, but she made no move to answer it. It was probably Jason, the thirty-year-old mooch himself. She didn't want to talk to him. She ignored the call and returned her gaze to the sky.

That morning, Jason had asked—no, commanded—her to wire him gas money so he could get back to Illinois because he had run out of both gas and money. She didn't have any money left over to give him, not if she wanted to pay her property taxes this month.

“Ma, gas was more expensive than we thought, and the kids had to eat lunch on the way,” Jason had explained. His voice always softened when he was trying to pull one over on her. He’d done that since he was little. No sir, she was wise to that and would have none of it.

Instead, Mary Ann suggested that his lazy girlfriend stop freeloading and hand over a few dollars.

Jason had given his teenager grunt and said, “Whatever. You know what? Never mind. We’ll figure it out.” Then the phone had gone dead.

She had felt a little poke of guilt through her chest. She wanted to get along with the boy, really she did. But not like that. Not as his meal ticket. Not as his source of drug money. How stupid did he think she was?

So many times, she had half-heartedly threatened to run off and join a hippie commune when Jason was young and gave her grief. He was supposedly an adult now, but he still gave her grief. A few times, she searched the internet for maps to communes in New Mexico. She didn’t need directions to get to there; she had memorized the route years ago after she watched *Ocean’s Eleven*—the remake, not the Rat Pack version. It was fiction, but that didn’t stop her from wanting in on the exploits. It was comforting to know that the open road was there for her, should she ever get the courage and opportunity to use it.

Someday she would shrug off her life of orange polo shirts, cold winters that made the arthritis in her back flare up, and the sinking feeling that she had worked herself into the grave just to raise her grandchildren. She could barely cover property taxes on

her little house, and those cereal-eating, Xbox playing leeches did nothing to help her get by. Maybe running off to New Mexico really was what she needed to do, even if George Clooney wasn't there.

New Mexico. George Clooney. Someday. New Mexico. George Clooney.

Someday.

A light tap on Mary Ann's shoulder made her jump and knock the little bottle of hand sanitizer off the counter by her register. She quickly bent over to pick it up, feeling the uncomfortable arthritic resistance in her back as she did so.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

It was Fritz. The bags under his eyes looked big enough to cost extra on flights. His bright green Customer Service Manager vest stretched tight across his gut, which had been much smaller when he was a checker like she was, before he was exposed to the fast-food, high-stress life of retail Management. He'd been at work since eleven o'clock the night before because his replacement had a tree fall on her house forty miles away. Fritz had been left to manage the waves of nervous shoppers emptying the shelves of anything that seemed like it would be useful in an emergency.

"Mary Ann, maybe you should go home and check on your family." Fritz kept his voice low, with his head tilted close to hers. His breath smelled like garlic and old coffee, but she didn't mind. Anyone's breath would stink if they didn't get to brush their teeth for a whole day.

"My family's away, hon," she said. "They're over in Indiana for the week. The Girlfriend's parents live there."

The house had been so peaceful with Jason, The Girlfriend, and their two kids gone for the week. No one made messes all over the place without cleaning up. No TVs blared at all hours. No one ate up all the food and never bought more. No one asked her to use her employee discount for them and risked getting her fired. No one asked for money because they couldn't or wouldn't get a job of their own. There wasn't anything wrong with Jason except an old back injury that she doubted was real. He felt good enough to go hunting or to go running around to the bars with his friends at night. Jason fed some doctor a sob story that kept them feeding him pills. The government sent him checks, which he always spent on those stupid video games or pizzas.

Sometimes, Mary Ann wondered what mistake she made raising the boy that he never learned to take care of himself. Jerry had gotten so badly hurt at the canned food factory he worked at in the 80s, he had two surgeries on his shoulder. He got up and went back to work as soon as he could, even though he had days when he was stiff or needed a Tylenol to make it through the afternoon.

“Mary Ann?” Fritz leaned closer, speaking quietly. “Are you all right?”

She blinked a few times and said, “Fritz, you’ve been here since yesterday. Why don’t you go rest for a little while? Take a nap on the breakroom floor or something. There’s no real emergency going on right now.”

He shook his head. “Not yet. Someone is coming over from Decatur to help out. He’s taking back roads to stay away from the worst of the traffic, and I can leave when he gets here.”

Mary Ann nodded. Saver’s Choice employees were constantly waiting for their replacements to arrive so they could go home. Their replacements were never on time,

and no one could leave their post without permission. Since the storms had started the day before, everybody who lived across town or across the bridge hasn't come in to work.

"But you," Fritz said, "You can go home. You've already put in forty hours this week, and you can't go over. Tony's here, so he will take your register."

Right. No overtime. Saver's Choice told willing workers that they couldn't have overtime even though the blank-faced kids they hired didn't do their jobs right and didn't show up half of the time. An electric thrill raced through her, shooting from her toes to her heart and back down again. Even though it was storming, she could have the rest of the day off in her house, by herself. Her neighborhood still had electricity.

"Okay," Mary Ann said. "Since you're twisting my arm."

Fritz put a hand lightly on her shoulder "You're the most reliable person I know. We need you. Be safe."

"I always am," she answered with a smile and a pat on his hand.

Loud, chattering voices floated into the room from the hallway. People were congregating at the front of the store like they usually did during bad storms. It didn't make much sense, standing around the big windows like that, but they did it anyway. After all, storms were for watching. Mary Ann slung her purse over her shoulder and slipped her stretchy keychain around her wrist. She hoped this storm wouldn't take too long; she only had a few more days to herself at home, and she intended to make the most of them. She was going to put up her feet, drink up all the iced tea without offering

anyone any, and watch all the “boring” TV shows she wanted. Maybe a little HG TV. Or a George Clooney movie. She smirked at the thought.

Just beyond the hallway that led to the breakroom and the manager’s office, people congregated in small clumps. Some of them were chuckling and recording videos of each other on their phones. Others were holding onto each other and whispering. Some fluttered around patting people on the shoulder here and there. And then there were the employees. They stood around in their polo shirts, glancing around aimlessly as if they had no idea what to do, either. They had probably been asked to do crowd control, but a bunch of twenty-year-old kids had no idea what that meant.

Outside the windows, the wind kicked up and blew wildly. Shopping carts that lazy customers had left all around moved on their own, smacking into parked cars. Mary Ann was too close to the windows, and she knew it. Her feet wouldn’t move, like her tennis shoes were stuck to the floor. She suddenly needed to pee.

In the middle of it all was poor Fritz, walking back and forth in front of the crowd of spectators. If he had looked worn out before, now he looked like death on two feet. His heavily bagged eyes were wide, his face was red, and he was sweating as he yelled over the sirens, “Move back from the windows, please. Everyone, if you could make your way a little farther back, behind the registers.” Most people weren’t moving, and finally, Fritz let out an exasperated “You guys, please!” All his safety training didn’t amount to a hill of beans when the customers acted like the situation was a joke and wouldn’t cooperate.

The sirens and the winds stopped all at once.

After a moment of dead silence, someone in the crowd of shoppers laughed loudly. Then everyone started talking. Some went back to their shopping, business as

usual. The employees stood facing Fritz with expressions varying from confusion to concern. Fritz turned around, took one look at the sky, and then looked wildly around the room, nostrils flaring. His shoulders and collarbone pulled up and down with the strain of his arrhythmic, frantic breathing. He met Mary Ann's eyes, and instead of her casual, glib supervisor, she saw wild fear. Something primal in her awakened, and her feet came unglued from the floor. She ran the width of the store and back into the employees-only hallway by the home goods entrance. She flung herself to the floor against a wall, trying to remember what she had learned from tornado drills in the past. Get low, cover your head, and get into an area that is reinforced with something like plumbing. Plumbing. Oh! The restroom!

The lights flickered twice and went out.

A scream rippled through the people in the store. On hands and knees, Mary Ann started to feel her way back toward the break room and employee restrooms. The emergency lights kicked on from the doorway behind her, and she stood up and ran the rest of the way. The floor rumbled like it used to back when she was young and lived in that tiny house next to the train tracks. What street was it on? Why couldn't she remember? As she slammed the single-toilet ladies' room door and locked it, knowing that the lock always stuck and she could be trapped, she could feel that squeezing feeling in her chest and head that said her blood pressure was too high. She couldn't get a deep enough breath. She crouched underneath the sink. The rumbling got more violent, shaking the room, the whole store, and then came that awful sound people describe as a freight train but in real life was something much worse than that. The roar of winds, the

shattering of glass, the thudding of ceiling beams and fixtures slamming around as the steel roof was peeled off the store like the lid of a sardine can—that was no train.

The sink began to gurgle, and the toilet flushed itself. Mary Ann’s ears popped painfully. She whimpered from her hiding spot and began chanting, “New Mexico. George Clooney. New Mexico. George Clooney. New Mexico. George Clooney. George Clooney.”

The locked bathroom door rattled as the wind tried to suck it off its hinges. Her bladder finally let go.

“New Mexico. George Clooney. Newmexicogeorgeclooney.”

Something thumped her on the back, and pain shot in every direction.

“GEORGE CLOONEY!” she screamed, even though she couldn’t hear herself.

“OH GOD, GEORGE CLOONEY!”

And then there was nothing. Mary Ann lay curled up on her side underneath the sink. She was still whispering, “New Mexico, George Clooney,” but the words were just that. Words. She wasn’t calling up images of her favorite actor. She wasn’t imagining a mansion in a state she had only seen on travel websites. She was hanging onto the words themselves as though they were some sort of shield. Perhaps she had forgotten that her lips were still moving. Perhaps the words were a prayer.

After a while, she opened her eyes.

“New Mexico. George Clooney.”

She heard her own heartbeat in her ears. It was fast, but strong. She was alive. Good. There was talking and screaming. Here and there, crashes sounded. Were the shelves falling? The ceiling beams? The thought occurred to her that she should get out of here and go help people, but the spot she was in right now was oddly comfortable. She

didn't feel like getting up. She lay on her side in her wet jeans with her bent arm cradling her head. The quiet was strange with no Muzak piping through the little speakers around the store.

How long she stayed like that, Mary Ann would never know. But eventually, she felt herself coming back to her senses. She gave a shaky laugh when she realized she was able to move. She wasn't hurt. She was, however, cold. And getting wetter. A pipe must have broken and soaked the floor. Something lay against the wall over her head, making a weird sort of lean-to against the sink. Was it the restroom door? A section of the roof? How was the sink not broken? She rolled over and pulled her knees up under her body in a folded-up position she had not been able to get into in a few years and pushed herself up. Making little sounds with her mouth closed, Mary Ann turned around and pressed her hands against the thing that was overhead. The slightly greasy, slightly sticky wood against her hands could have been nothing other than that old wooden restroom door. She pushed hard against it in spite of her legs and arms feeling like Jell-O and braced her rear end against the sink. With one more good, hard push, the door fell away from her, but not before it slid, the bottom end slamming into her ankles. She hollered. But the door was down. That darned door that always got stuck when it locked had saved her life.

Daylight streamed through parts of the tattered ceiling like leafy tree branches. The wall it had been attached to lay in pieces beneath a copy machine, and a fluorescent light fixture poked through the wall next to the toilet.

Carefully, Mary Ann stepped onto the door, testing each ankle and holding onto the wall for balance until she got used to the feeling of walking over the unsteady surface of the door propped on—well, whatever it was propped on. Her ankles felt stiff, but at

least they weren't broken. Something tugged at her elbow, and she shook it off. It thumped to the ground with a jangle of change, and she realized she had just thrown her purse onto the wet floor. With a scoff, she picked it up again and slung its long strap across her chest. Her car keys were still on her wrist. Their stretchy chain hadn't broken.

Making her way down the hallway took some doing. After crawling over the top of the wall of lockers that had fallen on its face, she climbed over upended chairs, pieces of twisted metal she couldn't identify, drop ceiling tiles, and a tangled mass of fabric. Her throat ached, so she could only whisper.

“Good Lord. Ohmigod. George Clooney and New Mexico.”

When she came out of that little hole of a hallway, she was standing outside. Saver's Choice was gone. At least the roof was. Merchandise was thrown everywhere. Some shelves leaned against others with clothing racks on top of them. The self-check area was still there, but the middle of the store was a pile of rubble. The walls at north and south ends of the store, though, still stood like the end zones of a very odd, very messy football field. Some shelves stood as well, looking unaffected. People wandered around those areas, some wrapped in blankets or coats or whatever they found lying around. Others climbed over the debris in the middle of the store, probably looking for people. Mary Ann stood in place, taking in the whole scene. Ambulance and firetruck sirens wailed in the distance.

Then she caught sight of a tiny bit of bright green underneath a pile of who knew what a few feet away from her.

“Fritz!” she whispered. “Oh, God.”

She ran, tripping over chunks of concrete, and dropped to her knees.

“Fritz!” she called hoarsely. “Fritz! Can you hear me?” She began pulling things off him, flinging merchandise and glass and wood and concrete chunks as though they weighed nothing. Other pairs of hands began digging with her. She didn’t acknowledge them; she kept digging. Fritz was the only person she cared about in this stupid, God-forsaken place, and she was going to get him out.

Finally, someone said, “I see his head. Quick, help me get this!”

More voices talked all at once. “Grab here. We need one more guy. Okay. Get over here. Okay. Ready. One, two, three—”

They lifted a section of orange-painted ceiling beam off Fritz’s head, or what was left of it. His forehead was dented in, and a trickle of blood came from his nose. His eyes were wide open, staring blankly.

Mary Ann didn’t scream. She sat back on her heels with part of a concrete block in her hands. She didn’t notice someone taking away the block or lifting her to her feet. She stared at Fritz with the same wide stare that was on his lifeless face.

Someone put her arm around their shoulders and started to pull her away from the pile of debris. She shuffle-walked, letting them lead her off to the end zone. Someone put a damp jacket around her shoulders. It was cold at first, but it warmed up quickly against the heat of her body.

“You okay, ma’am?” someone asked. “Ma’am, can you hear me?”

She didn’t answer. A bottle was slipped into her hand. It was a dirty bottle of pink Gatorade. She hated Gatorade, but she held on to it anyway. Someone pressed against her side. She looked up briefly, but she didn’t recognize the young woman standing next to her, wearing pajama pants and crying. Pajama pants in public. Mary Ann turned her eyes

back toward Fritz. Some people were lifting his body and moving it off to the side, near what used to be the service desk.

Mary Ann was still staring at the area where Fritz lay when the emergency crews showed up. Someone put a sheet over him. Mary Ann wondered if they had closed his eyes first. Did they do that? Close dead people's eyes before taking them to the morgue?

Someone else, someone who looked like an EMT with vinyl gloves came up to her and asked her if she was all right. She answered in nods and grunts. He shone a little flashlight in her eyes, and she squinted and turned her head. The man patted her on the shoulder and moved on to the next person while the girl in pajama pants slid an arm around her and kept it there.

After a long time and without any thought whatsoever, Mary Ann stood up, turned toward the parking lot, and stumbled away from the remains of Saver's Choice. She did not thank the woman who sat with her. She did not glance back at Fritz's sheet-covered body being lifted into a black body bag. She eventually dropped the Gatorade bottle, and while she knew she had dropped it, she did not bend down to pick it up.

The parking lot lay like a little kid's bedroom after a rough game of Hot Wheels. Cars and light poles and shopping carts were strewn every which way. But the sky was clearing. Mary Ann walked through the nonsensical maze of vehicles and carts, past the flashing lights of the fire trucks and ambulances, past the sign for aisle D4, which was on the only pole standing in the lot, its "Back to School Savings" banner waving loosely in the wind, tethered at one corner by a zip tie.

Beyond the tangle of cars, Taco Bell sat untouched. So did McDonald's. The farthest part of the parking lot, the Back Forty, as the employees called it, only had a little

debris here and there. The cars were still parked in their spots. Saver's Choice employees had to park in the Back Forty unless they had one of those blue disabled tags to hang on their rearview mirrors. Mary Ann's white 2010 Honda Civic sat in its spot facing Taco Bell, just as she had left it that morning. She shoved away the shopping cart resting against the newly dented back bumper. She got into the car and sat with her eyes closed and her back to the wreckage that had been her place of employment just that morning. When she opened them again, she saw George Clooney's face. All at once, she let out a scream, a laugh, and a wail. A soggy *People* magazine was plastered to her windshield, George Clooney's grinning face staring at her from the cover.

“Of course,” she wailed. “Of course you would show up now, George.”

The crying laughter rasped out of her aching throat for a long time after the tears dried up. At long last, she got out of the car, took the magazine off her windshield, and tossed it into the passenger seat, and started the car. She got in and started the engine, backing out of her parking spot, heedless of the shopping carts she hit, and drove out of the parking lot. She pointed her car west on Illinois Route 9 and pressed down on the gas pedal. She had to weave around some signs, junk, and a few cars on the road, but she did so without even thinking about it. It was almost as though her car was moving on its own. As she drove past her neighborhood, she saw that not a single house was standing. She didn't bother stopping to see if anything was worth saving. She instead glanced down at the magazine next to her, gave a chuckle of disbelief, and continued toward to Santa Fe.

Front and East

You think you own me.

You cobbled over me and stamped a piece of bronze to mark the spot where a famous man gave a speech. He changed the world and pulled the yoke off the necks of thousands of people domesticated as beasts. One hundred fifty years later, I am graced with a parking garage.

You think I know nothing.

But I watch. I notice. I remember.

I know where your lost wallet is. I saw the stone from Jimmy Pickett's slingshot shatter the courthouse window.

I heard William Whitmore propose to Thelma Locke in William's buggy. Thelma hesitated at first. Her eyes scanned the landscape and fell upon William again to size him up. William had a job at the law office over there. Marrying safely would ensure a life without chasing chickens or scrabbling for potatoes. She accepted the proposal, and the two were married in the little church that a boiler explosion would destroy in the 1950s.

I know how Sherman Wright ended up sleeping on the streets. His house burned down when he was eleven, and he thought it was his fault because he had told his mother he hated her just before bedtime. A candle lit the Christmas tree on fire. Sherman's mother died trying to rescue his little brother Sam from the flames. Sherman refused to believe his father's reassurances that the fire was not his fault. He ran away and took to life on the rails, hopping trains and following hobo symbols. For the rest of his life, he muttered to himself, certain that some unnamed, authoritative They would catch up to

him any day. Sherman fell asleep beneath the bridge on New Year's Eve of 1964 and never woke to see 1965 begin.

I saw Milo Delarosa leap from the roof of the apartment building that used to be just back that way. He had bet all his family's money on a fickle thing called the stock market, which crashed unexpectedly beneath the noses of the financial giants. The sound of a body hitting my pavement like that is difficult to forget. That rainy night, I was the only witness.

I know who snatched Sharon Pilcher off East Street. I heard her screams, initially sharp against the cold night, then muffled as her captor covered her mouth. I saw the car drive off with her inside. You found her months later in a ditch just outside of Chillicothe. You never asked me for answers. I couldn't have told you even if you did ask.

I saw the police haul Calvin Downs to jail for drugs as Maximillian Smith looked on, joint crushed out in the palm of his clenched hand. The burn became infected, but Maximillian passed it off as an accident in the kitchen where he worked. Calvin had never so much as seen pot before; he was on his way to the YMCA for basketball practice.

I know who fathered Annie Voss's baby. She and Richard Syke met under the cover of darkness two levels up in this very parking structure, hiding among the walls of the concrete maze, unnoticed by passers-by on the street. Their meeting was quiet and businesslike. They did not have the luxury of spreading out their love over time or their tangling limbs over the space around them. Richard Syke had to get home to his ill-tempered, suspicious wife. Annie had to get home to her impotent husband. They thought they were quiet, but they were not quiet enough.

All of these people and countless more are now ghosts. They crowd the sidewalks and streets all the time, weaving among the living. There are so many, I would not be able to tell the dead from the living if one did not lack footsteps.

I have witnessed marriages and divorces, hangings, court trials, car accidents, drunken fights, chance meetings, deals made in secret, protests, free love, stolen kisses, children born. I have no mouth with which to speak, but I remember.

I was born from melted earth millions of years ago. I saw the rains, snows, winds, heat, and fires make unhurried movements across my face, markers of the passage of time. You are impoverished enough never to have seen an entire day pass in nature's noisy quiet. You have never witnessed me claiming what is my own and giving up what I wish.

Before your families staked their claim on me, I shook my mighty body and changed the route of a river. I gave my very best gifts to the people who communed with me—trees with fruits and nuts and strong wood, animals, fertile soil, sunrises and sunsets. Suntanned feet tickled me as they crept along gently, silently, ensuring their survival without scarring me at all. I have seen your kind learn to break my back, tearing flesh with mechanized claws and burdened animals. I offered my blood to you, and you drank. I offered my flesh, and you took it all. And finally, you covered me up with blacktop to make your travel easier.

