Acceptable Losses

Ashley Renee Jenkins

West Virginia University

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Acceptable Losses

Ashley Renee Jenkins

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ABSTRACT

Acceptable Losses

Ashley Jenkins

Acceptable Losses is a collection of linked short stories that focus on the experience of growing up in rural Appalachia. Some of these pieces straddle the fence between fiction and nonfiction while others are purely invented. Nonetheless, the people in these stories are linked together by location, experience, and often the bonds of acquaintance or friendship. Often, they focus on people left behind or people who have lost direction. More importantly, they focus on some of the tragedy of rural West Virginia that often gets brushed aside in discussions about cost of living and crime rate.
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Morning Service

Driving back home to Preston is an event. It requires a full tank of gas from the Sheetz by my apartment, a cup of coffee with a shot of Irish Cream Torani Syrup, and a series of prayers as I sit in Sunday morning traffic at the five stop lights I’ll pass before I leave Morgantown behind me and floor it for cow pastures and doomed hay.

The prayers are the most important part.

It’s a beautiful morning as I drive through a cloud.

The place I come from is high up in the mountains. From a distance, you can see the clouds settled on the land early in the morning; they’re smears on the camera lense of my windshield. They make me want to follow them as I’m told that Moses followed a pillar of cloud out of Egypt. The problem is that these pillars aren’t going anywhere; they are larger sheep than the others, that’s all.

I’m going to church today, even though I don’t always believe in God. Nevertheless in the tiny church on the road where I used to live, I’ve been the church pianist for the past thirteen years. I’m the only one in our congregation of 30 who knows enough to get through the hymns, so it’s my job until someone else learns.

The last pianist “retired” at around seventy. She was a beautiful woman with white hair and a smile like a sliver of moon. Her name was Maxine, and she taught me to play “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

It’s a strange thing to drive home to a place like that. I know already what’s waiting for me. The familiar red Methodist carpet. A crowd of wrinkled, friendly faces who will tell me that I look more like my mother every day. This isn’t true, but they’ll say it anyway. My mother was
a small-boned girl with a cheerleader figure when most of those people knew her thirty or forty years ago, with cropped brown hair around her ears and eyes like a sparrow.

I am a big-boned girl with wavy hair down my back. I have a jaw like a Viking. I don’t look like a cheerleader; my eyes are too Indian. I’m not sure if I really look more and more like her to them, or if, in their minds, they adjust her to look more and more like me.

We sing the same songs every week. Then we talk business – whose house needs mending, which cause needs money. They’re good people; if they had their way, there wouldn’t be a leaky roof in the whole parish, or a child without a backpack, or a house without a Thanksgiving turkey.

The only thing that ever trips me up is the sermon. It’s usually about giving, or forgiving, or all the ways that people misinterpreted Christ when he was among us – but anymore it seems like every third week the sermon is about the evils abounding in the nation. In these sermons, Satan is a literal being of flesh and blood; the way they talk about him, I would expect to be able to touch him. To hear our pastor tell it, Satan spends most of his time out and about, actively laying traps for believers. Traps like premarital sex, voting for terrorists, and of course, homosexuality always comes up. That and abortion.

Some days, I am offended. I think that no God would make such ridiculous rules.

Other days, I am convinced that I am going to Hell.

Still other days, I turn my head away from all the pretty light that spills yellow through the windows and think about whether or not there is sunshine in the next world, or if my trick hand will still ache when it rains, or if there is a next world at all.

On those days I wonder, sitting in those soft white pews, what would happen if I ever decided to bring a girlfriend home or, less rebelliously, if I decided that I wanted to have one in
the faraway metropolis of Morgantown. As I’ve said, they’re good people – they wouldn’t ask me to leave or attempt to cast the demons out. I just think they’d look at me with sad cow eyes and ask me to pray with them some more.

I might try to sleep through the sermon.

The good news about the drive home is that I can only spend so much of it thinking. The roads in West Virginia are famous other places for being so terrible. They make horseshoes and loop-de-loops over suicide hills where herds of cows and goats watch with blank, bored eyes as drivers swerve and skid and stomp their gas pedals. I once served beer to a troupe of Verizon guys from Long Island who spoke of the roadways they travelled in search of downed wire in the same way that my brother and I used to speak in hushed tones of the bears in the yard or the boogie-man in the closet.

“Evel Knieval would take one look at these roads,” one of them said solemnly, pronouncing “these” with an exaggerated d, “and he’d shit himself, swear to God.”

They’re not the only ones who think so. A friend from Pennsylvania once showed up to dinner fifteen minutes late, threw his soaked skullcap on the floor, and pronounced red-faced to the room that our roads had been designed by Dr. Seuss after a bad acid trip.

The roads in Preston are especially bad, or so I’m told. I tend not to notice them much as I grew up there; its roads other places that get to me. I can’t drive cross country. The long stretches of straight, flat roads make me feel like an ant clinging to an upside-down book; I shift too much in my seat and pull over every fifteen minutes to stretch my legs. Not like home, where every twist of the wheel is an exercise in precision. Still, there are reminders. It seems like every bend in the road anymore is decorated with a small monument: a cross of white silk flowers, a
little brown from drifting hay and manure. A purple wreath with a faded, water-damaged photo. A wooden plaque that no one has time to read. Sometimes I wonder who those plaques are for; is it so the family never forgets the exact spot? Or is it a warning to others: dangerous turn, slow down.

I wonder if my family would have created such a monument for my brother when he drove my mother’s olive-colored Sebring off a hill and into the woods on his sixteenth birthday. I wonder if I would have been the one to nail a wreath – what color wreath would it have been – to the stern trunk of the oak tree that eventually stopped the car. It seems like the kind of job that my father would delegate to me, right along with getting squirrels out of the attic and retrieving borrowed lawncare equipment from my grandfather.

Either way, there are monuments on every turn. When I see them, I think about the people in my own life who are gone; not necessarily dead, but gone-for-now, which for me is the same thing. I have one of those heads that can’t grasp distance; when someone goes away for six months and I don’t hear from him, it’s the same as if he’d died.

Not that death is any easier for me to wrap my head around. When my grandmother died in October, her loss didn’t hit me until December. I was in the mall with my brother on the twenty-fourth; he was fresh in from the army and frantic to get his Christmas shopping done, so he and I split up to cover more ground. And at that, it probably would have been fine if I hadn’t passed a stand of glass hummingbirds. I saw one, a delicate thing made of air and pink ribbons, and thought it would be perfect for grandma’s collection, and that was when it hit.

My brother found me sobbing on a mall bench surrounded by packages from Waldenbooks and Bath’n’Body. He reached the logical conclusion that I had snapped under the
holiday pressure, picked me up by the front of my coat, and gave me a few punctuated shakes.