Look here. I have no hands with which to grab you, but I will swallow you up in time, as I have everyone else who came here before you. I leave signs for you, though you do not notice them. Look down. Between your feet. Your domain of concrete, rebar, and asphalt is not permanent, not impenetrable. See that blade of grass in the crack?

That's me, pushing up a reminder that I am here, I am watching, I remember, and eventually I will begin to put things right.

Intersection

West

“It’s hotter’n goat’s balls,” Kyle said to no one.

He tied his T-shirt around his head and left the rest hanging down his stinging, sunburned neck for shade, leaving his chest, arms, and shoulders exposed to the unforgiving sun. He squinted at the horizon, but it was the same as it had been yesterday and the day before, and the day before that, ever since he set out walking. Featureless fields stretched in every direction, corn, soy, hay, or lying fallow. Here and there, a little grove of trees or a dried-up creek broke up the view. The grasses that grew along the edge of the old county road were the yellow-brown of August and sharp enough to slice at his ankles.

“Goat’s balls, you hear me?” he yelled at the horizon. Then, to himself, “It’s all good. One foot in front of the other, son.”

Kyle talked to himself so often since he hit the road, he didn’t notice it anymore.

“I don’t care if your pussy-ass feet fall off. Your mommy ain’t here to carry you. You hear me?” He snorted and added, “Oorah, maggot!”

His voice bounced off the blacktop.

Kyle didn’t last long in the United States Marine Corps. He blew his knee out halfway through infantry school. It wasn’t even because of anything cool. Just a regular exercise, crawling under barbed wire while live bullets were whizzing past his head. How does anyone blow out a knee *crawling*? Hell if he knew.

The Marines mercy-killed his military career after a few months in the medical unit. Kyle's knee was now manmade. He couldn't crawl or climb that easily. But he could still march. By God, if there was nothing else he could do, he could at least march.

Basic training sucked, but he still missed it. When he felt like his legs were going to break on a big hike, somebody would bellow, "Oorah." He would bark it back involuntarily and keep going. The cool thing about the Marines was that you didn't do anything by yourself. You were part of a group. If you failed, the whole battalion failed. So the battalion encouraged or threatened or did whatever it took to get everyone through the hard stuff.

There was nobody to cheer Kyle on now, not on this empty road. Pain radiated like lightning strikes from his reconstructed joint. His army green Chucks kicked up dust in the gravel along the road's narrow shoulder. Both soles were cracked. Each little rock that jabbed at him through the thin soles sent sharp pain shooting through his foot. Since they didn't offer protection from the hot blacktop, he had to stay off the smooth road. His shoelaces had fallen apart a long time ago and were now replaced with bright pink ones from a pair of girls' shoes he had found in a dumpster. At least it wasn't raining. Those shoes weren't worth crap when they got wet. He was better off going barefoot in the rain. He had hated walking in the rain during basic training, but now he missed it.

Not to romanticize the experience. Basic training sucked. It was probably the hardest three-plus months of his life. Even though it was awful, at least it was predictable. He woke up to the horn. He ate, marched, sweated, grunted, marched some more, ate again sometime in there, and passed out on his bunk when the horn said to sleep. The

next day he woke up and did it all again. Those thirteen weeks showed Kyle that he at least had some substance, some strength in his bones and stubbornness in his mind. He would have been a damn fine Marine.

All he had now was the urge to march on and let the past roll off his back.

“Wait,” he interrupted his thoughts. “God's green toilets! Thank you!”

Just up ahead, a cluster of tall bushes stood at the edge of a field. He didn't realize he needed to pee until he saw it. Relief flowed through his body so suddenly, his bladder nearly let go. He clomped a little faster. After climbing carefully over the barbed wire fence where it sagged low next to the trees, he ducked into the bush and relieved himself both ways. He knew better than to drain the main vein out in the open after that time he spent a night in jail for pissing in a ditch on Route 30 in Indiana. It would be just his luck that the second he whipped it out, a cop car would drive by, and he would be busted.

It must have been about ninety degrees in the skimpy shade of those bushes. It was better than the heat that was baking his brains on the road. Kyle didn't want to get back to hiking along the pavement, but he couldn't stay where he was for long-- not just because he could get shot for trespassing, but because of the mosquitoes. They were everywhere, whining in his ears, biting his face where sweat trickled like rivers, eating his sides and arms. The only thing protecting his back was his backpack with its sweat-soaked straps. Even as he was squatting in the bushes, he slapped at the mosquitoes that went after his newly bared skin. He hoisted his pants back up to protect his skinny butt from the little blood suckers' assault and stepped back over the fence. This time, he scraped his inner thigh on a barb and ripped his pants. The scratch he got wasn't deep, but it hurt. He'd probably get tetanus from it, but what did that matter?

He shook his head to clear that thought and growled out an “oorah” as he resumed his labored march. If he kept at it every day, he just might make it to California, back somewhere near Camp Pendleton. In some sick sort of way, that place felt like home.

East

The road was long, so long. Twenty miles or more to the next town. No houses nearby. No interstates. No people. Just his freshly-washed white tow truck hauling a bashed up car. No one to see what had happened a few miles back.

“If I had a hammer,” Jasper sang along with the radio. He took to belting out song lyrics when unwelcome thoughts got into his head. What happened all those years ago, well, that wasn’t him anymore. If he could make himself forget, those memories couldn’t take over.

Everyone in the village of Carmi sort of knew who Jasper Block was and sort of liked him. When the weather was good, he was the sole occupant of the back right pew of the Zion Evangelical Church. All the other days of the week, he was a good mechanic who quietly showed up and did his job at Brady's Towing and Repair five days a week, six when he was needed. He ran the tow truck on Sunday afternoons and pulled people out of ditches after snowstorms, always ready with a red duffel bag full of tools for roadside repairs. He nodded or touched the bill of his baseball cap when people thanked him for picking up their clunkers that broke down on the side of the road.

The people of White County, Illinois regarded mechanics like priests—no, bartenders: miracle workers who listened to their problems and made it all better. The

doctor is in. People treated the cab of the tow truck Jasper drove like a shrink's couch. They complained about the weather. He always answered with a stare off toward the horizon and a distracted “Yup.” They told them about their money troubles; he answered with a nod and, “Yup. I hear ya.” They told him about their kids, their exes, whoever had screwed them out of a hundred bucks; he answered, always with his hooded eyes squinting at something far off, “If that ain't the worst.”

And wasn't it the worst? People thought their problems were situational--the rusting chassis of an Impala with an engine that wouldn't turn over, or a minivan with a broken tie rod and windows that wouldn't go down. But that wasn't it at all. People were horrible to each other. Everybody on earth was broken. The engines in their minds weren't running right. It was like all of humanity needed a tune-up.

A listening ear was good for business. Jasper's good reputation kept him employed for twenty-six years. If he hadn't been a fixture of the shop much like the hoist or the air hose, Bill Brady might have let him retire a good decade before. But people always seemed relieved to see Jasper there, reliable as always in his navy blue work shirt with the name patch sewn on. They even asked after him on the odd day he wasn't around, and they got the same answer every time:

“Oh, you know Jasper. He's probably out haulin' somebody in.”

To hear Jasper talk—or not talk, a person would not think he was very bright. But he could resurrect just about anything with wheels and an engine. Under the hood, his hands moved confidently, gently feeling along hoses and pipes, knowing where to look for cracks and pinholes, grabbing tools from his neatly organized tool case without needing to look. He ran diagnostics quickly, and most important to the customers, for

free. Jasper knew the workings of a car with as much intimacy as most men knew their lovers.

On the hottest day of the year, Jasper towed his most recent hunk of twisted metal down an old numbered county road to the scrap yard. This heap was one of the few he couldn't bring to life; it had been wrapped around an electrical pole at a high speed. There were no survivors to occupy the cab on the drive back into town, and he was glad. His heart beat irregularly, and his mouth was dry. He tried sipping at the soda he had bought at the BP that morning. It did not clear the aluminum taste from his mouth.

This cleanup call was a doozy, and Jasper had arrived before the carnage was cleared. There was a body—well, parts of it—lying in a field some fifty feet away from the crash site, and a second body peeked out through the windshield. His breath had quickened as soon as he saw this second victim, and it still had not slowed down.

The state troopers at the site guessed the driver had been texting behind the wheel. She was young and blonde, probably a pretty girl. But her scalped head stuck out of the reinforced glass. With the flesh ripped away, he saw parts of the skull, but only parts—it was cracked open, exposing the pinkish matter inside like some kind of alien egg. One cop, a young one, held his hat in his hand as he retched into the ditch a little ways down the road.

Jasper watched as rescue personnel extracted the girl's head from the windshield. In spite of the gory consequences of youthful ignorance, she looked peaceful. Her eyes were closed, her facial expression was unruffled, and she was still. Even with her brain exposed and blood everywhere, her face looked like she was having the best nap of her

life. Whatever might have troubled her, whatever kept her awake at night, whatever made her broken was over now. It was done. She was at peace.

At the sight of her, a breath made a jagged path into Jasper's chest. His pupils dilated, and the hair stood up on his arms, giving him a shiver despite the heat. Another trooper glanced over at him, and he quickly threw his arm over his face, faking a coughing fit.

“It's a damn shame,” an older cop had said to him, walking across the grass slowly, idly. He clapped a hand lightly on Jasper’s shoulder.

“Yep,” Jasper responded, blinking. He looked away quickly, trying to focus his eyes on something, anything that would distract him from the horrible, long-dormant feeling that threatened to rupture his calm. His eyes fell upon an old silo with half its roof missing. The edges of the metal were rusty.

“You'd think you'd get used to this after a while.” The cop’s voice wavered. When Jasper looked back and saw him wiping his nose on a crumpled tissue.

“Nope,” Jasper gave his characteristic polite grunt. His gut tightened of its own accord, as did all the muscles in the lower half of his body.

Jasper turned away completely, busying himself with readying the wheel-lift on the truck. Hopefully, Ole Copper wouldn't notice the excited bulge that protruded beneath the front of his pants.

Now, even without the coppers around, he didn’t dare let himself enjoy his reaction to what he had seen. He throbbed with dull, unrelieved pain. He shifted gingerly

in his seat, unable to find a comfortable position. His face was surely still blushing.
Great. He felt like a high schooler trying to conceal a surprise boner in class.

He twisted the volume knob on the dash until his eardrums hurt and sang louder.

“I’d ring out danger! I’d ring out warning! I’d ring out love...”

West

Sitting in the shade of a large wooden sign advertising a farm stand five miles that-a-way, Kyle pulled a pack of Twinkies out of his shorts pocket and inspected them. They were smashed, but he only shrugged and tore into them. He peeled the wrapper open and licked the sweet mess off the little piece of waxed cardboard inside. It made for a few good mouthfuls, at least, but it was hardly worth the energy he had put into stealing them from that convenience store he had passed early in the morning.

Most guys returned from their first few months in the Marines with the hero status, even though they have not yet seen combat. Kyle returned without fanfare and found himself unemployed and living with his parents. The last day before he hit the road, his father had fired the words *mooch*, *lazy*, and *loser* at him like hate-fueled projectiles. “You can’t just sit around here and feel sorry for yourself,” his father had said. “Go mooch off the government if you want to. But I know the truth: There’s nothing wrong with you except that you are a lazy, self-entitled kid who couldn’t handle the military.”

Kyle was carless, but that was not a problem. He knew the way to California. He figured at the rate he was going, he could make it to Camp Pendleton by, say, winter. Especially if he could hitch a few rides.

A semi passed. The wind it kicked up blew road dust into his face. It went inside his sunglasses, up his nose, in his mouth. The sugary grit of the Twinkie mush was now plain old dirt grit.

“Welcome home, Private,” Kyle muttered. Then he pulled off his shoes and socks very carefully, checking his feet for cracks and blisters. “S'all good. Oorah.”

The Twinkie-and-dust mixture in his mouth made his spit thick. He knew the sugar was a bad idea. After the initial bliss of sweetness, he felt even thirstier than he already was. Now the grit of sandy dust ground between his teeth. Nothing would taste better than water. A drink, a swim, a shower, a rainstorm, a stream, a ditch. Anything wet, but the colder, the better.

He slipped the straps of his backpack off his shoulders and swung it around to his lap. The milk jug he had filled up at a gas station the day before was empty and hung from the strap clipped through its handle. But he still had a smaller water bottle inside his pack. If he sipped at it little by little throughout the day and found some kind of shade soon, his water reserves would outlast the worst of the heat.

Kyle's smile quickly faded as he felt the wetness on his legs.

“No. Aw, c'mon, man,” he growled. He picked up the backpack, and sure enough, the stupid thing was wet at the bottom. He dug through the bag and pulled out the water bottle. The lid was still on tightly, but the seam in the plastic had split at the bottom, and water leaked out.

“Great, now my stuff's wet. Aw, come on!” Kyle slammed the backpack to the ground and pounded his heels against the dirt.

With nothing left to drink and no water in the stream bed nearby, Kyle picked up his bag again and tried to suck water out of the bottom of it. Nothing. Now his mouth tasted like Twinkie gunk and mud. Cursing under his breath, he struggled to his feet, using the signpost for support. He tested his weight on his bad knee. It would hold him. He walked gingerly to the road and scanned the horizon. He couldn't see any towns. Maybe he could bum a ride from the next car going this way.

East

“The past is in the past, the past is in the past,” Jasper sang tunelessly to himself. His gear-shifting hand gripped the knob so hard, his fingers turned white. His erection was gone. He took slow, deep breaths, willing his heart to slow down and his tortured face to smooth itself out. He unclamped his hand from the gear shift and turned the radio's volume down to a less painful level.

No one knew about the summer of 1984. No one knew about Cassie. That was 1,500 miles away and three decades ago, the last summer Jasper had gone by his given name, Robbie Evans. He had been careful after it was over, covering his tracks and making sure no one knew enough about him to put two and two together. Any slip-up, though, could cost him his anonymity. A look that lasts too long. Any sign that he had more than just a bystander's curiosity about roadside carnage.

He whispered to himself, “You're safe. No one even looked for her.”

Jasper—Robbie—had never learned Cassie's last name. He had found her sobbing at a truck stop in Washington state while he was running a load of lumber south. She was

a beautiful, broken mess with makeup smeared around her eyes like a raccoon's circles, her curls hanging limply around her face, her clothes rumpled, her jeans torn at one knee. She could not have been older than twenty. When he had pulled off the highway, Robbie had only intended to get some dinner and maybe a shower if one was available. Instead, he found himself gravitating toward this girl sitting alone on a parking block in front of the little 24-hour greasy spoon.

“You alright, miss?” Robbie asked. Not sure what to do with his body just then, he leaned on the front window with his thumbs through his belt loops. The girl blew her nose on a tissue and crammed it into her pocket.

“I’ll be fine,” she said with a cracking, shaking voice. Sniffing, she looked upward and wiped beneath her eyes with her fingers. They came away black.

“You sure don’t look alright,” he mused.

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I don’t. My boyfriend just ditched me here. Well, I guess he’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

“I suppose not,” Robbie said. All at once, he noticed every detail about this girl. He saw that, even under the fluorescent lights, her hair was not one shade of blonde, but three or four. She didn’t have dark roots, so the color was the one God had given her. Her neck was long and delicate. Robbie could almost feel the gentle thrum of the pulse in her thin veins. Her eyes stood out, a shocking shade of blue against their red rims. There was a wildness to those eyes. Robbie couldn’t look away. What was she searching for? A shiver struck the small of Robbie’s back, and he felt sweat start up on his neck. He had to do something. He wanted to help her. He wanted her breath to stop hitching in her throat like that. He wanted her to smile.

Quietly, he asked, “Can I buy you something to eat?”

Those wild blue eyes narrowed. She was sizing him up to see if he was a creep. Could she run away if she needed to? Could she hit him hard enough to stop him? Robbie had played this scene out in his head a hundred times as he rolled past travel plazas. A helpless young girl comes to him, begs his assistance, and he saves the day. He fixes whatever is broken about her, and she rides with him. She lets him in, lets him understand her inner workings, feel her engine, classify her parts, find out what makes her hum. If he was very quiet, if he quieted her down, too, could he hear her blood flow?

These were, of course, thoughts he kept to himself. He knew that his little daydreams, as he called them, would offend most people. No one liked to acknowledge the intriguing nature of the fragility of life. People went on their way from day to day, never thinking about how life could be snatched away from them, and how exciting the experience could very well be.

The racoon-eyed girl's look eventually softened at Robbie's offer of a meal. Instead of shooting him a rude response, she grabbed her new-looking red duffel bag and said with a shrug, “Sure, why not?”

So Robbie found himself having BLTs with Cassie from California. According to her story, which Robbie knew could have been ninety percent bull, she had run away from home when she was sixteen and never looked back. Her folks were strict, and she just wanted to be free. She had been on her own for a while, moving from boyfriend to boyfriend, from city to city, having adventures. Most of her experience had been good, but her current adventure had not worked out, and now she was trying to get to the City of Eugene.

As broken, broken Cassie went on, talking with her mouth full sometimes and stopping only to take a bite of her sandwich or a drink of her Coke, Robbie found that all he wanted was for the bitter clenching of her jaws to loosen, for the harshness in her words to smooth out. He wanted her to be quiet. He wanted to hear her engine, not her words. He could help. He knew it. So he offered her a ride.

Early in the morning, the lumber truck flew down sleepy highways, the dawn light making the forests on either side glow. There had been rain in the night, and highway sparkled. Cassie slept curled up in the seat next to him with her head resting on her duffel bag against the window. Robbie wanted to wake her to show her the view, but he decided against it. Only in sleep was her brow uncreased. She looked so peaceful, and their ride together was almost over.

The signs for the first Eugene exits came into view. The signs for the last exits to Eugene passed. The truck rolled on, hitting a bump in the highway, waking up his cargo. Cassie sat upright, sniffing loudly. Her eyes were puffy, and her hair went every which way. “Mm,” she croaked. “What time is it?”

“Half past seven,” he answered.

“Where are we?”

“Oh, just outside of Eugene,” Robbie sighed.

Cassie seemed satisfied with this for another hour, but then she started reading the signs along the highway.

“Lowell?!” she exclaimed, her voice rising in pitch. “That’s the wrong side of Eugene. What are you doing? Turn around! Go back!” When Robbie didn’t answer, she said, “Robbie, let me out of this truck. You let me out right now!”

“I’m sorry, Cassie, I can’t do that. Not until I help you.”

It took some doing, but in the end, Cassie did stop struggling. His arms stung from where her fingernails scratched them, but she lay peacefully in his truck for the rest of the ride into the mountains. In the pine forest covering one of the gazillion mountains on the way to Diamond Peak, Robbie found a quiet clearing and explored Cassie inside and out. He marveled at the latticework of veins and capillaries showing through her skin, then he opened the skin to wonder at them more closely. He then buried her body, smiling at her final entry into permanent peace. Then he turned the rig around at the next possible spot, abandoning it in Eureka. Robbie left on foot, thumbing rides to the Midwest, and became Jasper Block.

“That’s not ME! Not anymore!” Jasper screamed as images of broken Cassie—peaceful Cassie—ran through his mind like a flickering movie. Delicate, pale skin. Long legs with their curved muscles. Pure white bones like snow among the deep, varied reds of blood and tissue. Jasper cranked the steering wheel hard to pull over to the side of the road. The weight of the load flung itself to the side and nearly took the truck rolling with it.

He saw the girl’s face before her final ride, her tear-streaked makeup, her smile after she washed up in the restroom. He saw her unworried face as she slept in his truck on the way to Eugene, the way her hair fell off her neck as she rested her head against the window. He had reached out and stroked her vulnerable neck just once, but when she stirred, he pulled his hand away. The next images came despite his singing, despite his trying to interrupt the thoughts he could not bear to own: her wide-eyed fear as she

realized he was not stopping to drop her off at the bus station in Eugene, Oregon like he said he would. Her screaming, her sharp fingernails clawing at the flesh of his forearm. Her gasping for breath as his hands choked her to silence her screaming. The moment her face went from terror to peace again. She slept.

He had fixed with his two hands what four years of wandering the back roads of the U.S. of A. had not been able to fix. That was it, he had told himself after he had laid the tortured girl to rest next to a stream in the woods along Route 58. She had forgotten her problems. She was finally at peace. Jasper pressed the backs of his fists against his eyes until he saw little pinpoints of light, and Cassie's face faded from his mind.

A state police car was approaching, and Jasper looked wildly around the cab of his truck. Had he missed something? Did he leave some part of the ruined car at the crash site? Had his boner at the wreckage site been that apparent, his arousal so visible as to draw attention to himself?

"Aw, hell..." he whispered incredulously, high-pitched and shaky.

The cruiser passed him going at a decent speed. The driver was one of the young state troopers that had just seen. The puker. The cop nodded at him, and Jasper nodded back, holding up his radio in salute as though he'd been talking with someone from the shop.

Jasper was free because he had kept his mouth shut and kept the past where it belonged. He never so much as checked the papers to see if Cassie's body had been found.

West

Twelve. Twelve cars had passed, and not one had stopped.

Maybe there were more. Numbers were kind of fuzzy in his mind at this point. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth like it did after a night of heavy drinking.

When the sun hit the middle of the sky, Kyle stuck out a thumb. All morning, his body had been covered in a slick coating of sweat. His clothes. His underwear. Everything was soaked. His pants were hanging heavy and sticking to his legs, but his shirt was drying out quickly. The sweat had stopped.

He walked on because there was nothing else to do but keep walking. He didn't "oorah" himself along.

Another car was approaching. Kyle walked backward, watching it. He had almost stuck out his thumb when he noticed the lights on top of the car. A cop.

"Geez," Kyle whined. His hand wavered for a moment. Was it worth breaking the law if it meant a ride in a cruiser that had AC? He stuck his hands in his pockets and whirled around to face forward. He put his head down and kept walking, watching the toes of his pathetic shoes.

The police car passed without slowing down. The wind it kicked up blew across Kyle's face, and he shivered. Goosebumps rose on his arms.

"Thirteen. God," he hissed, half in prayer and half out of frustration. "I'm gonna get heatstroke out here."

His knee hurt so badly that he winced with each step. Sometimes he swerved close to the ditch, and sometimes he found his feet on the hot pavement. The wet pack had dried, and it felt unbearably heavy, even without the weight of the water he had carried the day before.

“C'mon,” he urged himself. “One foot in front of the other. Another car will come. It's gotta come. Can I get an oolah, Private?” He only snorted in response.

The sun and one flimsy cloud were the only two things moving across the unremarkable landscape. He wished that the flat Illinois fields would sprout a freaking tree or two. The tallest thing for miles around was knee-high soybeans. He wanted to lie down between the rows of beans, but he knew that if he lay down without getting some water, he was dead. So he kept walking, this time holding his thumb out without caring if the police drove by again. Or maybe he was daring the cops to pick him up. He didn't care what happened to him now as long as he got a drink.

East

Up ahead, someone walked along the side of the highway, thumb out, headed straight for the Brady's Towing and Repair truck. Jasper swallowed his metallic fear as he eased his foot off the gas. How long ago had he seen Officer Queasy?

From the thin, broad-shouldered hitchhiker staggered drunkenly with one arm extended, wandering onto the road first, then stumbling off into the gravel. But this was no ordinary case of an idiot with gallons of bravado and not a drop of water to drink. Something else was wrong with him.

Jasper knew that walk. This was no pleasure hike, but the gait of a person who wanted to get away from something. Otherwise, he would have stopped as soon as his body hurt. With a limp like that, his leg was probably badly injured. But the kid staggered on, no matter the heat or pain he must endure. Jasper had walked his share of miles like

that back when he was Robbie and needed to get away from Oregon. Away from Cassie, or what remained of her.

An engine deep inside Jasper began to purr, one that had not sparked to life since he was young. In the space of a few rapid breaths, he knew what he wanted to do. Twenty miles to the west and a few miles north up a gravel road, there was an old barn that barely stood with one wall flapping in the wind. The dangerous, dipping angle of the dilapidated roof shielded the spot from curious eyes. No one owned the farm it sat on, thanks to a dispute between the government and whomever had lived there in the past. It was the perfect place to give the ailing kid some rest. With one gesture, he could smooth out the pained expression that was coming into focus. Jasper was confident that he could unwrinkle the forehead and close the eyes that rolled in his head a little as he still squinted against the unrelenting sunlight.

Jasper glanced around to make sure that this stretch of road was clear of both houses and traffic. The nearest house was so far away it was barely a blur on the horizon. Now that the beans were planted, there wouldn't be so much as a tractor on this road in the middle of the day.

"Nobody can know," he crooned to himself, letting his hand slip off the gearshift and adjust the reawakened sex in his pants. "Nobody will know."

"No. Keep driving. Don't be sloppy," he answered himself in a low tone. "Think. The past is over. Done. Kaput. Ka-blooeey." He slammed his free hand against his thigh. He rolled to a stop across from the hitchhiker.

The kid's head jerked up at the sound of Jasper's voice through the rolled-down window. Jasper nodded and touched the brim of his baseball cap. The kid looked at him

through half-closed eyes. Jasper shifted his truck into park. If he drove the understood speed limit of fifty-five miles per hour, he would be at the barn in about thirty-six minutes. He pushed his old red duffel bag of tools out of the passenger seat. They fell onto the floorboard with a clunk like a heavy chain.

“Help is on the way,” he whispered.

To the hitchhiker, he called out, “What are you doing out here, son?”

West

“Dang chigger butts. Butts. Chugger bits. No. Ch-ih-gger bits,” Kyle giggled as his parched mouth gnawed on the words like a huge gummy bear.

“Chigger bites,” he corrected himself.

No matter how much his eggs litched—no, his legs itched, he could not stop to scratch at those bites. He didn’t try it because the last time he had bent down to scratch at the new round of critter bites, he had pitched forward and face-planted on the ground like a drunk. Now his cheek was raw and throbbing.

“Am I drunk?” he asked aloud. “No. Maybe. Heh. I wish.”

Fever made words difficult to come by. His jaw was too heavy to open and close. His arms were a dead weight at his sides. The backpack he was carrying felt like someone had taken out the sweatshirt and socks and replaced his stuff with cinder blocks. Somewhere in that bag, he might have some lotion or something to put on those bites. He couldn’t get the backpack off.

He saw stars at the edges of his vision. The sparkling polka dots fizzled and darkened quickly into black, swimming spots.

One step, two steps, c'mon, Kyle. "Oorah, buddy. Oorah."

Truck.

Look up, idiot, he thought. There is a truck. Stop that truck.

Kyle straightened up as best he could and stopped facing the vehicle. The old, white tow truck had a busted-up car in the back. It struck him as funny how in his current state, he couldn't get his mouth around simple words, but he could notice every detail of the truck, with the black and blue letters spelling Brady's Towing and Repairs on the doors, the rusted chrome bumper, the mud splattered up around the wheels, the filthy driver side door handle. He even noticed that the car in back had blood all over the windshield.

The truck came to a stop right across from him, and he staggered across the road to the driver's door.

"Are you all right?" an old man asked. He was mostly bald, and his face was wrinkled yet dignified in a way that both reminded Kyle of Gene Hackman and made him giggle.

"I'm--" Kyle said between high-pitched, slow giggles, "I'm- Can you, um."

"Need a ride into town?" the man asked, finishing his thought for him.

"Uh-huh."

"Here," the man said, handing Kyle a gas station Styrofoam cup. Ice rattled in the cup as Kyle took it in his shaking hand. "Drink up. It's hotter'n hell out here."

Standing where he was in the middle of the road, Kyle slurped at the straw like a desperate, suckling pig. The man put a hand out the window toward the cup. "Slow down, kid, you're gonna make yourself puke."

“Uh,” Kyle said. The world was swimming around him. He tried to make it stop by staring up into the man’s face. “I need to lie down.”

“Come on around and get in,” the man ordered gently. His hooded eyes looked alarmed. “I’ll put on the AC.”

Kyle leaned against the truck, sliding along the front of it to the passenger door. The soda only stayed down for a few seconds. Hanging onto the bumper, he bent over and retched up the fizzy brown mess all over his shoes. The bumper burned against his hands and arms. He made his way to the door. He couldn’t get the stupid handle to work, so the man leaned over and opened it from the inside.

“Thanks, man.”

“Yup,” the man said. He held out a hand. Kyle took it and let the guy pull him up into the truck. It took a couple of tries.

East

The hitchhiker didn’t climb into the seat so much as he fell in, backpack still on, one leg held out straight, stiff.

“What on earth are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?” Jasper asked.

“Just walking,” he said. He struggled both to sit up and to get his arms out of the backpack straps.

“Here,” Jasper said, grabbing the backpack by its top handle. The kid leaned forward and let his arms fall out of the straps. As Jasper moved the bag, the kid fell back against the seat and shut the truck door. Jasper hit the gas a little fast. The kid didn’t bother buckling up. He closed his eyes as his head bumped against the headrest.

It couldn't have been easier. This one didn't ask where Jasper was headed. He didn't open his eyes at all. Jasper put up the windows and blasted the air conditioning, pointing all the vents at his passenger. The kid moaned his approval, and that was it. His skin was bright red, though from sun sickness or sunburn, Jasper couldn't tell. Those sun-tortured arms were covered in goose pimples. A steel ball chain hung around the kid's neck, holding a set of military dog tags nestled between his hardened nipples. So young, so hurt. So broken.

"What are you doing walking in the heat like that?" Jasper asked, rephrasing his question to avoid a one-word answer.

"Just. . . going. Gotta get out of there." He was shivering.

"There?"

"Yeah." The kid peeked an eye open, and Jasper nodded and looked away, fixing his stare on the road in front of him. He kept his right hand low on the wheel, hoping his arm shielded his crotch from view.

The kid didn't say much else, and Jasper didn't ask any more questions.

When Jasper turned onto the uneven gravel road, the kid slid across the seat and thumped against the door. He didn't try to sit back up. Jasper pulled him back onto the seat, and the kid slumped, sliding halfway onto the floorboard.

Despite the ball of energy that had gathered itself in his stomach, Jasper made himself drive slowly. It wouldn't do to lose his wreckage on the side of this road. He busied himself considering whether he needed to change his name and move again. It was harder to disappear these days. Harder to take a new name. People practically needed identification to piss. He doubted anyone had seen him come this way with a passenger.

“Looks like it’s just us two, kid,” he said to the hitchhiker. It wasn’t likely that anyone was going to be looking in the middle of nowhere for a guy who left of his own will.

The barn finally came into view. Jasper’s shoulders relaxed, and he realized he had been shrugging them nearly up to his ears. Grasses and weeds had grown up waist-high around the property, from the barn all the way up to the house. He turned into the drive and found the same situation on the other side of the house. No one had been out this way in months, if not longer. At least no one who knew the property.

“Look, kid! That wobbly old thing’s still standing.”

The kid didn’t answer. Jasper didn’t expect him to.

He cut the engine, leaving his truck on the gravel to keep from making tire tracks in the grass. He slid down from the truck and hurried over to the hitchhiker’s side. He opened the door and patted the boy’s face, which was not the same bright red that it had been thirty-six minutes ago. No response. The boy’s eyes mouth hung open slightly. His struggle-born crow’s feet were smoothed out. No worry or pain tightened the skin around his mouth. Jasper let his fingers linger along the cooling cheek.

“You beat me to it,” Jasper said softly, stroking the dirty neck. “You’re already fixed.”

He lifted the kid out of the truck, surprised to find the task easy. The hitchhiker was light, and Jasper felt more alive than he had in nearly three decades. Jasper hooked the limp arm across his shoulders and lifted him down, then he adjusted his grip and dragged his passenger into the barn. After arranging the body on the floor, Jasper went back to retrieve duffel bag of tools from the cab of the truck.

With the work of fixing done, all that was left to do was to admire what nature had claimed for itself—the interwoven veins, the unbroken maze of internal organs, the pure pink of tissues that had never been exposed to the air.

Dust

Cheyenne Wilkins pretended she was not home when the national guardsmen pounded on her door during the evacuation. After turning off the lights, pulling the blinds, and locking the doors, she hid in a storage cabinet in the cellar. She hoped there were no spiders down there, but she knew the truth. The house was over a hundred and thirty years old, and the basement was dirt and stone. Of course there were spiders. It was more realistic to hope that the spiders wouldn't bite.

Cheyenne wrapped her arms around herself in a tight hug and held her breath as she heard the loud rumble of a truck idling on the street and the sound of boots tromping up the stairs to the front door. Someone pounded on the door, and a man's voice called out, "Hello? Are you in there?"

They waited, and Cheyenne waited.

"This is a mandatory evacuation. If you are in there, you need to come with us now." The bullhorn distorted and scratched the guardsman's voice.

After a while, the boots tromped down the front stairs. She heard pounding on the back door and the same voices calling out. Then came the squeal of the bulkhead doors opening. Cheyenne closed her eyes.

"Hello? Anyone home?" A pause, then a second voice. "Yeah, this one's empty. Let's go."

The bulkhead doors closed. Muffled voices continued to talk, then the idling truck kicked into gear. Its rumble faded, but Cheyenne stayed still a while longer in case the people came back. They didn't.

"Cheyenne? Are they gone?" Laura whispered.

Cheyenne jumped at the voice. She had nearly forgotten about the girl who had shown up at her door that morning asking for help. A neighborhood kid. Nobody she had seen before, but that wasn't saying much, since she didn't exactly hang out on her front porch watching kids play.

"I think so," Cheyenne answered.

Glad to get out of the cold, damp spider's den she had camped in for the past two hours, Cheyenne pushed open the door to the wooden cabinet that had stood empty the few years she had lived in the house. She never kept anything in the basement because it flooded every spring. She had no idea how many decades that cabinet had stood in the cellar. It could have been a hundred years old, for all she knew.

Laura emerged from the shadows, brushing dirt off her arms. "It took them forever to go through this block. Do you think they'll come back?"

Cheyenne shrugged. "Why would they? They want to get out of here, too."

"True."

Cheyenne covered her nose and mouth with the light blue scarf she had been wearing around her neck. No longer an accessory, the scarf was a necessity. She pushed open the bulkhead doors, which opened easily despite the squealing of the rusty iron hinges. She emerged from the cellar into the choking yellow air. She stopped to let Laura pass.

"Cover your face!" Cheyenne demanded. Her eyes stung and teared up.

"I'll be fine," Laura said. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and jogged up the stairs, past Cheyenne, and up to the front door. Cheyenne shut the bulkhead and unlocked

the front door with the key that hung with her gym membership card on a lanyard around her neck.

The wind gusted and nearly pulled the glass door out of Cheyenne's hand, but she managed to catch it before it banged against the wall and shattered. She made quick work of sealing the edges of the door with wide strips of painter's tape so the dust wouldn't get in.

Dust had completely upended life in Oceanfront. It wasn't sand, which blew around the seaside town all year long; it was strange yellow dust that hovered over the town in a choking cloud, no matter how hard the wind blew—which it did, and quite hard, at that.

It started with a city infrastructure project. Excavators bit into the hot blacktop like a cracker and left clumps of stinking dirt piled up on sidewalks and in people's yards. It was yellow, acrid, and clumped up with sorry, dried tree roots twisted through it. City workers said the water mains were old and needed to be replaced. Water had been leaking from those mains off and on since Nixon was president, tainting the sandy soil with rust. The construction crew dug that muck out from underneath the roads, planning to re-plumb the entire town. They only dug up Cheyenne's neighborhood, though. Then they stopped.

No one could place the smell of that dirt when it hit their nostrils. It was sour, not quite like vinegar, and earthy, not quite like mushrooms, but more like rot. When it rained, the stink got worse, and little bits of the yellow stuff dissolved into the grass.

Cheyenne never thought anything could be as messy and pervasive as sand—that is, until the weather turned dry and that awful yellow dust began to blow around.

That hot, droughty summer, dust got into everything—the laundry on the line, every surface in the houses, even people’s hair and teeth, tasting like rotten, mushroomy dirt. It washed off easily, but as soon as anything was washed, the dust covered it right up again. On the windiest days, dust pelted and tore at exposed skin. On still days, it strangled the air and hung like smog over the entire town. People joked that the hazy sky looked like Beijing on a good day. Those who had been to the desert called the phenomenon what it was: a dust storm. Plants began dying off, and the grass turned brown, the likes of which had not been seen since the drought of 1988. Meteorologists and geologists alike were stumped by the existence of a dust storm of its makeup, isolated to one location, a location known for its humidity and healthy saltwater air.

The little town made national news, and people from all over the world offered up guesses as to why a dust cloud might hover over a single location. Some people guessed volcanic activity such as fissures or a lava vent. Others guessed the beginning of a long-term storm like the one that had been raging on Jupiter’s surface for centuries. Still others guessed over-paving or over farming. More guessed industrial pollution, but air samples showed nothing but an excessive amount of that smelly construction dust in the air.

Before the yellow dust blotted out the sky, the children in Cheyenne’s neighborhood were thrilled to see the big machines tearing up their streets. They acted like it was a beach holiday, waving at the excavators, digging their little shovels into the muck that piled near their houses, flinging it at one another. Then they started coughing. Croupy barks came from half of the houses at all hours.

Like most of the other people living in the construction area, Cheyenne had called City Hall to complain about the mess and the dust in the air. The people at City Hall said dusty air was common around road construction. They said there was nothing dangerous in the dust, though it was not good to sit there and breathe it all day. They told Cheyenne to keep her windows shut like she was already doing. Soon, however, the utility workers started wearing face masks.

By mid-July, every preschool, every store, every street echoed with those deep, lung-ripping coughs. Daycares sent home notes warning about pneumonia outbreaks. Overbooked pediatricians and doctors turned patients away at the door and handed out prescriptions for cough medicine, antibiotics, and antihistamines as though they were handing out stickers. After about a month of this, the CDC stepped in and gave the sickness a name: dust pneumonia.

Dust pneumonia had not been seen in such numbers since the Dust Bowl. A couple of babies died from it that summer. So did Wally, who lived next door to Cheyenne with his daughter, Shirley. He was ninety years old and on oxygen already before the dust started flying. Most people were fine because they had the sense to stay indoors and keep their houses buttoned up tight.

The regular road construction crew Cheyenne nodded to every morning was soon replaced with a new crew wearing helmets with face masks that had weird little fans on them. The Red Cross showed up in town with surgical masks for everybody. The city called each homeowner and asked them to kindly relocate until construction was finished. Most people heeded the warning and went up to their cabins, or they stayed with friends

and family outside of town. Some went to stay at the church up on the hill, which had opened its gymnasium for a shelter because it had cleaner air.

All at once in the middle of August, construction stopped. The hazmat-suited crew left open holes on the street with metal framing inside and orange cones and piles of the acrid dirt around them. Anyone who dared to drive had to do so by memory, avoiding five-foot-deep trenches on one side of the street. It mattered little because almost everyone had already left town.

Businesses closed down until the dust settled. Grocery store shelves emptied quickly, from bottled water all the way down to the stuffing mix and mushroom soup. The law office where Cheyenne worked as a legal secretary was closed, and all her coworkers had already left town. The only reason Cheyenne stayed behind was that she had no family to go to and no friends to speak of. Her father was dead, and she did not know where her mother was; she hadn't seen her since she was six. With no idea of where to go and no money for a hotel, Cheyenne opted to stay home and try to keep the dust out. She covered her windows with plastic and stuffed the cracks around the doors with weather stripping. She played Christmas music because it seemed funny to be winterizing the house in June. Her efforts proved effective; only a little dust made its way into the house whenever she opened the door. Without air conditioning, though, the summer heat became unbearable in her little fortress. Cheyenne tossed, turned, and coughed instead of sleeping, and the only clothing she could bear to wear were tank tops and underpants. She found comfort in taking lots of cool baths and sitting in front of her fan.

The first two weeks or so of Cheyenne's confinement were almost fun. She binge-watched her favorite television shows and ate popsicles. She did yoga. She read books and spent countless hours goofing off on the Internet. She rationed her food carefully, knowing that she would have to leave town when her well-stocked food supply ran out. She always had enough tuna packets and rice on hand to feed twenty people for a month. She did, however, allow herself the unlimited indulgence of expensive, locally-roasted coffee because she practically bought the stuff in bulk. The dust storm was not likely to outlast her coffee supply.

After those first two weeks, Cheyenne reached the end of the information superhighway and became bored with streaming television shows. Accompanied by her collection of Pandora stations, she cleaned her house from top to bottom, organizing every closet, drawer, and shelf. She gathered up a trash bag full of items to give away to Goodwill. She mopped the hardwood floors and even used a toothpick to scrape the cracks where the floors and walls met. She washed and dried the curtains and bedsheets, rubbed leather cleaner into her black leather sofa, and cleaned the oven. She redid the grout on a section of tile that had come loose in the bathroom. Then the internet stopped working. When the music stopped, all Cheyenne could hear was the sound of dirt hitting the windows, a blizzard of filth assaulting the house. Silence was no good because it wasn't silence at all; it was the sound of the storm that had trapped her for days on end. She let out one loud scream-growl and switched on the radio. Dust had begun to accumulate on the first floor of the house, so she began her cleaning routine again, this time out of agitation instead of determined concentration.