“Ash,” he said between jerks, “pull yourself together – we don’t have time for this.”

That undignified note marked the end of my grieving process. Five minutes, start to finish. I may have felt worse about that than about failing to cry at her funeral.

Distance bewilders me like algebra used to; the substitution of letters for numbers or vice versa. Either way, those little monuments make me think about the people who are gone.

Take, for instance, Jen. I got a call last week from a mutual friend to let me know that she’d been shot again. The “again” is relevant because this will make the third time. She’d been changing a tire somewhere in Afghanistan, and a bullet – I don’t know what kind, what caliber – struck her square in the kevlar. It broke her sternum, Elise said, but she’s alive and, by all accounts, pissed off. Demanding heads on stakes and muttering about how jihad can go fuck itself, that’s what Jen’s doing in Afghanistan right this second.

I’ve changed a million tires on these roads. Or, if not a million, then upwards of twenty. There are potholes hidden under spillovers, hazards around blind turns, and sometimes, your tires don’t make it. I’ve crouched in mud and gravel, wrapped my hands in my shirt sleeves to stave off the numbing feeling of the metal on my hands. I’ve cursed eloquent and long at phones that beep an apologetic “no service” and blank. But at least no one’s ever shot me.

Then there’s Shockey. He was a tall, strange boy back in high school who later grew into a tall, strange man. He smiles too much and always takes a joke two inches farther than it needs to go. He once juggled grapefruits to make me smile, face upturned like a clown’s, glowing. The only thing about him – he has the worst sense of direction I’d ever seen. He got lost in Disney World and would presumably still be there to this day if I hadn’t managed to track him down with only the vague directions that he was standing “next to the giant red thingamabob.”
I worry about that boy, off in the desert with a compass and a map that he’s probably holding upside-down – he’ll have a half-empty two-liter of Mountain Dew between his thighs, hunched over the steering column and squinting. I wonder what the rumored Afghani terrorists will make of him; whether they will watch his erratic driving pattern and confirm that he’s a master of evasion, or whether they’ll shrug and decide he’s been out in the sun too long. Either way, Shockey will be back; he always comes home uninjured and leather-brown and quiet.

He and Jen are getting married in the spring if neither of them dies.

I don’t understand religion or distance or future.

I don’t understand myself.

I don’t know if these problems or others that create a sense of distance in me. I have a hard time connecting to events, to people, to reality. The details stay with me instead: the color of a roadside wreath, the way that the older ladies in the church sometimes hold hands while the younger ladies don’t, the exact color of the sun on an upturned face.

I write about this when the prayers don’t work. I have a leather-bound journal on my coffee table, a slick black notebook that rides around in my pocket, and a laptop. These are the articles of my faith. When it falters, as it often does, I read Sherman Alexie and Li Young Li.

I am told that others read Job.

I always liked Revelation better.

I drive past the monuments on my way to church. Meanwhile, the sun finally comes up over the hunched hay bales, turning the cloud around me to honey and milk. At times like this, I remember why I wanted to be a writer.
There’s something magical about the way that people are connected – especially in small towns where everybody remembers what your mother looked like when she was twenty-five, fifteen, or ten. We share a history, which is a blessing and a curse at once.

“When are you getting married, Ashley?” they ask me each time I pack up my keyboard after a wedding and the bride and groom, both much younger than I am, smile and walk outside to be assaulted by bird seed. The doves that live in the brush around the church – not the great white doves of scripture that bring peace and olive branches but mourning doves the color of work gloves or milky coffee – watch them with hungry eyes.

In my mind, those doves swarm the happy couple. Their wings make thumping sounds like peppers on a chop block.

In my long quiet, someone will ask if I’m going to be a teacher like my mom.

This place traps you like that.

I can still smile and shake my head. I don’t have the heart to tell them that my life has been a wrong turn.

I have my own wreath of silk flowers that I need to nail to a tree – one for every moment that someone has smiled at me and juggled grapefruit or sat with me to watch the cars slide in the first snow. I have my own work to do.
A storm was coming up over the mountains of Apline Lake, threatening Kam’s lifeguarding umbrella with every angry gust. Kambra could see it in the way the lake was getting choppy and gray, could feel it in the way that the wind had changed, blowing sudden and hard out of the northeast. The air was different, too – thicker than it usually was on top of the mountain, wet and heavy and starting to get cold.

The birds felt it, too. They were usually everywhere; swallows skimming over the water, geese ambling along the far side of the lake, glaring at beachgoers with silent resentment. They were all gone, now – all of them except for a single crow on one of the picnic tables, preening his black wings and, to all appearances, waiting for the chaotic rush that was bound to happen. Kam wondered if the crow had a plan – if he had realized that people fleeing the rain would probably leave half-eaten bags of chips or dropped sandwiches on the sand for him – or if he had chosen to wait out the storm there, resigned to a dunking.

Kambra drew her wiry legs up into the chair to protect them from the wind, squinted her eyes, and watched the far-off gray for lightning. It had struck the lake before, and she had seen it from the far-off lodge— a bridge of light across the sky, a sound like a pair of giant hands clapping, the sudden black afterward as her eyes struggled to work again.

Kam put her chin on her knee.

There were still children in the water. Two brown boys with raised pearls for spines. A little girl trolling back and forth in a donut tube in the shallows. Two older boys lying on the small dock at the edge of the swimming area, feeling the crazy wind on their wet bellies. Their parents sat on the beach, dosing on towels or reading romance novels.
Kambra wondered about those parents, who could smell the rain on the air the same way she could. She wondered if they had that much faith in her judgment, or if they had just never seen the sky split with white fingers.

For the first time in weeks, she thought of her father. He had taught her to swim by throwing her into the water, had taught her to paddle a canoe by putting her in one and shoving it out into the water. “Row for it, Pocahontas,” he’d called from the bank, a block shape with salty and pepper stubble, a crooked baseball cap.

In the last days of his life, he’d taught her to look for rain. Slumped and quiet on his deck chair, he pointed his thick, calloused finger at a blur on the hazy rise of Catskill. “You see that?” he told her, bottom lip jutted out to balance the cigarette. “The way those mountains bleed into the sky right there? That’s what rain looks like when it’s far off. And if you listen, and the wind’s right, you can hear it coming.”

Kambra felt like she had when he’d shoved her off into the river in their battered aluminum canoe – small, needy, and unwilling to seem either. Even though she was almost eighteen, she made sure that her squint was obvious. She could already see the bones showing up more in his hands, the healthy weight already leaking out of him. She wanted him to see that she was listening. She wanted him to be proud.