The day the radio stations announced that the National Guard was coming to town to assist with mandatory evacuations, Cheyenne awoke from a nightmare about being buried alive. Sweat covered her body, and big clumps of yellow gunk had gathered in the corners of her eyes despite the eye flushes and eyedrops she had used faithfully since the dust began flying. She scowled at her puffy, gunky-eyed self in the mirror. If she had to spend one more day locked up in this prison, she just might go mad. The walls she had lovingly painted when she moved in now seemed too close. She had had enough. Enough dust on her toast. Enough grit on her teeth and tongue. Enough coughing in her sleep. Evacuations were coming anyway. No need to sit around and wait for them.

Cheyenne packed her phone charger, a book, and a few days' worth of summer clothes into her camping backpack along with a sleeping bag and bedroll. She donned her surgical mask and hefted her backpack onto her shoulders with every intention of leaving behind the house she had bought two years ago and waiting out Dust Bowl Version 2.0 in the gymnasium at the church on the hill. If the air was not clear there, she would find a campsite somewhere. She turned the doorknob and pulled the door, only to jump and scream as she came face to face with a young girl.

“Sorry,” the girl said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No, no, it’s okay.” Cheyenne said. “I was just—sorry, I wasn’t expecting anyone. Wait. Why on earth are you outside?”

“Can I come in?” the girl asked, gesturing toward the air around her. “It’s a little—”

“Yeah, of course! Come in.” The girl stepped into the kitchen, bringing a little puff of dust with her. The girl couldn’t have been more than ten years old. She wore

cutoff jean shorts with knee socks, dorky green suede sneakers that were cool a few years ago, and a yarn ribbon that held her hair back from her face. She wasn't wearing a face mask or a scarf.

"I'm Laura," the girl said, brushing herself off and shaking her hair behind her. Cheyenne closed the door. Her jaw tightened when she saw a drift of dust just inside the door.

"I'm Cheyenne. I was just—" Cheyenne looked for words, but she couldn't remember what she was going to say. She stared at Laura's pink cheeks, her wide brown eyes.

Laura said. "Dirt is coming in through the crack in the door."

Sure enough, yellow was clumping at one corner of the doorframe. A small piece of weather stripping had come loose and was sticking out. Cheyenne let her backpack fall to the floor behind her and stuffed the weather stripping back into position.

"Why are you out alone? Where are your parents?" Cheyenne asked. No, that wasn't what she wanted to know. But it would do for now. She straightened up.

"I can't find them. And I don't want to be out here alone." Laura's forehead was creased with worry, and she sucked her top lip in.

"Wait—they just *left* you? How could they possibly leave their kid behind?"

"I don't know," Laura said quietly, almost a whisper. Her chin started to crumple.

Not wanting to have a strange kid crying in her kitchen, Cheyenne jutted out her own chin and said, "Well, we'll find them. What street do you live on?"

"Elderberry. But they're not home. The door is locked, and nobody answers when I ring the bell." Laura swallowed hard and forced her bottom lip to stop wavering. She

had to hand it to the kid; she was doing a great job of not freaking out. This dust storm had everyone in town terrified.

“What if your parents are out looking for you?” Cheyenne asked. “I could just call them. What’s their number?”

Cheyenne bent down and got her phone out of a small side pocket of the backpack.

How hard could it be to get the kid to her parents? They were probably at the church shelter. Cheyenne was headed that way, anyway.

“We don’t have a phone,” she said.

“Oh. That complicates things a little. Hm.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, and Laura’s tears started up a storm of their own.

Cheyenne put her hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Hey, hey. It’s going to be okay. We’ll find them. Don’t worry.”

After a few awkward minutes of awkwardly patting Laura’s shoulder, the girl sniffled and took a few hitching breaths.

Cheyenne hated to be this way, but she had her guesses as to where the girl’s family lived if they were too poor to have a phone. Down at the end of Elderberry Street, there was a small apartment building with a crumbling front porch. It contained only six apartments, but that small building was responsible for most of the police calls in the neighborhood. It was an anomaly in the neighborhood; the rest of the houses were decent, and emergency services were rarely needed. Everywhere else, only when one of the elderly people died did the silent ambulance enter the neighborhood with its flashing

lights. But at the end of Elderberry, Friday nights were lit up with flashing patrol car lights.

Wind pushed against the door and rattled the windows. Something hit the side of the house. Both Cheyenne and Laura jumped, and Cheyenne said, “Why don’t we wait ‘til the wind dies down? You want a Coke?”

“Sure,” the girl said, and Cheyenne brewed a cup of coffee for herself and got a can of soda from the fridge for Laura. While dust drifted up around the doors to the house, Cheyenne plugged in her old DVD player and unpacked a box of DVDs that she kept in the extra closet. The girl had not seen any of the movies in the box. Laura opened one of the DVD cases and stared at the disc inside, clumsily lifting it out and staring at the rainbow-mirrored back, tilting and inspecting it like she had never seen one before. Cheyenne felt sorry for her. The kid was poor enough to be partying like it was 1979. But if this storm and lack of internet had taught Cheyenne anything, it taught her that it was possible to live without electronics. Not fun, but possible.

Hours passed, and the wind blew. Dust pelted the window with the *tikka-tik* of snow during a blizzard. Two movies later, the wind began to lessen, and the brownish daylight brightened a little. As Cheyenne was getting ready to put in the first Spiderman DVD, Laura suddenly straightened up on the couch, dropping the blue toss pillow she had been hugging.

“I think they’re coming,” she whispered.

“Who?” Goosebumps rose on Cheyenne’s arms. She stayed still on her knees in front of the DVD player, listening. A new sound had replaced the wind and pelting dust: a whooping siren followed by a loud, garbled voice.

“Oh! The evacuations!” Cheyenne smacked herself in the forehead. How could she have forgotten that the National Guard was coming? How had she forgotten to go to the church on the hill? “Hey, they’re going to evacuate us anyway. How about if I take you to the church, and we can look for your parents there?” Cheyenne stood up and turned off the television.

“No!” Laura said sharply, making Cheyenne jump a little.

“We can’t leave, not without my parents! Please!”

“Well, we can’t stay here! Those National Guard guys are here to make us leave.”

“We can hide.”

“Hide? Where?”

“I don’t know. Downstairs? And if you don’t find my mom and dad, then I’ll go with you to the church. Please. I can’t leave here without them.”

Cheyenne shuddered at the thought of spending any time in her moldy, leaky basement. But it wouldn’t take long to drive to Elderberry Lane and check on the girl’s parents. The church was only a mile and a half away after that, and once she got out of this neighborhood, there would not be any holes in the streets.

Cheyenne thought for a moment. Why was this kid suddenly her problem? Then she quickly chided herself for having such a selfish thought. “Okay. Fine. Help me turn off the lights.”

Now that the National Guard had left and taken the remaining dust storm holdouts with them, an eerie calm had settled over the hazy, yellow neighborhood. It was silent. No wind was blowing. Cheyenne could see only as far as the next house, and anything beyond that was a murk of shadows. As she breathed into her face mask, her hot breath steamed up the lenses of the sunglasses she put on to keep the dust out of her already stinging eyes. She glanced back at Laura, who had given in to Cheyenne's demanding that she wear a face mask, too. The girl stepped forward and held onto Cheyenne's arm. Even walking like that, Cheyenne could not see Laura clearly.

Cheyenne led the girl to her car, pressing the unlock button as she walked. She threw her backpack into the backseat and climbed into the driver's seat. Laura quietly settled herself into the passenger seat.

"Don't forget your seatbelt," Cheyenne reminded her, and the girl complied.

"Cheyenne." Laura put her hand on Cheyenne's arm as she stuck the key into the ignition. "Thank you."

Cheyenne felt her frustration dissipate. This was just a kid who wanted to get to her parents. Cheyenne was a grownup who had the ability to help her. It was the right thing to do, and it didn't require more than a little bit of her time. What kind of person would refuse to help?

"No prob," Cheyenne said. "Let's go find mom and dad."

Cheyenne turned the key in the ignition, but nothing happened at first. She tried again, and the engine sputtered and then started to run normally.

"There we go," she said. She threw the car into reverse and stepped lightly on the gas pedal. The car lurched into motion, and Cheyenne backed down the driveway slowly.

There were no holes in the road immediately in front of her house, so she knew she would at least be able to turn the car around before she had to worry about driving into a ditch.

As she shifted the car into drive, the engine made a grinding sound. Smoke poured through the heat vents into the car.

“What on earth?” Cheyenne groaned as she slammed the steering wheel with her fist. The horn honked, and she jumped. Her heart began to race. Dust had likely blown into the car’s engine. Her entire plan, her safety and now Laura’s, depended upon having a functioning car.

“We could walk,” Laura said simply.

Frustration and fear tasted like metal in Cheyenne’s mouth. “Sure. You wanna walk through that mess out there? You wanna feel your way through a dust storm to go check on your parents? Sure, kid. Why not? Let’s go. We’ll leave the car right here in the street. It’s not like anybody is going to come this way.” She threw open her car door and got out. “But if your parents aren’t there, we’re walking to that church.”

Laura gave a thumbs up. Cheyenne got her backpack out of the car and grunted her way into it. It felt heavy. Laura came around the car and hooked her hand through Cheyenne’s arm.

“Okay. Elderberry. That street curves around. Should we go left or right?” Cheyenne asked.

“Left.” Laura stepped lightly beside Cheyenne, matching her pace as they started out for the girl’s apartment.

A gust of wind blew dust inside Cheyenne's sunglasses. She shut her eyes tight against the assault. When it was over, she opened them cautiously and asked, "You okay?"

"Yup." Laura wasn't even blinking against the wind.

Cheyenne started out walking as the wind picked up again. Elderberry Street was two blocks down. The left end of the street was where the apartment complex sat. She quickened her steps, the wind pushing hard against her back.

"When was the last time you—" Cheyenne started to call out to the girl, but the wind blew dust into her mouth. After spitting several times, she shut her mouth tight. She started to walk forward again, and then she realized that Laura was no longer holding onto her arm.

"Laura? Hey! Laura! Where'd you go?"

She spun around. Wind gusted again, taking visibility down to zero. She needed to get low, to let the wind go over her. But she was responsible for the girl. She inched along. Dust scratched the exposed skin on her face, arms, and legs. She yelled the girl's name into the wind even though it was pointless. Maybe she had fallen into one of the trenches and gotten hurt. Now that she was committed to helping the kid, there was no abandoning her.

"Right here," Laura said, in front of her this time, almost nose to nose.

Again, Cheyenne jumped.

"Oh geez, you scared me!"

"Sorry."

"How did I not see you?"

“I’m surprised you can see anything at all.”

“True.”

“Let’s go this way,” Laura said, taking Cheyenne by the hand.

She let Laura lead, feeling the hard-packed dirt of the torn-up road give way to the soft unevenness of grass. They were walking through people’s front yards. A bush snagged Cheyenne’s bare arm, tearing her skin. She tried to pull back against Laura’s grip, tried to make her slow down. Laura did not ease up; she merely reassured her that there were no holes in the yards, only the streets. To Cheyenne’s surprise, the girl’s grip was strong, and her hand was cool despite the smothering greenhouse heat. With her hand starting to go numb from Laura’s tight grip, Cheyenne was overcome by the urge to run in exactly the opposite direction of wherever she was going. She struggled harder against the girl. After all, she couldn’t weigh more than eighty pounds. How hard could it be?

“Laura. Wait. Slow down!”

“No!” Laura snapped. “We’ve come all this way. I’m not stopping yet. I don’t want to be alone out here!”

“What?” Cheyenne shuddered from the small of her back. The ripple of it reached her head, her hands, her feet. This wasn’t right. She needed to get to the church on the hill. She needed to get out of this neighborhood. Out of this town. Far away from this kid. As Laura dragged her stumbling onto Elderberry Lane, Cheyenne wondered for a second if she could figure out how to hotwire one of the cars abandoned in the driveways. Maybe she could break into a garage and steal a car that didn’t have sand in its engine.

She tried to pry Laura's fingers off her wrist. "Man, you're strong. Come on! Stop! Please! You're going to rip my arm out of the socket." Her lungs burned despite the surgical mask she wore.

Ignoring her, Laura rushed forward with the concentration of an offensive lineman. A four-and-a-half-foot offensive lineman that could haul a tank down the street by herself. "No. We have to find them," she barked.

"But I can't *see!*" Cheyenne yelled. With that, she tripped, landing on her knees on rough cement. A porch. Laura let go of her wrist, and the palms of both hands skidded against the porch.

Cheyenne was kneeling in front of the apartment building. The awning was long gone, and the wooden poles that used to support it were propped against the wall in front of her. She curled her fingers, hoping for the stinging in her hands to stop.

"My mom should be here," Laura said. "But the door is locked. I don't have a key."

Cheyenne winced and ground her teeth together as she stood up, putting as little pressure as possible on her hands. "Then push the buzzer."

"I tried. It's broken."

Now on her feet and standing close to the building's front door, the dust wasn't blowing directly into her face. It still swirled, but it wasn't a true frontal assault. "Which apartment?"

"Number three."

Cheyenne tried the buzzer herself. Of course, it did nothing. She pounded on the main entry door. “Hey! Hey! Is someone in there?” she called. Then to Laura, “What’s your last name?”

“Henson,” Laura said softly.

“Okay. Mr. and Mrs. Henson? I’m here with Laura. Please. Let us in.”

They waited. No one came to the door.

“Please,” Laura begged, touching her upper arm gently this time. “Can you find a way inside?”

Cheyenne recoiled at Laura’s touch. She opened her mouth to say no, and the word “Yes” came out instead. She meant to run away. Instead, she knocked again, harder. Then she stepped off the porch and walked around to the back of the house, where she guessed Apartment Three would be. She glanced at Laura as she passed her, and the girl nodded.

Her knees stung as she dropped to them outside the right bottom windows. The window was one of the older ones that can be jimmied open from the outside. It wasn’t locked. The screen, however, would not budge. Cheyenne moved forward, lifted her foot, and kicked at it as hard as she could. It took several tries before screen began to tear away from its frame. She also cracked the window. Good enough. She doubted anyone was home. No one would be home because anyone with any sense at all had gotten out of there while they had the chance.

“You did it! Let’s get inside. The wind is getting worse.” Laura crouched down on the ground next to Cheyenne.

After a lot of pulling and several thin gouges in her hands, the screen tore open wide enough for Cheyenne to put her arms through. She began tugging at the window, which flew up easily. A face appeared right in front of hers. She screeched and fell onto her butt. The face in the window belonged to an old woman, one with a very round body and a shock of white hair sticking up off the top of her head. She had no teeth, and her tongue moved back and forth as she seemed to struggle for breath.

The strange woman pushed the window open, straining hard as she did so. “What do you think you’re doing, breaking into my apartment? I’ll have you locked up for breaking and entering.”

“I’m sorry—I – I really didn’t think—I thought this place was abandoned.”

“Well, it’s not. Go loot somewhere else.”

“Mom?” Laura whispered softly. “Mom, look at me.”

“Wait. *That’s* your mom? But she’s—”

Laura nodded.

“Who are you?” the woman demanded.

“Are you Mrs. Henson?” Cheyenne asked.

“Yeah, why?” The woman’s tongue darted around in her mouth, so slightly reminiscent of a toad.

Cheyenne shot a look at Laura, but Laura did not look at her. She was staring hard at her mother, whispering, “Mom? Please.”

“I’m here with your daughter. She’s been looking for you.”

The tongue stopped moving. “What?”

“Your daughter? You know, Laura? The one you just left outside while dust-nado is wrecking the whole town. You can’t say you don’t see her. She’s right here.”

The woman stepped back and let out a hard breath like she had been punched in the stomach. “But—” she started.

“Mom, I’m right here. Let me in!” Laura moved closer to the window. “You don’t know how scary it is out here alone!”

Mrs. Henson did not acknowledge Laura’s presence at all. Instead, her eyes widened, her lips drew back to reveal her naked gums, and she shrieked, “Get out of here! It’s been forty years. Forty years! And they cleared me. Do you hear me? I was acquitted!”

Mrs. Henson stepped back up to the window and slammed it shut. The cracks spread further across it.

Cheyenne forgot about her stinging palms and knees. She suddenly needed to pee or throw up or do something that involved hiding in a bathroom.

“Forty years? What does she—” Cheyenne started, but when she looked up, Laura was gone.

She tried to stand up. Her legs trembled, and her lungs threatened to tear with the deep cough that overtook her. She let her scarf slide down her chin. She strained her eyes, trying to see the girl who had dragged her here. But there was no one.

Cheyenne felt her way around the building, back to the front porch. She wanted to run screaming down the street, but sense forced her to walk. She needed to go back the way she had come without getting hurt.

“Cheyenne!” Her name floated toward her from no direction, from every direction. She couldn’t tell.

Cheyenne wrapped her scarf around her face once more and moved carefully to step around bushes and cars. Her ankle turned as she stepped on a chunk of crunched up blacktop. Pain shot up the outside of her leg. She swallowed her cry of surprise and limped onward. Which way had she turned on to Elderberry?

“Cheyenne, please!”

Laura’s voice grew more insistent, louder in her left ear. Cheyenne ducked right.

“No, leave me alone,” Cheyenne whispered before she felt the ground disappear beneath her feet. As she fell, she could see the orange construction cones the workers left behind to warn everyone of the open holes.

Cheyenne’s right foot landed hard on something, jamming her leg upward. Down in the hole with the wind raging above her, she heard her femur crack before she felt it. Her body buckled and bounced, and her head hit something hard. Pain climbed her leg like a flame on a wall, burning her very self, filling her awareness. Her stomach lurched. Her head throbbed, slow and deep. The dim light above her wavered and smudged as her vision blurred.

“Laura?” she called out, surprised by the weakness of her voice. But if the girl or spirit or whatever she was could drag her down the street, she could find her and pull her out of a hole, right?

Cheyenne tried to move her arms, but she couldn’t tell if they moved because she couldn’t feel them. She lay like a rag doll draped haphazardly over something hard and rough. Her head felt wet. Maybe she had landed on water. The wind screamed and

slapped noisily overhead, showering her with dust. No one was up there, and she knew it. Giving up for the moment, she fell asleep.

Cheyenne did not know how long she lay in that trench before it started to rain. Was it minutes or hours? Did it matter? All she knew was that she awoke to fat, warm drops of muddy water splattering on her scratched-up face and hands and head. For the first time since April 28, it was raining. Slowly, as drops continued to rinse her head, her senses began to gather themselves. If it was raining, the dust storm might be ending. Rain could wash all that suffocating dirt out of the sky.

“Is it over?” she asked nobody in particular. Her voice croaked, a throaty whisper. The rain was gentle, not driving. Still, a small river of water washed down into the hole. She looked up into the sky and watched it change from brown to yellow to the pale gray-white of a rainy day.

With much care but surprisingly little pain, Cheyenne rolled onto her side, using her arms to push herself into a sitting position. She let her backpack slide off her shoulders and clunk its way down beside the huge cement water main casing on which she sat. She felt her head where it had been wet, but her fingers came away dry. She must have been passed out for a long time.

Pressing her hands on the dirt wall next to her, she stood up on the cement casing, putting all her weight on her good leg. She wondered if she could climb out of the hole on her own. If she could get a foothold, she might be able to hoist herself up, maybe using the steel beam framing that rose up from one side. It was ambitious thinking, but she had to try something instead of sitting in a hole as it filled up with muddy rainwater.

Her broken leg couldn't move on its own. She would have to hop. She began to feel along the wall for places to dig in her hands and her good foot.

“Come on,” she urged herself through gritted teeth. She clawed at the dirt wall with every bit of desperate frustration her ragged fingertips possessed. Clods of the wet, acrid stuff fell away in her hands. She kept digging until her hand finally hit something that was not dirt. It didn't feel like a rock or a pipe; there was just a little give to it. She moved her sunglasses to the top of her head and peered into the hole, brushing away more dirt.

She wiped her hand on her shirt and reached into the hole again. She felt the roughness of old suede, and after pulling a particularly large clod of dirt away from the object, she stopped, horrified, staring at the toe of a green suede sneaker.

She pulled on the shoe, and it came out of the wet hole with a loud sucking sound. The shoe was empty. She didn't find that to be a relief because she had seen that shoe before. She dropped the shoe as though it burned her fingers. She dug all the more furiously for a way out. Finally, help came in the form of a broken piece of pipe jutting out from the wall of dirt.

“Thank you, thank you,” she repeated breathlessly. Using the steel beam for support, she hefted herself onto the water main casing, then onto the pipe. While it was entirely useless, her broken leg did not hurt. She stood balanced on the pipe, inches away from reaching the top. She glanced back over her shoulder one last time and began to scream. There on the cement form lay a person—a woman who looked just like her, limbs bent at odd angles and a snapped leg bone sticking out just beneath the hem of her

shorts. The cement that held the water lines was stained brownish red around her head, and her eyes stared blankly at the sky.

“Cheyenne,” Laura said, softly, right next to her.

“I’m—” Cheyenne began, but she trailed off.

“Uh-huh,” Laura answered. She nodded her head in encouragement, a small smile forming on her lips.

“But—”

“I know.” She slipped her hand into Cheyenne’s. “But look at it this way. At least neither of us is alone.”

Corners

Something horrible was in the corners, and no one could see it but Pauline Hopper.

They slithered, snaking their way around the house, winding into the darkened spaces where the walls met, wet and wormy. When the clock ticked into the funerary silence of the living room after the sun went down, she heard them hissing and whispering. It never stopped, the constant whispering. It was almost as if--

“No. Best not to think of it,” Pauline interrupted her thoughts. Just remembering the sound of those horrible Things, for she had no other name for them, would make it real. She never dared look at one head on, and she never dared to allow herself to listen to their horrible sounds. Best to keep it that way. Pauline reached for the TV remote on its little wooden table next to her recliner and turned the volume up a notch. Jeopardy was on.

“God bless you, Alex Trebek.” The sight of that mustached face meant that in thirty minutes, the home healthcare nurse was due to arrive.

At first, Pauline had resented her daughter Libby’s decision to have a nurse come to the house. She wasn’t completely disabled, after all, just a little weak. But the nurses helped her get in and out of the bathtub, and they straightened up the house a bit. The best part was that when people came around, the Things kept quiet and still. More than once, she had asked the Hearts at Home nurses to stay for a Coke just for a few extra moments of quiet. Even more often, she invented some nit-picky chore for them to do. From time to time, she asked the nurse to help her make dinner, of which she was certainly still capable, though she didn’t much like going to the kitchen. It was too dark in there. Too many corners where the Things liked to hide. She also didn’t really care to have her

toenails painted, but if playing pedicure kept someone around to keep the Things from bothering her, she would deal with having neon pink toenails. As soon as Pauline was alone again, it was TV time.

Day and night, the TV blared in the little house. Pauline told time, not by the large clock that hung on the wall too close to the corner, but by who was on the TV screen. Jared Smith from the Local 8 news, Kelly Ripa, Rachel Ray, those crazy girls on The View, and Steve Harvey kept her company before lunch. Then came the twisted, tangled soap opera love lives, and later, John Wayne or Gene Autry, and FOX news like a spoken lullaby.

If the volume was a little loud during the daytime, it was positively blaring by nighttime. Everyone just assumed that since she was pushing ninety years old, Pauline was going deaf. She wasn't. Actually, the volume gave her a headache, but the headache was better than hearing what was waiting for her if she would just turn her head or move her eyes. It was a good thing that the neighbors made a lot of noise. She didn't complain about Reggie's loud, drunken parties or his engine revving friends; they didn't complain about her TV blaring around the clock.

In the pauses between commercial breaks and the shows, Pauline shifted uneasily in her recliner. She mentally reviewed her mantra.

There's nothing in the corners.

It's just a shadow, or mold growing on the wall.

You're just a batty old woman.

No one would believe you if you told them.

Ignore it though she might, Pauline could almost feel the slithering darkness pressed into the places where the walls met, waiting until the last visitor had gone away and left her home alone.

The paint near the door was bubbled where the walls met the ceiling. Cracks ran along the plaster walls at each corner, and a large crack ran down the middle of the living room ceiling. The cracks bothered Pauline, but she learned to ignore them so she would not be tempted to look.

“There’s nothing in the corner,” she repeated her mantra.

Alex Trebek recited his last words for the episode, and with that, Jeopardy was over. Pauline glanced expectantly at the door, which stood in the only corner that the Things did not inhabit, the brightest corner in the whole house. Maybe the light from its windows scared the Things away. Pauline turned the TV down a little to listen for the Hearts at Home car.

Commercials began and ended. The theme song for the next game show started, but the Hearts at Home nurse still wasn’t there. Where was that irresponsible girl? What was her name? Was it Amanda? Yes. Amanda. For the past month or so, Amanda had been her nurse three days a week. This girl seemed more responsible than most, spent less time on her phone than most, and seemed to know what to do without having to be told. Pauline genuinely liked her. But with every minute that passed, she found herself muttering, “Irresponsible girl. Just a kid. Why do they hire kids? So irresponsible! I would never be late to work like this!”

From the corner behind Pauline’s chair came a hiss.

“Go stand in the corner, Pauline.”

Pauline bowed her head and rose quietly from her seat, digging her fingernails into the palms of her hand to keep herself from crying. Her lower lip wobbled as she passed her classmates.

“Dunce!” someone whispered as she walked by. A tear escaped and made its way down her cheek.

“A good student is never late to school. A good student always finishes her homework, and a good student certainly always keeps her pencil in her desk instead of losing it. Put your nose to the wall, please.”

Pauline stood with her nose barely an inch away from the whitewashed walls, getting chalk dust up her nose. She sneezed. In doing so, her forehead and nose hit the wall. The class erupted into giggles. Her head smarted in two places, and there was a little bit of clear snot on the wall in front of her.

“For goodness sake, Pauline Stone, would you stop interrupting the class before I have to get out the ruler?” Miss Ableson was perhaps the meanest third grade teacher in the history of River Valley School. She handed out Fs like doctors handed out lollipops, and that ruler of hers gave many a little boy and girl welts across their legs or the backs of their hands. On top of all that, she constantly looked like she smelled something appalling. Maybe the old prune didn’t like the way third-graders smelled.

Pauline cried silently into the walls, letting the snot and tears mix on her face, not daring to wipe either away for fear of feeling the sting of that ruler across the backs of her legs. She had felt it on her hands just the day before, when she had been caught writing with her left hand. “Good students use their right hands to write legibly,” Miss Ableson

often lectured her. Only Pauline's right-handed writing was even messier than her left-handed writing.

Without warning, Pauline felt something small hit the back of her head. More giggles. Surely it was a spitwad. *Tink!* And another. She dared not even move to shake the little, wet balls of paper out of her hair. They would cling to her frizz and dry there. Oh, mother was going to have a fit if she showed up at home with welts on her legs and spitwads in her hair!

The other children's stares burned into her like fireplace pokers. She stood in the dunce corner with spitwads flying in her direction and the boys laughing at her while the girls rolled their eyes and whispered. They always whispered about Pauline, with her too-short old skirts and her daydreaming and her frequent trips to the dunce corner. The whispering happened on the playground, in the street, in the classroom, even in church--the only place she was safe from the whispers was at home.

"You may go back to your seat now, Pauline," Miss Ableson said at long last. "Irresponsible girl," she tutted softly as Pauline wiped her tear-smearred face on her sweater sleeve and walked back to her desk.

"Go stand in the corner, Pauline. The corner, Pauliiiiiiiiinnnnne," a rough whisper taunted her from behind. Pauline sat very still beneath her green granny square afghan. She pulled the end of it over her head. New voices joined the first one. Pauline peeked her head out of the afghan and chanced a glance upward. Shadowy forms slithered all around the ceiling, moving from one corner to the next. She pulled the afghan back over her head. She needed to use the bathroom, but it would have to wait.

At long last, the screen door slammed, and Pauline sat upright with a start.

“Pauline? Are you alright? What’s wrong?” Amanda asked far louder than was necessary as she dropped down to one knee next to the recliner.

“What?” Pauline asked shakily. She sniffed loudly and was surprised to find that her nose was running.

“Why are you crying? Are you okay?” Amanda pulled a Kleenex out of the box on the side table and handed it to Pauline.

“I--I--” Pauline faltered, searching for words while trying to figure out where and when she was. Had she just been in third grade again? Maybe it was a dream. But she didn’t feel like she had been sleeping; her head still hurt from bumping it against the classroom wall. But she couldn’t tell Amanda that. She had heard Libby say the word “nursing home” far too many times lately, and she had an inkling that appearing to be a confused old woman would land her there even more quickly. Everyone seemed to be against her living in her home, the home she had raised her children in. So she lied, “Oh, it was nothing. Just something I saw on TV.”

“Really?” Amanda asked, turning to look at the TV screen. “On the Four O’Clock News?”

“The news is depressing,” Pauline retorted, regaining her composure without needing the tissue.

Amanda shrugged and said lightly, “Fair enough.” She began picking up the afghans and pillows that Pauline had pushed onto the floor when she had awakened that morning. “There are blankets everywhere. Have you been sleeping in your chair?”

“Yes, I have,” Pauline admitted.

“Why? You have a perfectly good bed in your room. Are you having trouble getting to your bed?”

“No, no, of course not,” Pauline said lightly. “It’s just that my mattress is old. The springs poke me when I try to sleep.” She started to glance toward her closed bedroom door, but out of the corner of her eye, she spotted something dark near the ceiling in the hallway, in that back corner. With a shudder, she quickly turned her attention back to her nurse.

“We need to tell your daughter, then, so she can help you get a new one.” Amanda pulled a pad of paper and pen out of her pocket and started to write a note.

“No, it’s all right,” Pauline wheedled. “You already do so much, helping this old lady out. You spoil me so much, I’m going to forget how to take care of myself. Leave the bed to me. Libby is coming over for dinner. I’ll tell her about it myself tonight.”

One of Amanda’s eyebrows went up.

“I promise,” Pauline swore with a firm nod of her head.

Amanda tore off the sticky note she had been using and crumpled it. “Well, okay. Are you ready for your bath?”

“Not just yet,” Pauline said, putting up a hand to stop Amanda, who was offering her hands to help her stand. “I was wondering if you could do me a small favor first.”

Lester Holt’s authoritative baritone voice boomed throughout the house, and Pauline was so distracted by the clamor of the NBC Nightly News that didn’t hear her screen door open.

“Ma?” The sound of her daughter’s voice made her jump. She knocked over her water bottle, but thankfully, the lid was closed, and it only flipped over and landed with a thud on the floor.

“Libby,” Pauline said, smiling and waving at her youngest daughter. “Come on in,” she said. Libby was big like her father, and her heavy footsteps sounded a little like Tom’s on the steps. Normally, Pauline could hear Libby coming a mile away.

Libby crossed the threshold hesitatingly, looking around the room like a tourist who wasn’t sure she had gotten off the train at the right station. Feeling a rush of glee at the presence of another person in her house, even if it was one who was overly opinionated and tried to control everything in her poor mother’s life, Pauline grabbed the remote and switched off the TV. She sat up eagerly and kept her eyes trained on Libby’s face, not the walls.

“Ma,” Libby began slowly and loudly, “What happened to your furniture?”

Pauline glanced around her at the living room furniture, which had been moved three feet away from the wall on all sides, and answered airily, “Oh, I did some rearranging.”

“Rearranging? All the furniture is crammed together in the middle of the room. You had that home healthcare nurse do this.”

“Yes, I did. And I like it this way. I can get to everything easily.”

“Yeah, well, you can also break your neck tripping over something.” Libby pushed a chair back a few feet, and Pauline felt her face redden.

“I may be old, but I’m not that wobbly,” Pauline declared, crossing her arms over her middle. Truthfully, with the furniture arranged in a tight rectangle at the center of the

room, she had to hold onto the couch and chairs to squeeze through the openings so she could use the bathroom or get to the kitchen. The positive part was that if the television got any closer to her, she wouldn't need the remote anymore. It was just about far enough away to put the foot of the recliner up without bumping anything. "It's my furniture, and I will keep it how I like it."

Libby took a long look at her mother, then shook her head and carried a paper shopping bag into the kitchen, flipping the light on as she went. Pauline sucked in a sharp breath when Libby passed a couple of inches away from a Thing, which was hanging upside down in the corner facing her. The Thing did not move or make a sound, and Libby did not look like she noticed it. With considerable effort, Pauline put down the leg rest of her recliner and stood up. It took a while to get the lever to work. It, like everything else in the house and in her body, was wearing out. She joined Libby in the kitchen and sat down in the chair that was pulled out for her.

"What do we have tonight?" Pauline asked. She especially liked Tuesday nights because Libby brought takeout from her favorite restaurants, either Kathy's Corner or Applebee's. It would have been nicer to go out to a restaurant, but those places were all the way across town, and Libby was able to order over the phone and to pick up dinner on her way back from work.

"How does chicken alfredo sound?" Libby asked.

"That sounds nice." Pauline dug in almost ravenously, or at least ravenously for a petite, thin old woman. Many days, she barely felt hungry at all. And now that those horrible Things were lurking around the kitchen, she didn't want to go into the kitchen to cook, even if she was hungry.

“Ma, I’m worried about you. You just don’t seem like yourself lately.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Just behind Libby’s shoulder, something moved against the wall. There was a barely audible chuckle. Pauline’s hands balled into fists so tight, the knuckles turned white. She looked directly at it for the first time.

“Libby, would you mind turning on the radio?” she asked.

“I can’t see me lovin’ nobody but you for all my life,” The Turtles’ song warbled from the little radio on the counter. The same song was playing down the hall in Libby’s room. The girl hadn’t heard the doorbell. She hadn’t seen the man in uniform who showed up at the door.

“I am so sorry, ma’am,” the young man in the green army uniform said. He held his cap in his hands, passing it from one hand to the other. He had politely refused Pauline’s offer of coffee, which was probably for the best. Her hands were shaking so badly, she would have dropped the coffee. Pauline already knew why the man was there. Every mother dreaded this moment.

“No,” Pauline said simply. A firm refusal to accept what was going to come out of this man’s mouth, a desperate attempt to put off reality for a moment.

The soldier cleared his throat. Whatever he said next, Pauline barely heard and would never remember. She knew it was over, her Jimmy was dead, and it was Uncle Sam’s fault.

“Get out,” Pauline heard herself growl. “You get out of my house right now!”

“I am so sorry,” the man whispered, his voice failing him. His eyes were wet, their rims red. “Ma’am, I-”

“No! No! No! You’re lying! You get out! Just go!” She was on her feet, ready to throw him out the door. She would throw him and the couch and the entire living room out the door if she had to. Yes, she would. There was no way in the world that her Jimmy was dead. She couldn’t imagine Jimmy alone in some God-forsaken jungle, bleeding to death while the ground exploded all around him.

Jimmy, who showed up at dinnertime with his pockets full of toads and rocks and sticks of gum.

Jimmy, who had just started working at the foundry when he was drafted.

Jimmy, who was planning to marry Ellen and have sons and coach Little League.

Jimmy, who was due home at Christmas, just six months from now.

Jimmy, who was almost done fighting.

Jimmy, whose entire life, whose entire future was ruined by a man who pulled his name during a draft lottery.

The young soldier left quickly and quietly, and that was a good thing. He closed the door after himself, leaving Pauline digging her nails into her hands so hard they might actually pierce her skin. Her head hurt, and she felt faint, but she refused to collapse onto that couch and give in to the truth. Not yet. If she stayed right where she was for just a moment, she could pretend that Jimmy was still over there in some imaginary place across the ocean where everybody wore triangle hats, writing her letters all about the funny little kids in the town near where his platoon camped. For who knows how long, Pauline stayed put.

The smell of smoke snaking into the room brought her back to the moment. She turned and ran to the kitchen, throwing open the oven door and coughing as smoke billowed out. The tuna casserole was black, and the crushed potato chips on top were on fire. Pauline pulled the burning meal out of the oven, throwing the casserole dish and the oven mitts along with it into the sink. The glass cracked, and the casserole spilled out. She turned on the faucet to put out the fire, and then threw open the back door and pushed up the window over the sink to air out the room. Now Tom would not have any dinner when he got home from work. The faucet continued to run on the now-extinguished mess of cream sauce, tuna, and noodles.

“Ma? Ma.” Libby’s voice sounded thin and tinny. “Are you still there, ma?”

“What? Oh. Of course, I am.” Pauline shook her head, trying to both clear it and get some sense of where, of when she was. She was holding the phone to her ear. “I- ah, I was just saw something on the news, dear.”

“Well, I can barely hear you over it. You might want to turn that down.”

“Oh,” she said. She quickly pressed the minus sign on the remote. The TV ceased to roar, and she turned her attention to the phone. “There. Is that better?”

“Yep. Okay. Ma, I’ll be over at nine o’clock on Wednesday morning to pick you up for to go to the eye doctor.

“I don’t need an eye appointment.” Of course, Pauline knew that she did indeed need and even want a new pair of glasses. But her vision was just good enough to see that another Thing had taken up residence in the corner next to the door. She didn’t want to go anywhere near the door, even if it meant staying in that little house for the rest of her life.

“Yes, you do,” Libby said. “You’ve got that darn TV set so close to your face, you can hardly watch it without putting your nose against it.”

“I can see just fine,” Pauline snapped. “And I have my furniture the way I want it. This is my house, and I can put my TV on the-- the--- on the roof if I want to!”

Libby’s voice softened. “Okay, Ma. I’m not going to fight with you today. Look, I’ve gotta go. Talk to you soon. Love you.”

“I love you, too, Libby. But I’m not going.”

Pauline used the edge of the afghan over her legs to wipe the tears off her face. She smelled smoke. The toaster! Good heavens, the last thing she wanted was the smoke detector going off. She couldn’t reach it to turn it off. “No,” she whispered as she struggled out of her chair and hobbled across the kitchen.

“He’s dead, he’s dead, he’s dead,” the Thing in the corner sang. Pauline felt as though her bladder might give way and leave her with wet pants, but she had to get to the kitchen. Something other than toast was burning. In her slow motion hurry, she forgot to look away from the corner, and instead ended up looking it full in the face. By God, it had a face! That face looked oddly like her Jimmy. Nineteen-year-old Jimmy in his army hat, which he wore tilted jauntily to the side. Jimmy’s face was mouthing something, but she couldn’t guess what it was. Forgetting the toaster, she stepped closer to the wall.

“Jimmy?”

The gray-brown Thing shaped like Jimmy’s face said, “I don’t wanna go, Ma. They can’t make me go over there, can they?”

Her first reaction was to reach out and touch her boy’s face. Her... She yanked her hand back. The Thing’s mouth opened into a grotesque, squirming smile. “You shut

your mouth,” she screamed. “You just shut up! You’re not even real! You’re dead, Jimmy! You’re dead!”

The smoke detector gave an ear-splitting squeal. Pauline gasped, “The toaster!” The appliance made a buzzing and popping sound, and the TV went silent. The power was out, and now small fingers of flame began to wave back and forth inside the toaster.

“Ma? Ma! Are you there? Ma! Who’s there with you?” Libby was shouting into the phone, her voice rising in pitch.

In the silence without the TV, the Things in all the corners seemed to form a choir, singing, “He’s dead, Jimmy’s dead,” over and over. Pauline put her hands to her ears and screamed. The scream ended in a coughing fit. The smoke was getting thicker, and her lungs started to burn a little. The toaster now looked like it was shooting off fireworks. The bottom of the cupboard was turning black as the fire spread to its varnished surface. The box of cookies she kept next to the toaster was burning, too.

The front door banged open suddenly. She tried to turn around to leave the kitchen, but another coughing fit overtook her. She clutched the refrigerator door handle for support. Suddenly, strong arms were grabbing her around the middle and lifting her up, carrying her toward the door. Grayish forms reached toward her like fingers, grasping at her clothes, pulling at her hair. Her feet dangled helplessly, and she shouted, “Put me down! Don’t you take me!” Like it or not, she was being carried toward the Things. Above the smoke detector’s shrill warning, Pauline heard the Things in the corner singing, “He’s dead, Jimmy’s dead, oh my poor Jimmy!”

Then, bright light.

Blue sky above.

Cold grass beneath her, poking the back of her neck.

And silence.

An oddly familiar face looking down over her. A man with a Confederate flag baseball cap over his long, stringy blond hair.

She sighed, “You got past them.”

“Are you all right? Mrs. Hopper? Pauline! Stay awake, okay? I called 9-1-1,” Reggie assured her. Reggie from next door with the loud parties and loud cars and loud friends. He said something else, but she wasn’t listening. All she could hear was the absence of the hissing, the break in the whispers. She had never realized how loud those Things were until she didn’t hear them. Her face lit up, and she reached up and took hold of Reggie’s shoulder, pulling his face down to him.

“Thank you,” Pauline whispered. “Thank you for getting me past the Things.”