The clouds weren’t over the corner of the lake yet. Kam balanced the rubber guard of her whistle on her bottom lip and sighed through her nose, careful not to accidentally send a blast over the small, sandboxy beach area. She had already pulled a sweat shirt on over her resort-issued two piece bathing suit, but she hadn’t put on the sweatpants yet. As long as there were children in the water, she kept her legs bare. She’d learned the hard way; she remembered the
heaviness and the binding as she kicked twice as hard as usual, as a child’s feet tangled in too much fabric. When she finally made it back in she’d staggered out of the water like a drunk, child inelegantly hefted under an arm.

In the shorter chair beside hers, Kambra’s coworker Stephanie had already pulled on her jeans and hoodie, and she was in the process of wrapping her towel around herself like a shawl. “I don’t get why they’re still even in the water,” she said. Her nose wrinkled at the gray color of the lake, the leaves skittering across it like tiny, desperate boats.

“Kids don’t notice the cold,” Kambra said, which was true. Long after dogs, parents, and even the die-hard, stringy old couple who trained for the 60-and-over triathlon had declared the water unswimable, children would still be splashing around in the shallows chanting “Marco! Polo! Marco!”

“Wish I was a kid again,” Stephanie said.

Kambra looked down from the high chair at Stephanie, at her freckles and highlights and six ear piercings, and thought that she was still a kid. Hell, she was just barely into high school, just barely starting to think about crap like car payments and registration fees. For the first time in her life, Kam felt too old to be working at a golf course. Like she should have a real job or something.

“Can’t we close the beach yet?” Stephanie asked. “If you’re so sure it’s going to storm.”

“Doug wants us to wait until it’s closer,” Kambra said, thinking about how their sour waterfront manager hated to waste beach time for paying customers. “Besides, it might go right by us like the last one, and we’d have to open back up again.”
“This sucks,” Stephanie said, sinking further down into her chair. She slid her guard tube off her lap and propped both of her bare feet on it, alternately squishing and releasing the foamy material, watching the footprint fill itself in.

Kambra thought that a lot of things sucked, but didn’t say so. She also thought that Stephanie should take off all those heavy clothes and be ready, but she didn’t say that either, because it wouldn’t have helped. Stephanie had started fresh that year, so fresh she still spent fifteen minutes primping in the bathroom before her shift, and reapplied lip gloss on breaks. Steph, Kambra knew, would work that out of her system in time, would learn to feel less glamorous in a bathing suit, would learn what real panic felt like sooner or later. In the meantime, Kambra would watch for her. She sat still, kept one eye on the blur on the mountains, the other on the children as they made fresh ripples in the lake.

Kambra’s father didn’t waste away in the standard sense. He dried up like a corn stalk in November: first yellow, then thin, then gone. She faced his death with puzzlement; even at the funeral, she had stood still and felt like the world was moving around her, and she wasn’t part of it anymore. The lace table-cloths, the silky texture of sorry-for-your-loss roses, the organ keys in between hymns – none of those things were real. Even when she stood at the side of the casket and touched the papery skin of his arm, she could not think that the brittle shape in the coffin was her father. He looked more like a plant in bad need of watering.

Her mother, afterwards, told her how proud she was that she had been so strong. At college, her professors asked her if she needed more time for her assignments, which she didn’t, or if she wanted to save her playing tests for when she felt a little better, which she didn’t. She played her way through every level without warbles or shakes, milking each note out of the oboe
like climbing a ladder. Everyone fed her crap lines about fortitude and great coping strategies. That Christmas, she got three copies of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. She pitched two, and left one on her shelf, unopened, just in case someone later might come looking for it.

Her younger sister Alice told her that she was a bitch. “Can’t you even pretend to care?” she’d asked, tossing her pageant-perfect hair out of her eyes like throwing a knife. “You can’t even *pretend*?” she asked again, as if it was such a great line. As if it was worth repeating over and over again.

Kambra could have asked her what kind of legs she had to stand on – her with her shiny olive skin and makeup classes, when Kambra had skinned up knees from softball and tough calluses on her palms from oars and paddles, canoeing with Dad, learning how to roll out of a boat without banging on the side, how to get back in again. She could have said, “You do enough pretending for both of us.” But she didn’t.

Her sister filled out an application for NYU. Kambra didn’t say anything about that, either, though it was strange to think that the room across the hall would be empty, and she might not hear her anymore – might not wake up to Alice’s favorite song on repeat, blaring “Drunk and I’m feeling down, I just wanna be alone” between their walls.

Alice packed three suitcases – one red, one blue, one battered and green. Then she was gone, too.

Stephanie was putting on more lip gloss, which didn’t make a lot of sense to Kambra. There was no one around to see how glossy Steph’s lips were, and besides, sand stuck to glossy stuff like that. Then again, it might just be something that Stephanie did when she was uncomfortable.
Meantime, the sky was looking worse by the second, swirlly and dark as the clouds tumbled end over end across the lake.

“What if you’re wrong?” Steph asked.

“What about?” Kam asked.

“Lightning. I mean, what if all those kids get fried?”

“The guard shack’ll call us if they see anything,” Kam said.

“Yeah, but what if it’s the first time, and it hits the lake?”

Kam shrugged. It was a possibility she’d considered herself, but she couldn’t afford to lose her job, so she did what management told her and kept her fingers crossed. “Then we better pray we get zapped too, because the lawsuit’s going to be bad,” Kam said.

“It’d be nice to get out early today,” Steph said.

Kam nodded.

“We’re going to go see a movie,” she said. “Me and Dan.”

Dan was Steph’s boyfriend and, as far as Kam could tell, a pain in the ass. He showed up with his buddies sometimes, tossed a football around, flexed his pale chest a lot. He was probably a big shot in high school sports, the kind the old community folk would still be talking about at the Dairy Mart in five, ten years over cigarettes. “Sounds like fun,” she said.

“More fun than this place,” Steph said.

Kam nodded.

“I’m glad I’m not you,” Steph said.

“Thanks,” Kam said.

“No, I mean, you’re working all the time up here. It’s like you live in the guard shack or something.”
Kam grinned. She sort of liked that idea – aside from how much it would save her on transit, she liked the way it sounded like a children’s story, like the old woman who lived in a shoe. “I could,” she said. “I really could.”

“You could sleep on the rescue board,” Steph suggested.

“I could. Or that old hammock is still in there,” Kam said. “From the last manager, what’s-his-name. The guy who flooded the golf course.”

“Ew,” Steph said, wrinkling her nose again. “With what?”

Kam snapped her fingers. “Lineman,” she said.

“What?”

“His name was Lineman,” Kam said.

“That poor guy,” Steph said.

“I know,” Kam said. “With a name like that.”

Steph poked her tube again. “No, I mean, no matter what else he did while he was here, everyone’s always going to remember him as ‘that guy who flooded the golf course.’”

Kam said, “Well, at least he’ll know for sure that someone’ll remember him.”

“That’s a good point, I guess.” Steph was quiet for a while, then said, “You never actually told me what he flooded the golf course with.”

Kam shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. We think the water was coming from the locker rooms in the lodge. The shower room. We’re pretty sure,” she said.

Steph sat up a little, her head popping out of her hoodie like a turtle coming up for air.

“Pretty sure?” she asked.

“It might have been the kitchen.”
“That’s disgusting,” Steph said with finality, no doubt thinking about the drains, the extra grease left in the sinks. “I don’t think I feel bad for him anymore.”

“It gave us something to talk about for a while,” Kam said.

“You always look on the bright side,” Steph said. “Can’t you just pretend to be grouchy for a while like the rest of us?”

“I can be grouchy when I want to,” Kam said.

“Oh yeah?”

“Definitely.”

“Since when?”

Kam looked at the bottle of water she always kept near her hand when she was lifeguarding. She looked over the arm of the chair at Steph. She opened the bottle and upended its contents onto her coworker’s head.

Steph, in a rare moment of maturity, didn’t squeal or jump up, didn’t run around in circles trying to shake the water off. She just looked up at Kam and said, deadpan, “I hate you so much right now.”

“Because I’m grouchy?”

“Shut up.”

Kam smiled, and looked back across the lake, able to see the gentle curves of the golf course. For a moment, she could see it all as clear as the water in front of her – the spilling brown wetness across the course, bubbles rising from the fourth hole flag, and poor, incompetent Lineman standing ankle-deep in the muck, his faded coveralls bulging over his sad-looking stomach, his greasy hands spread open as if he could cup all the water up and roll it into a ball, shove it away. He knew he was going to get fired. Hell, everyone knew, just as soon as they had
to shut down the golf course for two whole days. It seemed brighter in her head than the day she was sitting in, like she could reach out and pat him on the shoulder, but she hadn’t seen Lineman in years. She wondered if he was one of those old guys at the Dairy Mart. She decided she didn’t want to know.

Kambra finished up her degree a year after her father died. She still wasn’t sure why, just that she didn’t like to quit things halfway through. She went through the graduation ceremony to appease her mother, who kept saying over and over how proud Dad would’ve been, and took lots of pictures. It felt more like a dream than a ceremony – unreal and fuzzy. The graduation speech was, predictably, about finding your dream and following it. Kambra ignored the speaker and touched the yellow tassel on her cap, let the synthetic ends catch on the rough surfaces of her very-short, hastily painted nails. It felt like a real corn tassel, just longer and brighter. And she told herself, “This is really happening,” but the tassel only felt real while she was touching it, and the speech didn’t feel real at all.

Finding a job after that was hard. Kambra didn’t want to teach, and the application for graduate school felt too long, too exhausting, and she’d have the same problem after graduate school as she did before – no demand for oboe players. She floundered for a while, and finally went back to what had been her high school jobs: life guarding at a small resort lake, tending the ski shop in the winter, waitressing in the lounge when she wasn’t doing the first two things. It wasn’t a bad set of jobs. It didn’t pay much, but it paid alright, enough to keep her in one of the shabby gray apartments in Kingwood, right above the lone McDonalds and up the street from the Dollar General. Besides, Kambra was good at it. She could always make the cash register work, sad old thing that it was – she knew just how to shake it, hit it with the heel of her hand to make
it pop open. She never dropped glasses in the restaurant, she was still young-looking-enough to blend in with the other girls even at twenty-five, and she knew how to find a storm.

The first hard blast of wind came, and it brought rain with it, cutting into the beach like needles. Kam blew her whistle out of habit, but most of the patrons were already scrambling, shoving towels and plastic shovels into net beach bags and trying to separate their children from the child-herd near the water.

Some of the parents laughed as they scrambled, but Kam didn’t. She could see the far-off lights over the side of the mountain; the real storm was blowing its way up from the town at the bottom of the hill. The storm was making up its mind. She wanted to see what it chose.

Stephanie started cursing under her breath when the hard rain hit – words she’d probably get complaints over, if the patrons weren’t too busy tripping over their sandals on their way to the cars. She quickly started shoving boxes of wheat thins and magazines into her beach bag in a great mimicry of the soccer moms with their net bags.

Kambra did not hurry. The guard shack was a long way from the beach, they had a lot of stuff to carry; wetness was inevitable, and hurry made it worse. She stood up instead, and wrapped both hands around the guard umbrella – the one that turned her tall chair into a ten-foot-tall lightning rod on days like this – and gave it a firm yank upward to pull it out of its casing.

Once free, the umbrella was more problematic. The hinge that allowed the umbrella to tilt was jammed with sand and refused to straighten. Kambra dug the pointy tip into the sand and wrapped her leg around the shaft like a pole dancer. Briefly, she wondered what would happen if a strong enough gust of wind caught the five-foot spread of umbrella and lifted her over the lake
like a scandalous, half-baked Mary Poppins – but she pushed that thought out of her head and sat her hips back, wrestling the umbrella upright and shut and back into its case.

It went faster after that; Kambra had a system. First aid kit wrapped around umbrella case, umbrella case and lifeguarding tubes onto the rescue board, rescue board wrestled up onto shoulders, which took some balance.

“Oh my God,” she heard Stephanie say. She looked over at her coworker, not sure what to expect; Steph was staring out over the lake, poking her pointed finger toward the far side over and over again, like a boxer jabbing with his lead arm.

Kam looked out over the lake, and she saw it roaring over the peak of the mountain, screaming down the ski slope. The blur was coming for them in the form of a wall of rain, rattling even from so far away. As she watched, the wall reached the distant shore of the lake, almost three miles away. The rain was hard enough to churn the water, throw it up and out in all directions, mini explosions.

“It’s just water,” Kam said. “Here, take this,” she added and slid the board onto Steph’s shoulders. “Go ahead, run this up to the shed and wait it out – rain like that never lasts long.”

“You’re not gonna help?” Steph said. “No fair, you can’t just drive off and leave me down here.”

“I’m not driving anywhere yet,” Kam said. Because at that point, wet was inevitable, and besides, the sudden rain would flood every road between the beach and the lodge. Instead, she shrugged out of her sweatshirt and hung her whistle on the arm rest of the high chair.

“You’re not going swimming,” Steph said. The board wobbled uncertainly on her shoulders.
Kam smiled at Stephanie, who hadn’t learned yet that sometimes what you need in life is a little water, who hadn’t yet wondered about the mindset of the ancient farmers who could look at rain and see a miracle. “There’s no thunder yet,” she said.

“You better hurry,” Kam said, “it’s almost here.”

She watched for a second or two as Stephanie ran up the hill, flip flops flapping, curly hair bouncing in already-wet ringlets. From the back, she looked a lot like Alice: pageant perfect, young and sure. Kam wondered if she had ever looked that way, thought back through the hundreds of graduation photos, the family portraits, the somber funeral shots, and thought that she probably hadn’t. She had, even before, been scraggly, been made of bony elbows and skinned knees, wispy hair and eyes too big for her face.