“The what?” Reggie asked. His face was near hers, and his breath smelled like potato chips.

Pauline woke with a start to the sound of whispers. She was in a bed with railings and a curtain hanging around it. The walls were peach with green shapes on the wallpaper. The hospital. Tom had died here, back when the walls were painted yellow. Pauline squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think of why she was there, but she found herself listening to the whispers instead...

“She was screaming at my dead brother. He died in 1967.”

“...Safety concerns...”

“She put bread in the toaster while it was still in the bag!”

“...A little smoke damage, and the cabinets and counter were burned.”

“...Smoke inhalation. She’ll be okay, but they want to keep her for a few more days.”

“If it hadn’t been for her neighbor Reggie, I don’t want to think about what could have happened.”

“Maybe they can figure out what’s happening to her. What if she’s got dementia?”

“Don’t even joke about that.”

“I’m not!”

“Can’t we move her into a nursing home?”

“It might be for the best, but she’s not going to like it. You see how she gets whenever I bring it up.”

Pauline tried to sit up, but her muscles wouldn’t cooperate. She coughed weakly.

“Ma?” Libby pulled back the curtain just enough to slip in closer to the bed.

“Yeah,” Pauline said.

“You’re gonna be okay, Ma. You breathed in some smoke. Do you remember the fire?” Libby spoke so loudly.

Pauline nodded.

“You sure did give us a scare, give us a scare, give us, give us a scare, you did!”

Her voice faded to a snarling whisper.

Pauline gasped, “What? What did you just say?” She gripped the bed rail tightly.

Libby gave her an odd look and said slowly, “You gave us a scare, Ma. I’m worried about you living alone. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere just yet,” Pauline replied. The smoke must have gotten to her head. Libby wasn’t whispering.

“I’m just going to go chat with the doctor before he comes in to see you, okay? I’ll be out in the hall if you need anything.”

Pauline nodded. She just wanted to lie alone and listen to the quiet, even if it was peppered with other patients’ monitors and call lights. She lay back against the pillows and let herself doze. She didn’t know how long she slept, but she awoke after the sun had gone down. She sighed, happy to be somewhere other than home. She heard normal sounds. Everyday hospital sounds. Beeps, whispers, call lights, whispers, nurses’ conversations, people passing in the hallway, whispers. She dozed a while longer until someone came into the room. She turned her head, expecting to see the nurse fidgeting with her oxygen tank or checking her IV. Instead, a gray-brown face was looking down at her from the corner next to her bed. Pauline froze, horrified, mouth agape, breaths coming rapidly. The heart monitor burst into frantic drumbeats.

“I’m not going anywhere, going anywhere just yet. I’m not going,” whispered the Thing in the corner, staring back at her with a face that looked surprisingly like her own.

Sword's Cross Inn

From the sound of everyone in the lobby, it must be Tuesday again.

Every Tuesday evening, the Sword's Cross Inn fills up with you eager seekers, skeptics, and believers. We watch you trip all over yourselves in the halls at night, knocking on doors and calling out into the darkness. You stumble over carpets, run into furniture, and step on loose boards that make doors close, all the while blaming us. I'll take the blame if it means getting to watch this comedy show.

You are here to meet Frederick and Elaine and Maxwell and the other local legends, the alleged stars of the Victorian afterlife. There are twenty of us, though you prefer to say there are thirteen. Thirteen is a much scarier number. That's cool. You've got our names wrong, though.

Let's see. How does your story go? At the Sword's Cross, you have assigned Frederick in Room Six, his enemy Richard in the basement, Elaine in Room Four, a young child who was harmed by Frederick in the stairwell, and a pair of dueling lovers fighting for Elaine's affection, both of whom died in the fray and now wrestle in the tavern. The supernatural drama you invented has held for over a century now. We reinforce your findings because it's funny and because the real story is much less interesting than that.

As far as we know, there were no murders, no intrigue. We lived. We died. End of a terribly boring story. Why we ended up here instead of knocking at the pearly gates, none of us knows. The others come and go, of course, but wherever it is they go, they manage to find their way back here.

Horace has always been at the Sword's Cross. He died something like three thousand years ago. Marta came from Spain, and her story is a lot like mine—she visited once, fell in love with the inn as well as a fellow traveler named Edward, and ended up here after she died in a car wreck. The one whose story we can't trace is Virginia. She is about eight, and she doesn't remember anything about her life or why she is connected to here. She does feel strongly about the woods nearby, though, and she loves playing in the rain. And Virgil, the only one of us who is actually Victorian, well, he used to run the place back in the 1850s - until he died of pneumonia one winter. He's not particularly pleased to be stuck at work for eternity, but he does follow the new owner around and mutter that he can run things better.

Is this Heaven? I doubt it. Is it Hell? Maybe. Except we aren't suffering, and after a while, you start to feel okay with being dead. Or at least I did.

Do I remember the moment of my death? Nope. I wonder if it was bloody or painful, but I am pretty sure that when the body is dying, the mind doesn't give a crap what is going on around it. Oh, Victor says to tell you he doesn't like my rude language.

We are the cast of your favorite nocturnal play. Normally, you can't see us. That is, unless we want you to. We follow your team of hunters around, doing little tricks to keep your attention, but we never give enough evidence to let you figure out what life is like on the other side. It's a rule. I don't know who made it, but no one dares to break it. We can whisper, moan, hover over your beds, touch your hair and clothes, and throw things. But we can never tell you who we are or why we are here. When I asked why a rule like that mattered, everyone sort of looked at me like they had seen a ghost—which was funny.

You have lots of questions. I may get to some of them. I may not. I can't tell you everything. You will find the answers to all your questions in time. If it weren't for all the laughs you give us, I'd wish you wouldn't look so hard for answers. Why would you want to spend all your energy looking for what's after death instead of waiting until you're actually dead to find out? It's like spending the whole day in front of the movie theater, holding your ticket and wondering how the movie ends instead of having the patience to wait for show time.

Maybe it's the pull of the forbidden that brings you to us. It should be obvious by now that you are not going to get any information from us other than a few personal experiences. We shut off your electronics when you get close enough to "catch" us. Your camera footage and video and audio feeds give you nothing conclusive to say. Are we real? Are we gusts of wind, unseen cobwebs, dust, or knocking heaters? The so-called experts disagree because they are not experts. The dead are the experts on the afterlife. My expert advice to you is to just keep living because death isn't all that exciting.

Tonight, it's my turn to be Elaine, which is pretty hilarious because my name is actually John, and I am not even English. I'm an American soldier, and I died in the war in Afghanistan a while back. Maybe ten years, or twenty. I forget how long. The Sword's Cross is where I took my wife Emily for our honeymoon. We got married on my third furlough, and our honeymoon was the last time I saw her. We had always wanted to go to England, so we saved up every penny we could, and I sold my PlayStation and TV to help out. It was the best trip of our lives. Maybe that was why I came back here after I died. Oh well. At least I'm not at boot camp or anything.

I am now in costume—twenty years old and beautiful with long, blonde hair and a gauzy white dress. When I got over the initial shock of being dead, Virginia showed me how to project an image of myself for people to see.

I went all out and even made a pearl necklace to wear. Each pearl glowed on its own instead of sinking back into the rest of the slightly illuminated image. The Pixar animators should take lessons from me, I look so good. Maybe I am awesome at making apparitions because I saw so many scary movies when I was alive.

“Here they come,” Marta says, floating by in a suit, tie, and bowler hat. She blows a puff of cold air at me, blowing my skirt up above my knees, Marilyn Monroe style. “Have fun, everyone!”

“Watch it, Frederick!” I say, trying to blow the hat off her head. I miss by a lot, and she leaves, laughing way too loudly. Someone in the drawing room gasps.

Victor tuts at Marta and stage whispers urgently, “For Heaven’s sake, girl, whisper! Have you no respect for the living?”

Horace thumps his hand against the bannister hard enough to shake it a little. His laugh is silent, but his thumps are hard to miss. He doesn’t say much, but he gets a kick out of watching Marta make Victor freak out.

I don’t pay much attention to the people coming in. The crowd is fairly small, but after so many years of ghost tours and overnight paranormal investigations, no one stands out anymore. I pass through a couple of people who are waiting at the front desk with their suitcases and backpacks. They shiver and ask one another if they had just felt that. People I didn’t even go near say, “yeah!” I laugh under my breath. That’s something I

love about you living people. Your imaginations are strong enough to make you feel things whether or not they are actually happening to you.

The night goes quickly, at least to me. I have no sense of time. I lose whole days, and I don't know what happens to them. Horace tells me not to worry about it, that all of us lose time because we are no longer connected to the physical world, which is a combination of matter and time. That's why the rest of the dead seem to fade in and out of Sword's Cross. Horace is pretty smart. He's also had a lot of time to think things over.

After a few hijinks in the hallway involving an umbrella stand and a potted plant—thanks, Virginia—the lights turn off, and the Ten Blind Mice begin their routine of bumping around in the night, asking for signs and answers. I love giving signs. I take some of the pearls from my necklace and toss them into the air, where they float in front of a camera lens several times. After the pearls do their thing, I hold out my hand, and they float back to me. Light tricks are seriously the coolest thing ever. Then I head back to Room Four to wait for the eager-seeker guest who will be turning in any minute.

The door clicks open softly, and someone steps inside. The woman seems young, with long, blonde hair not too different from what I was projecting. I turn my back when she changes clothes. Hey, I may be dead, but I have a wife. Had a wife. Whatever. I just don't need to be creeping on girls when they change clothes. Being a peeping Tom seems awfully weird. I wait to start my show until Room Four's guest is settled into bed for the night.

I hover over the old four-poster bed, watching the person try to sleep. She rolls around in the bed, shifting the pillow, tangling the sheets around her legs like seaweed catching a swimmer and pulling them under. She flips to her left side, then her right, then

her back. I up the glow factor a bit, hoping that she would see me in the bluish moonlight. The woman opens her eyes, blinks, and seems to stare right through me without moving. But she doesn't react to me in any way.

She reaches her hand out and feels around the nightstand, groping for something. Of course. She can't see me because she needs glasses. She puts them on and sits up. The moonlight catches her face fully, and I am the one to gasp first.

You think ghosts never get spooked? Think again.

"Emily?" I say aloud, dropping the Elaine gag at once. "Babe?"

Her eyes widen, and she pulls the covers up around her chest. The wedding ring I gave her is still on her finger. It catches the light from the streetlamp outside.

"Who--?" she starts.

"Emily? Honey? It's me, John. Can you hear me?"

I crank up the glow a few notches higher. Emily simultaneously screams and bursts into tears, running out into the hallway in just her tank top and underwear. Energy seems to crackle through me, and I take off without meaning to. You may see lamps flickering or curtains and potted plants rustling like the vent is blowing air on them. But it's me. I fly, diving through walls and people and furniture. I can't make out any faces. The Sword's Cross is a blur around me, and suddenly I am outside, whipping around the property faster than I think I can. It's like I've forgotten everything I know about this ghosting gig. I can't stop myself. I don't know how. If you know how to help a freaked out ghost chill out, tell me. I've got nothing.

Before I know it, I'm in the M1 Abrams with my buddies, bumping down a dusty road between piles of rubble that had been a main thoroughfare of Kabul at one point.

Keto is blasting AC/DC loud enough to puncture our eardrums. I am in the driver's seat again. I look at my hands gripping the steering wheel. They're shaking and flickering like a bad film.

"Keto," I say. "We gotta get the hell outta here. There's IED. I know it."

"What, you a psychic now?" Keto smirks and pops open a Coke.

"More like psych-O," Miller cracks from behind me.

"No. You guys," I try to talk, but my tongue feels like lead in my mouth. I can't move it, and my lips won't form a shape around it. This is worse than mush mouth. It's metal mouth, and not the braces kind of metal mouth.

I hear a thud, and the air is pushed out of my lungs violently. I fly backward. Something tugs at the center of my gut and drags me out of the tank and down the street, faster and faster until the landscape becomes blue and yellow-brown stripes. I feel nauseated, but the pulling at my gut continues.

I scream from the very bottom of whatever I am, ghosting rules forgotten, actually hoping someone hears me. Then, a hand on my shoulder. A whisper I know. A little girl.

"John, it's all right. Hush, now. We've got you." I open my eyes, which I didn't even know were squeezed shut. Virginia, Horace, Virgil, Marta, and several of the others are all holding on to me at once. The world isn't blurring anymore. If I had a stomach, I might barf.

I am no longer in Room Four; I am in the tavern. No clue how I got there. The ghost-hunting guests are sitting around a Ouija board, and my wife is setting down the planchette. But Virginia and Victor and Horace and Marta are all holding onto me tightly. You all have got to stop messing around with Ouija boards. You don't know what you do

to us when you go yanking us around with that stupid planchette thing. *I* don't even know what you do to us, but I do know one thing: It isn't good.

Emily buries her face in her hands, and the person next to her puts a hand on her shoulder. She's taking a few hard, hitching breaths. She clears her throat and says, "Um. If there is anyone here, can you let us know? I'm looking for my husband, John."

I try to break free of my friends to take a step toward the board, toward my wife. Their hands clamp around my limbs.

"Let me go!" I growl. "It's Emily! That's my wife! You gotta—" Victor puts his hand over my mouth.

"Hush," Virginia whispers again.

"Don't go," Horace adds.

"Why?" I ask, my voice rising to a whine that sends a shiver through the séance-goers. "It's—it's Emily! Wouldn't you go if it was your wife?"

"We don't know what happens when you go, but you never come back," Virgil whispers. He puts his face right against mine, forehead to forehead. His teeth are clenched. His voice breaks. "You never. Come. Back."

On Pearl Street

“Not that way, Tank. There’s nothing here, and you know it,” Marlene chided her dog helplessly as he dragged her down Elm Street. Her shoulder ached from the strain of pulling at the panting Staffordshire terrier’s leash. Why did she even bother? That dog would go wherever he wanted to go. His muscles bulged against his stocky frame as he dragged her down toward the only place he ever wanted to go—Pearl Street.

More to herself than the dog, she added, “It’s just the wind. Or people talking inside their houses.”

She gritted her teeth as she turned onto Pearl Street, dreading the whispers that came at her from every direction, the whirlwind of desperate sound that had no apparent source. She tried looking under parked cars and in bushes for someone playing tricks on her. She peeked into windows until one of the neighbors caught her.

“Somebody...”

“Oh, shut up!” Marlene snapped.

She never talked about the voices, not to anyone, not anymore. Not since the time her husband joined her on a walk, and she asked him if he heard the sound, too.

All he said was, “Heard what?”

Of course, she played it off like someone had their television turned up too loud, but inside, she figured she was losing her mind. That wouldn’t be so far-fetched, after all, since Gran spent her final years at South Portland Nursing Home talking to imaginary friends. She resisted reacting to the thin, childlike whisper, just as she would resist

walking down this street if this ridiculous, grinning dog didn't practically rip her arm out of the socket trying to pull her there.

As a thin, breathy cry of "Can you help me?" reached Marlene's ears, the hairs raised up on her arms.

Stop it, she thought, shaking her head. Ghosts aren't real, and neither are voices without a body. What you've got is an overactive imagination. Either that or you've gone batty before you can even turn seventy.

Now on Pearl Street, Tank trotted happily, his long, stupid tongue dangling from the side of his mouth. He did not share Marlene's misgivings about Pearl Street. Why should he? It was just like all the other streets in the neighborhood known as Pleasantdale, which bumped up against Casco Bay. Houses from the mid to late 1800s stood proud and weathered on their hand-hewn stone foundations, a testament to a time when people relied on the strength of their hands to survive the wildness of the land and of Maine's seasons. Between these inhabited monuments stood newer houses—newer as in 1930 and not much newer than that.

Tank pulled Marlene along to his favorite spot, the eight feet of yard in front of 63 Pearl Street. The two-story Cape Cod house was New England normal, which is to say, quirky and old. The buttery yellow siding was relatively new, and the white shutters around the windows had not yet turned gray from age and salt air. The porch was white, speckled with yellow ash leaves from the tree right next to it, victims of the most recent wind storm. This house was much nicer than the Forest Avenue money pit she and Darrell had bought years ago.

“Please. Somebody. Somebody. Somebody. Please...” The whispers got louder than ever, so loud, they stopped being whispers. Someone sobbed into her right ear, “Please!”

Marlene batted at her ear, but it did no good.

“Somebody! Send somebody. Please!”

A wind kicked up out of nowhere, and Marlene’s head buzzed, sending waves of dizzy nausea to her stomach. She staggered forward, gripping the end of the stair railing to steady herself, finally going down onto one knee.

“Somebody? God, please...”

A single voice, clear and distinct instead of swirling among a barrage of whispers, spoke into her left ear. Or was it inside her head? Marlene sank down to the ground, dropping Tank’s leash and leaning against the bottom porch step as the ground rocked back and forth.

“Stop it!” she cried out.

As suddenly as it started, the wind and the voice stopped. Something hot, smelly, and wet touched her chin, sliding up her lips to her nose. Marlene opened her eyes just in time to see Tank’s wide, pink tongue swipe across them.

“Gah,” she sputtered, and Tank turned his attention toward the ground, sniffing the grass with placid, almost bovine interest.

Marlene straightened up but did not trust her legs enough to hold her steady.

“What in the world,” she whispered to herself, looking up at the house.

Maybe someone was inside. No car was parked in the driveway, but that was nothing new. Half the people in town probably drove across the bridge into Portland for

work, and it was nearly ten o'clock in the morning. The upstairs windows were closed. The downstairs windows, however, were cracked open like those on all the other houses. The lights seemed to be off.

“Please....”

“Who *is* that?” Marlene muttered.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” A woman’s voice made her jump. Just a few feet away on the sidewalk, a jogger stood looking at her. One earbud hung down her chest, and she wore stretchy gray running pants and a bright pink zippered jacket with green running shoes. Her long ponytail stuck to her sweaty neck on one side. She was fiddling with a set of keys that dangled from one of those slinky-like bracelets around her wrist.

Marlene glanced down at her own ill-fitting sweat pants with the hole in the knee and her clown-bright sneakers. *Of course I would run into someone on the one day when I am practically in my pajamas, she thought.* It was too bad the mums just behind her could not just swallow her up.

Marlene had never met most of the people in the neighborhood, and that was just fine with her. She and Darrell kept to themselves. Truth be told, she was never one for barbecues or parties, and just having this woman looking at her closely made her forehead and back break out in a sweat.

“Hi,” the woman said with a questioning hook to her voice and a small, tentative smile. “Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry, yes. I’m fine,” Marlene began. “I’m Marlene. I live in the neighborhood. I’m just catching my breath.”

“Oh,” the woman said, her eyebrows working themselves together in the middle of her forehead.

“The dog got away from me,” Marlene lied as she stood up, leaning heavily on the railing. Its metal was cool against her palm. “He’s pretty fast.”

“Oh.” The jogger’s brow smoothed out.

“Would you know if the people who live here are home?”

“Um, I don’t think so,” the tentative smile disappeared. “Why?”

“Oh, it’s probably nothing. I just thought I heard someone inside calling for help.”

“That’s weird. I saw Jim leaving for work this morning,” the woman said, squinting and looking up toward the second floor windows.

“Does he by any chance have a daughter? Or maybe a wife?”

“Nope. No. He’s divorced, and his kids are in their thirties. They live down in Boston.”

“Oh,” Marlene said. “Maybe I was just hearing, I don’t know, a TV or something. Thanks, anyway.” She turned to leave.

“Yeah, no problem,” the woman said. She walked to the brown one-story house next door, and looking over her shoulder at Marlene a few times, stuck her key into the lock.

Marlene looked away for a moment, and when she looked back, the jogger had disappeared into her house.

Tank was still standing nearby. Marlene climbed the front porch steps. Her hands were as unsteady as her feet. What if this Jim character was a creep who stole children?

Images from crime TV shows filled her mind. People chained up in attics, clawing at the walls to try to get out. Children stuffed into vans and hauled away to unthinkable deaths.

“Okay, okay. Calm down, Marlene,” she said aloud. Maybe the guy had left a TV set on to deter potential thieves. No music accompanied this persistently pleading voice, no answers from another character, no commercial break. The voice did, however, say the same thing over and over. Maybe it was a movie left on repeat.

A memory burst into her awareness. She was no older than nine, and the kids in her neighborhood had dared her to knock on the door of the abandoned house at the end of her street. It was supposedly haunted. Marlene had vomited out of fear right there on the porch in front of a very confused and disgusted old man, and the other kids had laughed and pedaled away. Blinking to dispel the thought, Marlene ordered herself not to be sick. She stretched out a hand slowly and deliberately to try the doorbell. It took two tries because she was trembling so badly, she missed the center of the button the first time. The doorbell didn’t work.

“Figures,” she muttered. Leaning toward the window nearest the door, she called out softly, “Hello?”

No answer.

“Do you need help? I heard you calling from the street.”

“Help,” the voice echoed. Clearer this time, the it sounded like a little girl.

Marlene sucked in a deep breath and tried the screen door handle. It swung open easily, but the thick, gray wooden door was locked. A tarnished brass door knocker that probably came with the house hung at eye level. It squealed when she lifted and dropped it with a heavy thump against the door. She did this twice more.

No answer.

“Is somebody there?” she called softly through the window nearest the door. “I can’t get in. The door is locked.”

No answer.

“Do you need me to call the police?” She patted her sweats pocket for her phone, but it wasn’t there. Of course not. It was still on its charger in the kitchen. She would have to go home to call.

Tank was still standing there with his stupid tongue-faced grin. Marlene went back down the stairs and picked up the leash.

“I must be losing my mind, boy.”

“Help... somebody.” It was definitely a girl’s voice—a young girl at that, and louder and clearer than last time. Tank must have heard it too. He pricked up his ears, pulling his tongue back into his mouth with a nose-licking slurp. He turned his head sharply at what sounded like a sob and took off toward the backyard, pulling mightily at the leash. Marlene stumbled several times, falling to one knee on a downed tree branch. Pain shot from her knee up her leg, and she let out a screech. She let go of the leash again, and Tank took off for the backyard at a full run.

“Tank!” Marlene yelled. “Come on! Get back here! Idiotic mutt!”

Back on her feet, she limped after him, favoring the knee that had hit the branch. The wave of dizziness hit her again, harder this time. She staggered and fell to the ground again and lay there on her side, feeling the world, or her head, spin.

“Please!” the girl’s voice was louder, more urgent.

Tank barked just once, and Marlene got up on all fours and started crawling. She didn't trust her feet to hold her at first. A sharp pain snapped from the back of her neck all the way up to her forehead. She gave a loud cry, and then just as suddenly as it all started, everything stopped. The dizziness, the nausea, even the pain that she thought might split her skull in two, all of it ceased at once. She rocked back and forth on her hands and knees for a few seconds, getting her bearings. Then she hoisted herself up to her feet, testing the ground warily as though it might give way and knock her over again. She rounded the house more slowly to find Tank staring at a large shed that looked like a garage without a pull-up door. It was ancient and had not been kept up, which was surprising, given how pleasant the house itself looked. The shed's red paint was weathered and peeling off the green, moldy wood. The black roof sagged on the right side, and the door hung open, unlatched. Tank's tail was not wagging.

"Tank, get away from there," Marlene said with little conviction. She came to stand next to the dog and stared with him through the crack in the door into the blackness.

"Please, somebody help me...Please, God..." That young voice was not carried on the wind. Somebody was in that shed. Tank growled softly. Marlene stepped closer.

"Please, God, send someone to help me."

Marlene put her face fully into the crack of the door. "Hello?" she whispered. Her gut gave an odd twinge. Ignoring the pain in her leg, she shifted her weight from foot to foot as though she might break into a run at any moment. She tried for a deep breath, but it wouldn't come.

At first, there was only silence punctuated with bird calls, so Marlene tried again.

"Do you need help?" she asked.

“Yes,” the girl said softly.

“It’s okay. I’m here.”

Pushing the door open and stepping inside, Marlene stood still to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. The only light in the shed came from the door and an old greased paper-covered window. Greased paper. Somewhere at the edge of her mind, Marlene remembered seeing greased paper covering a window somewhere. Maybe at her great grandfather’s farm when she was little.

After a few moments, Marlene’s eyes adjusted to the dim light, and she could make out a girl huddled among neatly arranged tools in the far corner of the shed, which was in better shape than its outward appearance had let on. The tools that leaned against the walls looked much older than the ones she was used to seeing, but somehow, they also looked new. Lightly used, perhaps, instead of the faded, worn tools she saw at antique stores and flea markets. Hoes and rakes and small pitchforks stood against one wall, and the other wall held shelves with smaller tools like trowels and spades, flower pots and even a few pairs of gardening gloves. The girl was hiding underneath the shelves of flower pots.

“Are you all right?” Marlene asked, stepping closer to the girl.

“No,” she said, sniffing. Her long, dark hair hung loose and tangled around her pale face streaked with either dirt or bruises. The poor thing couldn’t have been older than nine or ten.

“Who hurt you?”

“Jesse Walls,” the girl whispered. She turned to face Marlene fully but kept her arms wrapped around her knees, covering them with her long, dark dress. Her feet were bare. “He’s coming. He’s going to hurt me.”

“Who’s Jesse? Why would he hurt you?” Marlene asked.

Pearl didn’t answer, but Marlene didn’t need her to. Something in the way the girl’s voice shook, the way she made herself as small as possible, told Marlene that the girl was not exaggerating. It didn’t matter who Jesse was.

If this Jim guy’s kids are grown up, then who was this? A granddaughter?

I really wish I had my phone, Marlene thought.

“I won’t let that happen,” she said audibly, but gently. “What’s your name?”

“Pearl.”

“Well, Pearl, let’s get you out of here. I live close by. We can call the police from my house.” Marlene crossed the shed and held her hand out. Pearl crawled out from under the shelves and took her hand to stand up, but a rough laugh cracked through the air like a gunshot, and she froze. Her dark eyes widened with fear.

“It’s him! Hide!” Pearl whispered.

Marlene moved quickly, crouching against the wall next to the door. Something sliced at her ankle as she moved, and she suppressed a scream of surprise and terror. Her knees and hands trembled, and she felt like she couldn’t, she dared not, take a deep breath. Her bladder threatened to let go.

“Guys, bet you she’s in there,” a male voice said. It was neither a little boy nor a man.

Tank growled low just outside the door.

Oh no. Tank. A strange dog hanging around the shed would give Pearl away.

Marlene clicked her tongue and whispered, “Tank! Come!”

The ordinarily willful dog trotted right into the shed and up to her for once.

“Oh, God, help me,” Pearl whispered, sobbing.

Marlene gulped and stood still. “Hush,” she whispered between gasps for breath.

“Don’t cry. I won’t let him hurt you.”

“Red rover, red rover, send Pearly right over,” the person sang, accompanied by laughter. “Come on, it’s just a game.”

The shed door creaked open wider. Tank growled again. His body was rigid against Marlene’s shins. Pearl threw a hand over her own mouth to mask the sound of her crying.

Another male voice said, “Maybe we shouldn’t.”

A third said, “What, are you going to wimp out? A dare is a dare.”

“I’m not wimping out.”

The third voice said again, “Yeah, a dare is a dare. Unless you want Jesse to do to you like he’s gonna do to her.”

The unmistakable sound of fists hitting flesh followed, and light and shadow flickered across the crack in the shed door. Jesse must have stepped in between them, because he said, “I ain’t losing on a dare. All Will is going to get from me a fist between the eyes.”

“Stuff it,” the other voice said.

“Stuff yourself,” Jesse said, then in a softer tone, “I know you’re in here. Come on, we just want to play a game with you.”

A tall, teenaged boy stepped through the doorway. He was so tall, he had to duck to get in. The stench of unwashed body and alcohol followed him in. He wore a strange outfit, white shirt and dark pants like something out of another time. Was he Amish? One of those re-enactors that gather at the park and wear old fashioned clothes one weekend every summer?

The boy, presumably Jesse, stumbled and swore loudly. His friends, whom Marlene couldn't count because she couldn't see them, laughed.

"Shut up," the boy snarled at the others. Then to Pearl, "Look, we're not going to hurt you."

One of the other boys' voices from outside said, "C'mon, Jesse, just do it and get it over with." His tone bordered on bored impatience.

In just a few steps, Jesse crossed the shed. He pulled Pearl out from under the shelf by her hair with one hand. His other hand was fumbling with the front of his pants.

"Stop it! I'll tell! Daddy! Daddy!" Pearl wailed, struggling and slapping at Jesse's arm. He was holding her an arm's length away from him, avoiding her flailing arms.

Sick rose to the back of Marlene's throat, but she swallowed it back and waited for the feeling to pass. She had the advantage of being against the wall behind Jesse, and he had not yet turned around. He was just a kid, albeit one that was much taller and likely stronger than her. She had to do something.

Still holding her breath, Marlene reached her hand along the wall and wrapped her fingers tightly around a long, wooden handle. She hoped it was a shovel. *He's a kid*, she reasoned, *but a monster of one.*

Jess laughed as Pearl fought against him. “I know your old man ain’t here,” he said. “He took the ferry into town today. I saw him. So come on, now. We just want to play a game.”

Pearl turned and bit Jesse’s arm. With a growl, Jesse let go of his pants, which slipped partway down his buttocks, and slapped Pearl backhand across the face. She screamed and swung from side to side, still hanging from his hand by her hair.

Tank sprung into action, crossing the shed in one leap, and with a loud bark, attached himself to the back of Jesse’s boot. He made a low, mammalian sound like a wild cat. Turning, he let go of Pearl, and she dropped to the ground. He then swung his fist hard, planting it against the dog’s nose. Tank whined and let go of the boot, and he got a hard kick to the ribs. Massive as he was, Tank flew against the wall, hitting the collection of hoes and rakes, knocking them all down.

“Damned cuss,” Jesse said. His friends laughed again. Tank snarled, pulling himself back onto his feet. Jesse looked behind him at just the right-or wrong—moment.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Uh,” Marlene said. Her stomach lurched. She was just wimpy Marlene, puking on the porch of the haunted house. She wanted to push her way out of the shed and go home. She wanted to hit this kid square in the face with the shovel.

“You leave her alone,” Marlene said. Her voice shook, and Jesse laughed.

“What are you going to do, Granny, hit me?” Jesse said, taking a step toward her. “You leave her alone,” he mimicked. The boys outside laughed.

“Hey, granny,” one of the voices said. “You want some of that, too?”

Jesse snorted.

Pearl began scrambling away on her hands and knees, her long skirt catching beneath her knees and slowing her down. Jesse stepped back toward her and caught her by the ankle. “Oh, no, you don’t.”

“Stop it! Please! I don’t want to play!” Pearl begged.

“Leave her alone!” Marlene said, louder this time.

“Shut up, old lady.” Jesse flipped Pearl onto her back in the middle of the floor. Tank charged at him again and got sideways kick to the ribs. He howled. Jesse yelled out, “One of you get that thing out of here. And the old lady, too.”

Choruses of “not me” and “here, granny, granny” raised up from the group outside the door. Tank did not get up this time.

Pearl kicked and screamed, but another slap across the face silenced her. Marlene couldn’t catch her breath. Her knees felt like they might not hold her up any longer. Her palm was sweating against the wooden handle she held. She dried her hand on her pants and took up the tool again. It was heavy. A shovel. Good. She needed something heavy.

With drunken clumsiness, Jesse tried to hold the girl down, but she struggled, twisting her body this way and that, trying to roll out from underneath him, coughing out sobs.

“Stop fighting or I’ll make you wish you had,” Jesse said, delivering another hard slap to her face.

Pearl squeezed her eyes shut.

Marlene raised the shovel up over her head. It wobbled in the air, and for just a second, she felt like she might drop it backward over her shoulder. But she found her balance. She forced herself to stare at the back of Jesse’s head as she brought that tool

down on him with all the strength she had. The shovel connected with his skull with a horrible crunching sound. Jesse immediately fell onto Pearl, unmoving. Pearl screamed again and began to sob with her mouth open wide.

“Get out of here! Go! Go! Go!” one of the other boys shouted, and feet trampled in every direction. Marlene raised the shovel again, but Jesse did not move. There was no need for a second swing.

“Oh my God.” Marlene’s words came as a trembling whisper. “Did I kill him?”

Marlene dropped to the ground, letting the shovel fall out of her hands. She pushed and pushed on the limp body until she was able to roll him off Pearl. He gave neither help nor resistance; he was completely still. Marlene felt along his neck for a pulse but couldn’t find anything. She wasn’t sure she was even checking the right spot. Tank walked slowly up to the man and sniffed at him, giving one last growl. Then he went to Pearl and nosed his way through her dark hair, licking her cheek.

“Pearl! Honey, are you all right?” Marlene crawled to the girl, who had drawn her legs up to her chest and lay curled up, sobbing and sniffing. Scooping her up into her arms, she said, “It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m right here. He’s not going to hurt you.”

Pearl buried her face against Marlene’s chest. The girl’s thin cotton dress was soaked through with sweat. After a long while, Marlene stood up and lifted Pearl onto her feet.

“Let’s get out of here, huh? Is your mother in the house?” Marlene asked. Pearl shook her head without lifting it.

“Grandmother,” she whispered.

“Your grandmother, then. Let’s go inside and tell her what happened, okay?”

Arms wrapped around one another, Pearl and Marlene walked out the shed door and into the daylight. There, she got a good look at Pearl's dress. It was long, at least halfway down her calves, with long sleeves and a high collar. The dark blue cotton had small, red flowers all over it.

"Your dress—" Marlene began.

Pearl said something, but Marlene couldn't hear what it was. The lightning bolt pain returned, and with it, the world started to tilt. Marlene's hands flew to her head, and she doubled over. She could not scream. She tried to reach for Pearl, but her hands found nothing. She lost her balance and fell face first onto the grass.

Then everything was silent.

Marlene felt something cold against her cheek, nudging her. She let the thing move her head from side to side. Little by little, she became aware of blades of grass tickling her nose. She scrunched it up and tried lifting her head. It didn't hurt. She mentally checked the rest of her body. One knee hurt, but she was able to move it. Her ankle felt numb. Tank's tongue found her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, her mouth. She turned her head to avoid the tongue and pushed herself into a sitting position.

Tank sat in front of her. She reached out and stroked his head. He panted in an odd rhythm.

"Your side, Tank. Did he break your ribs?" She tried to touch his side, but he moved away from her. "Okay, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I won't touch it. Ohmigod, I can't be going crazy. Not if you're hurt, too."

Marlene looked back at the shed, but it was gone. In its place stood tall, wide oak tree.

“Hold on. What? But we were just—” She twisted around to look behind her. All she saw was the back of the yellow house with a neat deck and new hydrangea bushes spaced evenly around it.

She gave a deep shudder. She looked down at Tank, and he returned her look. “Come on, boy! Let’s go home.”

Tank walked slowly over to her, his head low, his body swaying from side to side. Poor dog. There was no way he would run off now, not in his condition. Marlene bent over and unhooked the leash from his collar.

As they rounded the corner onto Elm Street, she glanced up at the street sign out of habit. It should have said Pearl Street, but instead, it said Orchard Avenue.

War Child

Ruta—Liepāja, Latvia, 1941

Artis holds my hand so tightly it hurts. He tells me not to let go. I won't let go. I can't. I can't see. If I let go, I will stumble and fall.

The sun isn't shining. I would know if it was because I would feel it on my face. Wind blows up my dress, and my arms are goose-bumped. It feels like March instead of July. I'm only wearing my nightgown. The soldiers wouldn't let me bring my sweater. They dragged us out of our house in the darkness. We screamed. We kicked. I kicked the black-haired man with the scarred cheek in the shins. He hit me hard. My ear still hurts from where the back end of the gun hit it.

Is it day or night now? Artis doesn't know. I ask him where we are. I have to whisper so the soldier doesn't hit me again. Artis doesn't know. He says to listen to the birds. Someone picks me up and shoves me into a truck. We are moving. Artis says listen to the sound of the truck on pavement. Artis says we can play a game of guessing what we hear. I listen to Artis because he is my older brother. He is ten, I am six, and he has good ideas. I hear a cough. A sob. A prayer. The breeze in the tree leaves. And quiet. No kids are playing outside.

The truck hits a bump. I fall with Artis, and we hit a soft belly. I say sorry. It is a man, and he says my name. It's the grocer, Mr. Ozoliņš. He lifts his big, thick arms, which are tied together at the wrists like mine, and loops them around both of us, squeezing us together. The rope on his wrists scratches my neck. My wrists are tied too tight. The rope makes my wrists burn. We press against the grocer. After Father left us because he was not Jewish like us, Mother did not have enough money to buy flour. Mr.

Ozoliņš gave it to her anyway and told her to pay him back when she could. When the soldiers shot Mother in the street in April, Mr. Ozoliņš gave us food every day.

I ask him to please tell me what is happening. He says we are going to die now. Pain flies through my chest like my ribs are a birdcage and my heart is beating its wings wildly, trying to escape. My mouth tastes like metal even though I have not eaten anything in a few days. I ask will it hurt. He says he does not know, but after we die, there will be no more fear, no more pain, no more yellow stars pinned to our clothes.

Mr. Ozoliņš is crying. His chest is jerking in and out without him making crying sounds. He rubs my back. I swallow hard to make the bubble of sadness go back down my throat. I hold Artis's hands, squeezing tightly, smelling his smell and Mr. Ozoliņš'. They should smell like shampoo and laundry detergent. Instead, they smell like filth and sick. Artis is not crying. He used to cry easily, but since Mother died, he has not cried a single tear.

The bird in my chest beats at its cage so hard, it must be tearing the feathers out of its own skin. I want to turn around and jump off the truck. There are too many people. We are pressed together like fish in a can. I can't move. My breath is getting away from me. Someone steps on my foot.

The truck stops. The soldiers yell at us in a language we don't understand. I think it's German. Father is German. Someone grabs onto me and pulls me away from Mr. Ozoliņš. I try to hold on to his shirt with my fingers, but the person's grip is strong, and he is now choking me by my nightgown collar. I manage to grab onto Artis. He falls off the truck with me. We lay clinging to each other. Someone grabs me by the shoulders and pulls me up to my feet. I am still holding onto Artis. He struggles and stands up.

Something hard pokes me in the back, and I start walking forward. I stumble over rocks or curbs or something I cannot see. Every time I stumble, the hard thing pokes me in the back again. Is it a gun? I want to ask Artis, but maybe if I don't make a sound, I won't be killed. I don't hear anyone talking. Nor crying.

A soldier shouts again. A hand grabs my shoulder and yanks me to a stop. I press myself against Artis's side and hide my face against his shoulder. A woman speaks. At first, I think she is answering the soldier, but she isn't. I don't know who or where she is, but I know her words well. My mother used to pray them with me at bedtime. She would stroke my hair and pray, and I would lean against her chest.

“Lie us down, Adonai our God, in peace,”

A few voices join her in the prayer, “and rise us up again, our Ruler, in life.”

A soldier shouts. The people's voices continue, stronger. I close my eyes and try to remember the feeling of Mother's hand touching my hair. Artis's chest heaves once, and he joins the others in a wavering voice.

“Shield us; remove from us every enemy, pestilence—”

The soldier shouts more, but the prayer grows louder. “—famine, and sorrow. Remove all adversaries from before us and behind us—”

“Say it, Ruta,” Artis says into my ear. He kisses my head. “They can hurt us if they like. But this, they can't ever take it away from us.”

More shouting, and over that, the prayer, shouted even louder. “For You are our guarding and saving God—”

I can barely find my voice. I whisper, “yes, a gracious and compassionate God and King. Guard our—”

A gunshot echoes loudly off the stones around us. Then another. I can't hear anything anymore. But in my chest, I feel the rumble of the people's voices.

Stormy—Lawrence, Kansas, 1972

“We have to wear clothes to go into town, Stormy. All of us,” June says.

I hate wearing clothes, especially in the summer. I can feel them touching my body all over. They make me sweat. They rub in weird places and make me feel like I can't stretch my arms and legs out all the way. The only good thing about pants is they keep my legs from getting cut up when I climb trees. But shoes, I can't stand them at all. I can't feel the dirt and rocks with shoes on. If people were supposed to have hard bottoms on their feet, I bet we would have been born like that.

June says I was born a free creature. But when we go into town, there are rules. The policemen don't let seven-year-old boys run around naked, or even half naked. I've never met a policeman, but I feel bad for them. They don't know what it's like to feel the sun and water against their skin. We used to camp by the ocean. It was hot every day, and I got to run through the woods and play at the beach all the time without my clothes.

My father, Roger, is driving our big yellow van today. The windows are open, letting a little air in. June is up front with him. Her long, dark brown hair is flung over the back of the seat, and she is singing along to the radio with her feet on the dashboard. I'm stretching out on the bed at the back of the van with my favorite *Hardy Boys* book, *The House on the Cliff*. Roger and June are both very smart, and they teach me themselves instead of making me go to school. June says it's easier for a kid to learn when the teacher can give all their attention to just one person. I like that just fine because I don't want to have to stay in one town for nine whole months just for school. June also says the best education comes from getting to see the world for myself. I agree with her.