But Kam knew water. She knew currents and wind, what ozone smelled like, the way to turn her hands into cleavers and slice her way through ripples, fold her body into the lake like a letter into an envelope. And so, as the curtain of rain came close, she ran down the beach to meet it.
Exit Stage Right

Her name is Jericha – Jericha like Jericho, the city whose walls fell down. She is a big girl, round up top and on bottom like a tube of toothpaste that’s been squeezed too many times in the middle. She is not tall, either; barely shoulder-high. She cannot find jeans that don’t drag the floor or sag in the ass. But tonight, she is not wearing jeans. She is wearing strappy shoes that lace up her legs like a gladiator’s boots, and lace underwear she got on sale at Target. Tonight, she is dancing to latin music in a dirty bar on a seedy street in Pittsburgh, where a man she doesn’t know is trying to slide his hand down the back of her skirt.

She spins with him anyway, subtly taking his wrist for the third time and moving it back up to the small of her back, where she can feel the sweaty heat of it against her shirt, like leaning against the side of a horse. He is Mexican, she thinks, from the accent – he is very clean, pressed into a white polo shirt, good jeans, slick shoes. By the next chorus, the next chant-through of *Las morenas son muy buenas*, she knows that his hand will be on its way down again, that its calloused fingers will start stretching the waistband, and she decides she doesn’t care enough to make a scene. Besides, he is a good dancer – his hips move against hers just the right way, and she doesn’t feel like finding someone else.

Mimi, her only friend from the office, is spinning on the end of a man’s hand across the floor. Jericha can spot Mimi’s hair from anywhere she happens to be standing, the kind of red that looks like it’s on fire any time the fanned-out strands whip past the glare of a stage light. Mimi is thin like a Prada shoe model with big feet. She loves to dance.

Two hours ago, Jericha’s mother called to tell her that her brother had been killed in Iraq. She didn’t say how, or if she did, it was lost in the throaty sounds she was making between the
sentences. Jericha had sat down on the arm of her couch to listen, had said only, okay, okay as if
she was taking down instructions. Okay, mom. Okay.

She put the phone back in its cradle. Then she walked to her closet, threw on a second-
skin tank top that showed the top halves of her breasts so that they were like two smooshed
dodgeballs and a skirt she held onto but never actually wore because it didn’t – and doesn’t -
properly cover her ass. She considered – and rejected - a pair of black stiletto pumps she uses for
work, paired with dark slacks and a sweater that covers her up like a blanket. She opted instead
for something metallic and shiny, with straps like tentacles. And then she walked down the
street, over gravel and cracks in the sidewalk, over broken bottles that shine like pebbles at the
bottom of a stream, until she finds just the right seedy bar, one that’s blasting the right songs, the
ones that sound like her favorite kind of college party, back when she went to parties.

She called Mimi up from her cell phone as she leaned against a telephone pole and dug
around in her clutch to make sure she had enough cash for cover. Because she knows Mimi well
enough to dance with her, but when they talk, it’s still awkward, all who’s cute at the office and
what are you doing for the holidays. She won’t ask her personal questions.

Jericha is not from Pittsburgh. She is from Preston County West Virginia – a poor place
where everybody’s brother is a marine or an army boy or a coal miner or a truck driver. But
mostly, everybody’s brother is a marine, and in Iraq, not usually because they like their country,
but because it pays good. Boys who aren’t smart, or who don’t get called smart, go into the
marines because that’s a surefire way to make money, and it’s how you make something of
yourself. You can work down at Lowes forever, and hold your head up just because you could
say you were in the Marine corps.
Jericha is not a boy. She was only supposed to be. The ultrasound said so. Her name was Jericho until the moment she was born, when the nurse cut her cord with a soft, “oh,” and her father said, she was told later, “Well, damn.”

But there are no fathers here tonight. Some of the men, she’ll grant, are old enough to be her father – their hands are even roughed up the same way, like her dad’s always were from working construction. She likes these men better than the greasy-headed boys in the bars up the street, though – she likes that they have a system for everything, that they ask her to dance by holding a hand out to her, palm up like a knight, and smiling with white, white teeth instead of latching onto her belt in the center of the dance floor and grinding like they have every right to her.

The man that she is dancing with leans in close – she doesn’t recognize his cologne, and wonders why. She knows the scents of Stetson, Old Spice, Brute, even some of the frat-boy smells like Axe and Tommy Hilfiger, but this is different – and asks her where she’s from.

_Aquí_, she says, _Soy de aquí_, though it isn’t true. It’s what she knows how to say. She doesn’t know the words for a dying coal town a long way from here, or someplace where the bars still have jukeboxes and wooden stools. So when she is speaking her rough Spanish, she is always from wherever she happens to be at the time.

He asks her next, as she knows he will, whether her mother was latina. Her father. A grandma. Jericha smiles like she doesn’t understand, but she gets that a lot, she expects it. It’s because she dances with her whole hips, not just a stiff little wiggle like the other white girls, it’s because when she was trying to pay for college, she tended bar at a local dive where all the mexicans came after a day’s work on the road crews, and she’d learned to dance there, and she’d
learned other things, too, like how you move a man’s hand from your ass to your waist without
getting one of you thrown out.

Sometimes, she jokes with them. Tells them she’s a gringa just to watch them do the
same shocked-laugh the motorcycle guys at the bar back home always gave her when she’d open
a beer with her belt buckle. But tonight, she doesn’t feel like talking. No entiendo, she says,
I’m sorry. No hablo. I don’t understand.

“Hey little sis,” her brother says. He is twelve and shaggy-looking, skinny as the boys you see on
t-shirt commercials. The sun is coming in behind him like honey into hot water. He tossed her
his old catchers’ mitt, butter soft in the middle. “Wanna toss a few with Jeremy and me?”

Jericha looks up from the couch. Her hair is in two braids that skim her shoulders. It
makes her head look like a squash. She is watching Teddy Ruxpin and squeezing her teddy bear
so hard that his head looks like a squash, too. “Really?” she asks.

“Sure,” he says like it’s nothing.

Jericha jumps up and leaves her teddy on the couch. She runs out the door to the muddy
ups and downs of the back yard. Leaves stick to her shoes, already wet and squishy. She sways
back and forth on the spot to show how ready she is, low to the ground and hungry for one of
them to throw her the ball.

Jeremy is a freckly kid with red hair and skin like a mouse has when it’s born. He looks
at her like she’s made of paper machete and tosses the ball to her underhand. It floats in the air,
slow as anything, and she has all the time in the world to get her glove under it.
Her fingers barely go all the way around the ball when she throws it to her brother. He catches it in his glove, cocks his arm back like the hammer on a gun, and he fires it back at her so hard it disappears.

Jericha holds her glove up anyway. She feels the impact in her shoulder, but it’s almost not real. She takes the ball out of the glove with her right hand, then shakes the left once or twice, feeling the sting spread out through her palm.

“Holy crap, Ben,” Jeremy says, “be careful already.”

“It’s fine,” Ben says.

“You’ll make her bawl and then we’re gonna be in for it,” Jeremy says.

“She’s not gonna bawl,” Ben says.

Jericha throws the ball at him so hard it makes a gun-sound in his glove. And he grins at her like their dad grinned at him when he hit a home run at the last game.

“Whoah,” Jeremy says. And he means it, which is even better.

Jericha lies on her bed and stares at the soft lump of her belly, pokes it and leaves her finger in the depression it makes. Her mother, elbows deep in dish soap, has just told her that she’s not buying her jeans any bigger than a size twelve – if she goes up to 14, she can buy them herself.

That would be fine with Jericha, but she doesn’t have a job. And when she lies down, her skin presses up against the waistband of her jeans like a lump of dough presses against a loaf pan in the oven, and she thinks that she’s going to start changing for gym in the bathroom stalls, and she thinks that no one will ever fall in love with her.

“Lemme in, Pud,” Ben says from the hallway, and she tells him the door’s open.
He is still skinny, scarecrow skinny in his first two years of high school, and she thinks it’s funny how hard he tries to gain weight, four eggs for breakfast, two hours in the gym a day, and she thinks if they’d been switched, if Ben had been a girl, he’d have been one of those pretty spindly-leg girls who have ribcages like baby deer and collarbones shaped like clothes hangers, and she hates him for a minute.

Ben holds up a bag of gummy bears and opens it with his teeth. They spill onto the comforter like jewels. “You gonna try out for softball this year?” he asks.


“You’re as good as anybody,” Ben says.

“Do your friends think I’m fat?” Jericha asks.

Ben leaned back on his elbows and thought about it. “Don’t know,” he said. “Who cares anyway?"

Jericha picks up a gummy bear between her thumb and her first finger. She smooshes it slightly so that it’s a shorter, rounder bear. She takes a second, and stretches it out so that it’s very thin, and lies it beside the first. “Look,” she says.

“Pud,” he says, “You try out for softball, or I’m gonna kick your ass.”

She says, “Okay,” and bites the tall bear’s head off. She smiles at him with the little green bear head between her front teeth.

Ben calls her from Iraq one time in the years he’s over there, and it’s awkward – his voice is too deep over the phone, like he’s speaking to her through time, like he’s thirty now, far away, with kids and a family and a life.
Jericha doesn’t know what to say to him over the phone except a lot of yes, yes’s, and yeah, everything’s fine, and no, she didn’t go out for softball this year.

The night before, Jeremy drove her home from school and, between there and home, he stuck his hand between her legs, stuck his fingers in her and made crooking motions like he was telling her to come here, all while he was driving, asking her how Ben was doing in the Marines, asking her how school was, if she liked it.

He took his hand out of her lap when they rounded her family’s mailbox, put it back on the gear shift as he had to downshift to make the turn. There were little wet smears over the numbers.

When they pulled up to the house, he didn’t get out of the truck and open her door for her. He just gave her a little grin and said, “You’re a tough kid, Jeri,” and she felt like she’d been inducted into something, somehow, without knowing what it was.

And there isn’t a thing wrong with her – she got wet like she was supposed to – but she feels funny today, like she wore a tampon too long, and she isn’t sure it was everything it was supposed to be. She almost wants to tell him about it, ask him what girls are supposed do when you feel them up like that, if it’s really supposed to feel like a weird kind of handshake.

Instead, she promises to send him gummi bears.

Sure enough, by the next chorus, she can feel it again, those fingers dipping down into the waistband of her skirt. This time, she doesn’t grab his wrist. She rests her forehead against his shoulder, curls her left hand up behind his neck and lets her right hand hang down by her hips. If he wants her hand again, he will put his left hand behind her arm, slide it down the back past her elbow, and take her by her wrist as if she is his woman, as if he’s going to lead her somewhere.
As the song ends, he whispers in her ear, asks her if she needs anything, and she says yes.

Mimi catches her eyes across the room and mouths at her something with three syllables, something that pulls her mouth wide in the middle – be careful, Jericha thinks, or just one more, but that doesn’t matter by now. She lets the man she doesn’t know lead her to the bar, buy her a drink. It fizzes up in the glass, white and soft like her belly against a pair of jeans, like popcorn in a white case at the stand by the dugouts.

The man says something else to her – she doesn’t recognize most of the words, just pretty and a word that could be sad, or could be glass. She smiles and pretends that she understands. Because she does need something, even if it isn’t the beer he buys her, or the dark corner they’ll stand in while she drinks it.
Acorns

Early September, not yet time for the Buckwheat festival, and the late afternoon sun still felt like middle August. It bore down on Ryan’s shoulders like a pair of heavy hands as he sat on a flat rock next to the bus stop, his sketchbook balanced on his dusty knees, and waited for his sister Rachel.

Walking Rachel to and from the bus stop had been one of Ryan’s jobs since he was a freshman. She was seven years old, still too young for the long bike rode to school, and too little, according to their mother, to walk the mile from the bus stop to their house on her own. So every morning at six, Ryan would help Rachel into her blue-sheened coat, pull her brown, already-tangled hair out of the hood, and lead her down to the bus stop. And every afternoon, he’d bike home by four, grab a snack from whatever his mom left out on the counter, and pedal his way back to the bus stop.

Some days, Rachel was home by four thirty; other days, it was nearly six. Ryan knew already that he would be waiting a long time today. It was still baseball weather, so all the bus windows would be down, all the boys rattling about who was on who’s team, sometimes almost-yelling across seats, all the girls mostly talking about the boys. Without trying very hard, he could imagine the heat of it, the sticky, army-green seats that peeled at any bare skin they touched. The feeling of washed out, rubber gum like pencil erasers if he put his hand in the wrong place. The noise, the jostling, the feel of crowding at his shoulders. The image was so real that Ryan almost drew it, even flipped to a new, clean page of his sketchbook, but he was daunted with the thought of the perspective on all the seats, and anyway, he didn’t want to draw the bus.
Mr. Styles, Ryan’s art teacher, told him that he should only draw things that mattered to him. He didn’t have to like them, but they should matter. For example, if he was drawing a trash can, then he’d better care about the lighting on that can, and the roundness of it, the specks of dirt near the bottom, the lid cast off to one side. It was hard, sometimes, to care about trash cans, or the marble blocks that Mr. Styles stacked up for them to shade in class, or the trees he insisted that they sketch in all seasons. But if it was hard to care about a trash can, then it was impossible to care about the school bus.