“Why do we have to go into town, anyway?” I ask when “Ruby Tuesday” ends. My shirt is off for now, but I promised to put it back on when we pull into Lawrence. The quilt I’m lying on is wet underneath me.

“We need some supplies,” Roger says.

“Shopping?” I asked. I slap *The House on The Cliff* against my chest and throw my arm over my eyes.

“Well, we need some food,” June says.

“And gas,” Roger adds.

“But shopping takes all day!” I hate shopping worse than I hate clothes. Roger goes to the labor office and finds work for the day, and June and I are left wandering around town with nothing to do.

June turns around and smiles at me. “Lawrence has a library, and it should be open. They also have a park.”

Roger says, “And ice cream!”

“Ice cream costs.”

“I have three dollars,” June offers.

It is hot, and ice cream is good. We are always thankful for the good as it comes. I smile and say, “Strawberry?”

“Double dip.”

Roger parks the van on the street outside a produce shop. He pulls his hair into a ponytail. “I’ll see you two in a few hours. Love you both.” With that, he gets out and walks into the day labor office.

“Ready? June asks, climbing over the front seat and sitting next to me on the bed. I nod. “Okay, then let’s get your shirt on.”

I pull on my T-shirt and shake my long, sun-blond hair out of my eyes. “Want me to pull it back like Roger’s?” June asks. I say no, I like it down and free. She smiles and kisses my nose.

The city park is a few blocks down at the end of the street. We pass small stores along the way: a boutique, a drugstore, a print shop, a five and dime, and a pet shop. I want to go inside and pet the curly white poodle puppy that is dancing against the window, wagging its tail madly. June clicks her tongue and says, “Those poor, imprisoned souls.”

I don’t ask to pet the dog.

At the park, I run off to the swings, and June settles herself in the grass beneath a huge, old oak tree. The swing is hot against my legs when I hop on. It feels good to be moving my body, though. The rusty chain squeaks against the hooks on the top bar of the swing set, and I feel it vibrate in my hands. I pump my legs harder and harder until I am flying, then I take my hands off the chains and lean my shoulders against them instead. My shirt flaps around my body, and I pretend I have wings. In California, seagulls were everywhere, white and proud and miles above us, laughing rudely over the land and water.

A kid jumps on the swing next to mine, thumping the whole swing set. He looks very different from me, with his hair cut short, and a properly fitting T-shirt and shorts. He has on shoes and knee socks. Knee socks! The kid must be sweating to death. He starts pumping his legs. Before long, he catches up to me.

“Hi,” the kid says.

“How’s it going?” I answer.

“Your hair’s long,” he observes.

“I know.”

“You look like a girl.”

“So?” I’ve heard that a lot. When I was a little younger, I didn’t like people pointing out my hair. Now I didn’t care if they asked. I know I’m not a girl, and a lot of men have long hair. I keep my arms spread and let the breeze hit me in the belly.

The kid is quiet for a while before he says, “I’m Jimmy.”

“Stormy.”

“What kind of a name is Stormy?”

“What kind of a name is Jimmy?”

“Heh,” the kid says. Then, “My dad says hippies are un-American because they hate the army. He says they all run away to Canada so they don’t have to fight. Are you running away to Canada?”

“I don’t think so.” I close my eyes and pretend the kid isn’t there. I grip the chains again and pump harder, harder, higher. I then lean back as far as I can. When my stomach feels too fluttery from flying and falling, I open my eyes and stare into the blue sky.

“Wanna play catch? I have a baseball.” The kid is still there.

I drag my feet in the dirt under the swing to slow down. The dirt feels cool against my toes. “Sure.”

The kid runs off to get his ball, and we play. I don't have a glove, but that doesn't matter so much. He doesn't peg it at me hard enough to hurt. We don't have to talk much to play catch. Eventually, though, the kid says, "Does your mom know that policeman?"

"What?" He nods his head toward the tree where June is now standing. She has her hands on her hips, and her face is pulled into a scowl. She glances over at me and shrugs. She picks up her bag and starts digging through it.

"Does she have five dollars?" he asks.

I flare my nostrils and raise one eyebrow. Roger taught me how to raise one eyebrow. He says it's a way to tell someone you think they're crazy without having to say so. But it is none of this goody two-shoes' business how much money anyone else has.

"Does she?" he asks again.

"No. She has three. Why?"

"It's a new rule," he says, walking over to me. "The police kick out anybody who doesn't have five dollars on them. To keep the broke hippies out of town so they don't beg."

"So you have to have money to be here at all? I thought public parks were free." I bit my lip. My muscles clench up, and my right arm feels hot. I want to hit something or someone. June says violence is wrong, but that didn't keep me from thinking that policeman deserved a good kick.

"Yeah," Jimmy said quietly.

"Well, I have to go, then. Nice knowing you." I hand the ball back to him and march across the grass to where June is still looking in her bag. I stand beside her with

my hands in my pockets, not saying anything. I have one eyebrow up, and my mouth gets really tight as I stare the man down. He doesn't look at me.

The policeman says, "Ma'am, I'm just doing my job. Lawrence has an ordinance against your kind loitering in the city."

"My *kind*? My husband is at work," June says. "And public parks are supposed to be for everyone."

"You have no proof. No known address. You certainly aren't from here. You rolled into town in that van. I'll bet you live in it. The sign clearly says no loitering. I'm going to have to ask you to leave." Sweat is running in little streams down the sides of the policeman's face. I am glad I'm not wearing that hat on a hot day like today. I look past the policeman to see that kid Jimmy talking to his mother. It's not fair that kids like him never get kicked out of parks like I do.

"Fine. Let's go, Stormy. This is obviously not the land of the free." June flips her hair across her shoulder and turns on her heel.

"Lady! Wait! Lady!" He's waving his hand wildly as he starts to run toward me.

I tap June on the elbow, and she turns around. She gasps, and her eyes get teary.

"Lady--Oh, hello, Officer Merkel—Excuse me, ma'am. You dropped this. Over there. By the swings." Jimmy holds up two crumpled dollar bills.

"Why, well- thank you, young man." June snuffles and swallows. "Thank you for your honesty." She smiles, her eyes still watery.

Jimmy holds up his ball and points his thumb toward the field behind him. I glance at June and the policeman, and Jimmy and I run off to play.

Liebschön—Berlin, 1941

Big men. Wool suits. Big guns. Won't shoot. Just for show. Why are they here? They protect us, Mother says. Want to touch the guns. Want to feel the curvy piece. Squeeze it, boom. Nanny says no guns. No guns for me. No guns for little girls.

Mother's dress new. Green. My hair curled tight. Curl papers hurt. Out come papers. Red ribbons. Stiff ruffles. Itchy collar. Don't scratch, Nanny says. I try. Rub my neck. Pinafore with bright stripes. Pretty dress. Time to go. Are you ready? Yes, Mother.

Big men all around. Mother's hand. Hold tight, love. I squeeze. Get into the car. Mother's lap. Go slow. So many people. Quiet outside. Wait. Where is Papa? Big men lead us. Flags everywhere. Rows of people. Like stripes. Like my pinafore. We match. I point. Mother says no. Pointing is rude.

People talk. Is it him? It's him. They whisper. Where? Look! Papa! Papa! It's me! See? Here! Hush child! No yelling. Nanny's finger on my lips.

People get loud. Louder. Someone claps. Everyone claps. Cover my ears. Feel noise through my feet. Ground shakes. Papa smiles. Microphone screech. People hush. Quiet. I'm quiet. Light is too bright. I squint. Hand over eyes. Mother whispers no. Squint again.

Papa speaks. No whispering. Words. Glory. Conflict. Future. Peace. Strange words. Louder, stronger. I feel something. Don't know what. Hold my breath. No talking. Scratchy collar. Rub neck. Stand still. Legs want to run. Legs want to dance. Stand still like Mother.

Papa stops talking. People shout. Ground shakes again. All that clapping. Ouch! Too loud! Try to cover my ears. Mother takes my hand. Walking now. Three big men. Go to car. Mother's lap again. Soft. Warm. Going. Going away. Not home. Other home. Up the mountain. Trees and sky and castle. Mother and me. Us and Nanny. But not Papa. I want Papa. Papa with thin hands. Bony lap. Loud voice. But a good smile. I want Papa now. Not Nanny. Not big men. Not guns. Soon, love, Mother says. Don't trouble poor mother, Nanny says. No more asking.

Aeroplane. Loud rumble. Metal stairs. Big men by the steps. Big men open the door. Shoes clang, tap dancing. Like movies. Want to dance. Tap, tap, tap, tap. Nanny holds my hand. I trip. Nanny catches. Pulls me up. Careful, now!

Aeroplane roars and screams. Louder than the people. Rumble, rumble. Up. Up. Up. Tummy tickles. I laugh. I love flying. Clap my hands. Blue all around. Blue and clouds. Water below. Far below. How high, Nanny? Close to Heaven. Is Glory there? Is Glory in Heaven? With God? Yes. Will we see it? Maybe someday. Soon, though? Nanny sighs. No more questions. Maybe someday.

Little Man—Ferguson, Missouri, USA, 2014

Daddy gave me his gun before he left.

“You’re the protector tonight, little man,” he said, standing in front of the dresser, blocking my view of the TV on top of it. I was halfway through an episode of *Phineas and Ferb*. Instead of complaining or telling him to move his big old head out of the way like I usually do, I watched him go through his drawers. It seemed like he was doing something important. Maybe it was the way he walked, fast but calm, like there was an emergency happening, but he knew what to do. Maybe it was his steady of his voice or the way that he didn’t tell me to take off my shoes if I was going to sit on his bed.

My daddy’s muscles were huge lumps on his arms and shoulders. They were a little sweaty, so every time he moved, they shone and rippled like water. When I grow up, I want to have muscles like that.

A black leather backpack was open on the bed next to me, making a wrinkly dent in the red and gold comforter. I didn’t move or make any noise. Daddy threw in a warmup jacket, a few bandanas, a bottle of water, Mom’s milk of magnesia from the medicine cabinet downstairs, and a weird thing that goes over his face to keep the bad stuff out while he breathes. Then he stuck his hands in his pockets and pulled out a handful of peppermint candies, which he dropped into one of the backpack pockets. He tossed one to me. I unwrapped it and popped it into my mouth.

Then, grunting, he got down on his knees and pulled the lock box out from underneath the bed. Little hairs stood up on my arms. I had wanted to open the box for so long, I sometimes dreamed that I broke into it. That lock box was where he put stuff I

was not allowed to touch. I couldn't even look at it. Daddy didn't look like he remembered that rule tonight. He twisted the little number dials on the front of the box, and when it clicked, he opened it. I had been hoping the box was full of rubies or gold or something cool. I leaned over the edge of the bed to look, but I didn't want him to notice me, or else he might snap that box closed again. There was some money rolled up with rubber bands around it. That and two guns with a box of bullets.

If I freaked out, he'd make me leave.

"Where are you going, Daddy?" I asked. "Are you gonna shoot someone?"

"Don't you worry about it. You just stay here and protect your mom and Jayla."

I knew Mom didn't want Daddy to go out there. Everybody was mad at the police because they did something bad. The police shot a kid. Why was Daddy going there? Will he get shot too?

Mama said Daddy was going to get himself arrested or killed. I heard them yelling about it down in the kitchen earlier. They thought I was up here playing on the Xbox or watching a show, but I wasn't. I hear everything they yell about. Usually it's money or friends or chores. Boring stuff. I just stay up with the TV and stay out of the way. Sometimes they forget I'm upstairs, and I get to watch TV longer.

But I listened to every word this time.

"Remember what I told you," Daddy said, touching my arm. "Use two hands. Keep the safety on until you have to use it. Don't you go acting like some gangster in a movie. And keep it away from your sister." He laid the gun next to me on the bed. I left it where it was and looked back up at him.

I know I'm not supposed to touch guns. I know people aren't supposed to even have guns, not unless they go hunting.

I told him I would remember. I could remember all kinds of things. I could remember all my multiplication tables. I could remember every pitcher on the St. Louis Cardinals' roster. I could remember what time the bus brings Mom back home from work at the shoe store. I could remember to stay with Jayla when she takes a bath so she doesn't drown.

When he was all packed up and had put his gun in his pocket, Daddy gave me a hard hug. Then he kissed the top of my head and left. My hair was so short, I could feel his wet lips on me. It was kind of gross. Kisses didn't come often, though, because I'm eight now. I knew better than to complain.

I didn't touch the gun until I was alone. I got this weird shivery feeling in my back when I did. I had broken the two biggest rules I knew. I looked in Daddy's lock box, and I touched a gun. Daddy always told me you have to have a little card that lets you carry a gun. I didn't have that.

I held my breath and flipped over the gun with one finger like it was burning hot. The safety was on, though, so I breathed. My fingernails made a zzt-zzt sound as I dragged them up and down the little crisscrossing pattern in the handle. It didn't look like the guns in the movies. Mama told me movies were fake, so movie guns were probably fake, too.

The TV went on playing another show, but I didn't watch it. I picked up Dad's gun. It was cold and heavy. A lot heavier than a toy gun. I imagined bad guys busting

down the door and coming in to steal my toys, or maybe the money from Dad's box, or the TV. I pointed the gun at the door.

“Bam!” I whispered.

I pretended to shoot invisible bad guys for a while. I didn't put my finger on the trigger because I wasn't stupid enough to shoot myself. But that got boring pretty fast. I put the gun down in front of me on the bed again. That shivery feeling in my back didn't go away.

Naji—Gaza, 2008

“You’re the protector tonight, little brother.”

My oldest brother, Hamid, was getting ready to go out to the street. People were shouting and throwing things out there. I couldn’t make out what they were saying through the closed windows, but I could guess. It was the same fight they always had: *Get out*, and, *No, YOU get out!* Like a song stuck in everyone’s heads, and all they could remember was the words to the chorus. Here and there, a gunshot cracked the air, making me jump. I tried to act like I was used to gunfire, but I couldn’t sleep anymore. Our street used to be quiet with people coming and going to work and a few kids playing. The noise, the anger had never been this close to our apartment.

I stood beside the bedroom window and tried to peek through the slit between the curtains, but Hamid grabbed my arm and pulled me down to the floor. My knees smarted from falling on them like that.

“Naji! Do you want to be shot? Stay away from the windows.” Hamid crawled across his mattress and slid a small tote box out from the space between it and the wall. Through the clear plastic, I could see a few cloth-wrapped bundles inside it. He took out a bundle and unrolled the scarf around it—Mother’s old blue one with the green stripe on the edge and the tear at one corner—revealing a small black gun I knew as a Glock. He held it out to me, and I took it as casually as though he were handing me a flashlight. It felt cool in my hands despite the thick, mean heat of the closed-up room. I wanted to hold the cool metal to my forehead, but I resisted the urge. I was nine years old, after all. You can’t act like a little boy when you are holding such a dangerous thing.

“Do you remember how to use a gun?” Hamid was watching me with a strange look in his eyes.

“Yes. My aim is better than yours, remember? Father was proud of me. He said maybe I would be in the army.” A few years ago, Father took Hamid and me outside of Gaza City, through the checkpoints, beyond al-Rimal, far away from anyone else, and taught us how to shoot guns at an old metal bucket. Father didn’t know I’d rather be an *imam*.

“Fair enough,” Hamid said around a chuckle. His smile didn’t spread across his whole face or up into his eyes. His eyes always seemed to be somewhere else, darting around but never focusing, even if he was supposed to be looking at you. Hamid called it vigilance. Mother called it worry.

Father was gone now; remembering him made a small, hot ball ignite in my belly, radiating down to my toes. Hamid was with him when he died in the street, fighting with *ya kelb* to get them out of our city. I was too young to go downtown with the men; mother would not let me out of her sight, even to go to the market for her. Hamid’s real smile died with Father. Mother faded into the corners in the back bedroom, graying and withering up. The people who killed my father and took away my mother were the same ones outside now with burning rags inside Coke bottles.

I held out my free hand, and Hamid gave me a box of ammunition. I popped out the magazine without looking and pulled the slide back, letting it catch with a satisfying click. I put the empty gun on the rug between us, facing it toward the wall before Hamid could remind me. I slipped bullets into the magazine, carefully holding them down with my thumb as I slipped in the next so I didn’t have to fight with the spring.

“Good, good,” Hamid said, nodding. His approval made the fire in my belly get a little smaller. I watched Hamid take out a second gun bundle. It was bigger and wrapped in another old scarf I had never seen Mother wear.

“What’s that one?” I asked.

“It’s a Carlo. You’ve never seen one of these?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve seen them,” I lied. “I just forgot.”

Hamid did not acknowledge my answer. He just took more ammunition and held it in his hands, looking both at it and into the distance.

“Tonight, you sleep in Mother’s room. Bolt the door, put the chain on. Take the Glock with you. I doubt anyone will try to come in here. But if there is smoke or fire, you have to leave. Then you will need the gun.”

I nodded and looked away.

“You take mother and go down the alley, hide between buildings if you have to, go out to the hills. Try not to be seen. Hide if you must.”

“Mother can’t run well. She just lies in bed most of the day.”

“She will be okay. Last thing, Naji: stay away from the front walls. Stay in the back rooms. If a bullet comes this way—”

“Don’t talk like that,” I interrupted him. My eyes burned. No way could I let Hamid see me cry. I bit my lip and looked at the ceiling.

“You know it happens. If a bullet comes this way, you will be safe in the back rooms.”

“Yeah. You told me that before.”

Hamid filled his pants pockets with bullets. “You are afraid,” he said. “I don’t blame you. This,” he motioned toward the window with his head, “this is no place for a child. I am sorry you have to see it. Sorry I had to see it, too. But ‘He is with you wherever you are.’”

“And Allah, of what you do is seeing,” I finished the verse. “He is with us wherever we are. We don’t have to be here. Hide with Mother and me. We can all run away. So many people have left. Can’t we leave, too?”

Hamid looked down and picked at a loose blue thread on the rug.

He—Midway International Airport, Chicago, Illinois, USA, 2002

Five minutes to go.

Voices drone over the intercom, calling out instructions, flight numbers, terminal letters. Three weeks ago, I wore one of those stupid cone-shaped party hats and blew out eighteen birthday candles while my mom took pictures. Last week, I wore a cap and gown. Tonight, it will be fatigues and birth control glasses. I'm standing against a pillar watching people walking past, milling around.

About ten other guys are standing around waiting to get on the same plane as me. We can't bring much to San Diego with us, so we just have backpacks and carry-ons. A skinny blond kid with a face that has to be more zit than skin is pacing along the window. A dude with his head already shaved and biceps bigger around than my leg is tethered to the wall by his phone charger cord. The others sit on the rows of black chairs in the terminal or stand stiffly against the walls. Everyone just sort of nods at each other, but nobody says anything. There isn't much to say. I check the time on my phone.

Four minutes to go.

I totally get it about airport security and stuff. People complain about the long security lines, the TSA pat downs, the luggage searches. The only complaint I have about the airport rules is that nobody can come past the security checkpoint with me. I've seen all those old movies where people hug dramatically in airports, huddling together with their loved ones to wait for whatever destiny Boeing had in store for them. I could go for a few dramatic hugs, maybe some more time to kiss my girlfriend Liz. Maybe it's for the

best that they can't come to the gates. They might cry, and I don't want to be a wuss. I've always wanted to be a Marine, just like my dad. I was born for this.

Three minutes to go.

Keep breathing, man. You'll be fine. You'll finish basic and training school, marry Liz, and bring her out to live with you. This is your first step into the future. You've got this. Okay. I'm ready. I check the time on my phone.

Two minutes to go.

People are getting restless. Picking up their bags. Gathering up their sweaters and their little kids. I can't stand still. I need to pee. Is there time to pee before the plane? I don't want to piss my pants when the plane takes off. It's like I'm getting on a roller coaster and wanting off, but the bar is already locked down over my lap, and the ride has started.

I check the time on my phone. Liz texted me. "Miss you already. I love you."

I text her back. "I love you. Be home soon."

One minute to go.

What if I don't really want to do this? Don't be stupid. It's too late to back out. I signed the papers. I belong to Uncle Sam. But--

A short, model-hot airline employee with fluffy black hair gets on the intercom and calls for pre-boarding passengers. An old man with an oxygen tank on his lap rolls by in a wheelchair. I pull my feet back just in case I'm in the way. A young, frustrated-looking mom picks up her screeching baby with one arm, slings a diaper bag on her other shoulder, and steps over feet and bags to get to the gate.

But there was a minute left! It's too early! No one should be boarding yet.

Okay. Take a breath. I have to go. I'm ready. I guess.

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