Mostly, Ryan cared about living things. His backgrounds weren’t good – his landscapes always looked scratchy and dull, half-finished even when he worked hard on them. He liked living subjects better. He had a few good sketches of geese on the pond, one he liked of a deer that had been stealing apples from the back tree – nose startlingly black against the white markings on his face, antlers tangled in low branches.

Ryan was so engrossed in his sketchbook that he jumped when the bus coughed its way up the dirt road toward the bus stop. It took forever, lurching into every pothole, every dip, the tired start-of-autumn dust streaked down its fading sides in cracked patterns like a tortoise shell. Down its sides, the words “Preston County Schools” were stamped in grainy black ink that reminded Ryan of the brands he’d seen on the hips and lips of old workhorses, or cows.

The windows were down, as Ryan had thought, filling the air around the stop with the remembered noise. Students shouted to each other, giggled with high-pitched geese noises, argued loudly over whose glove was under the seat, who had a better claim to a window, who was crowding what. Mr. Melvin, the round bus-driver with a plate-bald head, had even in Ryan’s day been forever roaring at the students to quiet down, alternately chomping on his own wad of gum, probably in lieu of a cigarette, and turning the local country music station,
FROGGY fm, still higher when the threats of stopping the bus – his only real act of rebellion – failed to cow his passengers down to an appropriate level of noisiness. Ryan had more sympathy for the unfriendly man than did most. After all, if he had to define a Hell for himself, it might well have included an eternity of bus driving.

With a great exhale of exhaust that sounded like a sigh, the bus rolled to a stop. Ryan knew better than to set foot near it – if the bus driver saw movement, he’d hunch down in his seat and wait, turning his head left and right with exaggerated care to make sure that no innocent child with lawsuit-happy parents had wandered in front of the bus during his brief lapse of attention. No, it was just faster to stay put, lean his shoulder against the graying side of the bus stop, and practice his unconcerned look.

The door of the bus folded open with a sound like a deflating tire. Ryan trained his eyes on the steps, fully able to visualize the way that Rachel would appear: first, he would see the yellowing white and pink shoes, the rolled up bottoms of jeans…then the coltish legs, the jacket no doubt tied around her waist, the ninja turtles lunchbox that her father had so vehemently protested – and last the grinning face, the hair pulled into a ponytail on the side of her head, or maybe braided down the back, whatever their mother had time for that morning.

Only Rachel didn’t step off the bus. Ryan waited several seconds, but he didn’t see so much as a shoe. Then, when the door began to close, he took a quick step forward, jammed his hand out, and winced as the hard metal edge of the contraption bit into his forearm. The door opened again immediately, just like an elevator’s, and Ryan found himself staring up into the puffy, impatient face of Mr. Melvin.
“Sir,” Ryan said, putting a foot firmly onto the first step so that there was no danger of the disaffected man slamming the door shut and driving off. “I’m looking for Rachel – my sister?”

Mr. Melvin rolled his gum against his back teeth thoughtfully. “Rachel – little girl with the lunchbox?”

“Yessir,” Ryan said. His hair was sticky in his eyes, and he realized that he must be sweating.

“Don’t think she got on today,” Mr. Melvin said. He squinted into the big, rectangular mirror that stretched across the front of the bus – supposedly so that he could use it for backing, but more likely so that he could watch for misbehaviors. “ Nope,” he said, “she’s not here.”

“Look, she’s gotta be,” Ryan said, trying to sound logical. “I know she left this morning.”

“Maybe someone came to pick her up or something,” Mr. Melvin said, already bored again. “Or she might have missed the bus. All I know’s she didn’t get on it.”

Ryan still turned his head to look down the row of army-drab seats looking for a familiar slump of jacket and sandy hair. Maybe she was asleep, propped against a window, or maybe she was playing some kind of joke on him. But he didn’t see her.

“Go call the school,” Mr. Melvin said. Already, he’d turned his crinkled-around eyes back to the road, no doubt thinking about the next stop, the one after that, the arm chair and Cheetos that eventually waited for him.

“Maybe she missed,” he said again.

Ryan nodded, climbed down the steps. “Thanks,” he mumbled as he got off the bus. He promised himself that if life ever did go completely wrong and he became a bus driver that he
would be a good-natured, helpful bus driver who didn’t chomp his gum over strains of “Man, I Feel Like a Woman.”

As soon as Ryan’s feet hit the dirt, he shoved his hands down in his jean jacket pockets. He wondered when it had gotten cold. Just days ago, it had still felt like summer even though the leaves were starting to turn. Now, the air was crisp and hard like the green apples he sometimes pulled from the trees on the way back to the house.

The cold burned his lungs and mouth. Ryan realized that he was walking faster than usual. He wasn’t really worried – or at least, he knew that it would be stupid to be really worried. It was school, and weird, annoying things like this happened with school all the time.

Ryan remembered the first time he’d missed the bus. He’d had a science fair project to do in the fourth grade, one of those assignments that requires a three-section display board and talked about the water cycle. Ryan worked hard on that project, drew all the diagrams by hand, and pilfered colored pencils from the art box to shade in the grass around the river, purple in the bases of the mountains that were to be rained on. He’d spent fifteen minutes just on the sky, being sure that the graininess level was just right, that all the pencil marks went in exactly the same direction. He crafted a model river out of paper machete, poster paint, and plastic wrap. For all this work, he got a slip of red ribbon for second place and a Certificate of Achievement, obviously a form printed from a computer with a few hastily-scrawled signatures.

The winner, of course, did a project on saving the rain forest. The winner had put out plates with slices of mango and avocado, coffee cakes and bananas. Even at the time, Ryan had thought that was funny; save the rain forest, or you won’t have anything to eat for breakfast. And, in spite of everything, he had still been proud of his water project. He took so much care in
wrapping it up that both he and his brother Mi, who had come to help him carry everything, missed the bus.

“Great,” Mi had huffed as they watched the squared-off stub end of the bus pull out of the parking lot. “Dad’s gonna be thrilled.”

Ryan shifted his poster board from under one arm to under the other arm. “Any ideas, Mi?” he asked. He’d never considered the possibility that he would miss the bus. He wasn’t sure what to do once he had.

“Don’t call me that,” Mi said in the tone of voice that marked a habitual correction. Mi really had been called Malachi until Ryan had come along. – but the nickname had stuck to him after Ryan had, for all of a month, toddled after him chirping “mi mi mi!” when “Malachi” proved too much for his clumsy, two-year-old mouth. Sometimes, Ryan thought that Malachi still hadn’t forgiven him.

“Okay,” he said, knowing that he’d forget again in five minutes.

“I guess we should go tell a teacher,” Mi said.

Ryan nodded and started scuffing an R into the dust with his foot. “Is Dad really gonna be mad?” Ryan asked.

“I don’t know,” Mi said, walking toward the gym. “Probably.”

“Will the teacher?”

“We’re gonna go see Miss. Jordan,” Mi said. “She’s always mad.”

Ryan had been very worried about sounding like a baby, but he’d asked it anyway:

“How’re we gonna get home?” he’d asked.

Mi looked down at him. “Don’t be such a girl,” he said.
“I’m not being a girl,” Ryan said in the exact same tone of voice Mi had used to say “don’t call me that” – a ritualized protest, nothing more. And because he hadn’t wanted his big brother to think he was scared, he hadn’t said anything else about it – but he still remembered how worried he’d been, sitting against the wall in that big gym filled with older students, a canvass of blank faces that all seemed to be open-mouthed and hungry and loud. He’d sat as far against the mats under the basketball hoops as he could get, kept his knees up to his chest, and looked down at his hands the whole hour until his Mom got there to pick them up. He remembered too how glad he’d been that Mi was there, who always knew what to do, even though he could be pretty stuck up about it when he wanted to be.

This was like that in a way. There wasn’t really a reason to be upset. Rachel would be fine; one of the teachers would see her, would guide her to the gym – by then, Ryan figured his parents had probably already got a phone call, might even have been having a chuckle at his expense since he’d been waiting all that time at the bus stop for no good reason. He could easily imagine his father snickering into his coffee as he folded his newspaper on his lap, reached for the keys to his truck. He’d go to pick Rachel up, some teacher would comment on how brave she was, and Rachel would spend the whole ride home talking Dad’s right ear off about her latest adventure. She’d be just fine and, knowing Rachel, might not even be scared. No, she’d see the whole mess as a chance to be heroic, maybe even as a funny story to tell later on.

Still, Ryan felt an unusual knot in his stomach. He jogged the rest of the way home.

Ryan’s house was wide but short, made with gray siding and half-circled by a porch. That meant that anyone in the kitchen would hear the thump of his shoes on the wood before he opened the
door, so throwing the door open would’ve been anticlimactic. He paused instead, his hand resting against the glossy Lowe’s finish on the outermost door, and caught his breath.

When he felt like he could go in without panting like an overly-dramatic marathon runner, he opened the door to the smell of marinara sauce and kitchen steam; it was spaghetti night. He took the time to toe off his shoes before walking through the living room to the yellow square of the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. “Hey, Mom,” he said to his mother’s back as she stirred the brittle noodle-sticks into the pot. “Did anybody call?”

“Well?” she asked.

“I think Rachel missed the bus.”

Ryan’s mother looked over her shoulder. “Really,” she said. “She wasn’t there?”

Of course she was there, mom, Ryan wanted to say. Of course. That’s why I’m telling you that she missed the bus. But instead, he said, “Nah. Mr. Melvin figured she missed it.”

“That’s strange,” she said. Then, raising her voice, she said, “Carl – did we get any phone calls?”

Carl – Ryan’s father – looked up from his newspaper. “No,” he said.

“Will you go to the school and see if you can find your daughter?”

“No,” Carl said.

Ryan’s mother glared at him over her shoulder.

“Why do you bother asking?” he grumbled, folding his newspaper, setting it on the table with a heavy-handed thump.

Ryan’s mother rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and mumbled something about men, which seemed to be her standard response to father-sarcasm.
Feeling suddenly awkward, Ryan decided to leave the kitchen. It felt too warm anyway, especially after his run, when his body had not yet adjusted to its own overheating and the warmth of stovetops, of filtered yellow light.

Ryan decided that his room was his best bet for going unnoticed until Dad and Rachel got back. The living room was risky, a good place for recruiting for odd jobs. In his room, he could at least play at working on his homework for a while.

Ryan’s room was on the second floor – which was more like an attic than a floor, up a set of steep stairs, and home to only two rooms with ceilings that slanted down toward the edges so that Ryan was almost too tall to stand against one of the walls. It was hot in the summer and cold in the winter, but Ryan liked it anyway; he liked the warm wood tones of the floor and the walls and the small, round window. He liked the way it was small in space like a ship’s cabin, the bed under the sloped part of the roof, the boxy dresser crammed at a right angle to it. But his favorite thing about it was that it was so far out of the way of the rest of the house that people tended to forget he was there.

That wasn’t completely true. Rachel always knew when he was upstairs; his room was right above hers, and she said she could sometimes hear him walking around. It wasn’t unusual for him to hear a knock at night and open the door to find her standing at the top of the stairs in one of the floor-length red t-shirts she liked to sleep in. When she was very little, there had been all kinds of excuses for coming to see him: her room was too cold, her bed wasn’t comfortable, she wasn’t tired, it was storming outside, she thought there was something in her closet. Lately, she’d come to the more grown-up explanation of “I wanted to talk for a while.”
Ryan smiled, thinking that she’d probably come up tonight, tell him all about missing the bus and the weird things that happened at school that day. Who was playing what at the play. Whether or not she was still mad at Tina for not inviting her to her birthday party. The funny thing Dad said on the way home. She could go on for hours just like that. It got annoying sometimes, her talking on and on; some nights, Ryan just wanted to sit and doodle, read from whatever paperback was under his pillow, or even just lie on his back and stare up at the ceiling wondering how this season of his favorite show was going to end, or how he’d write it if he could. But Rachel was still worth talking to. She could be really funny when she wanted to be. Especially when she was making fun of one of her teachers. She could puff up, do the down-the-nose stare, even mimic certain rises and falls in pitch.

Besides, they lived so far away from everyone that Rachel didn’t really have any nearby friends. Ryan knew what that was like. At school, there had been boys his own age to talk to, play games with, and even argue with. Granted, he hadn’t done that much; he’d liked to spend his recesses either reading a book or talking with Jesse. Granted, that had caused him some trouble too because Jesse was a girl and elementary school students didn’t understand the concept of girls as friends any more than they understood the reason for memorizing their times tables. Ryan hadn’t really cared all that much, though. Jesse was funny, knew a lot about a lot of things, and wasn’t afraid to be a little bit of an outsider. In fact, lately, she seemed to invite it. She’d grown into one of those girls who seemed sharp around the edges, wire thin and snappy with close-cropped black hair and tank tops with skulls on them. She usually sat next to Ryan in art. Ryan had learned a lot from Jesse. Not the least of which was that highschoolers didn’t understand the concept of girls as friends any better than gradeschoolers did.
So maybe Ryan hadn’t spent as much time goofing around with the playground crowd as most people did, but at least the option had been there. And even though the noise of the schoolyard drove him crazy sometimes, there were other times when Ryan came home from school, and the silence would get to him. Not really silence; it was never as quiet out there as most people would expect it to be. There were always sounds, even if it was just the wind tearing at the siding or the crows marking a morning liftoff. It was more the silence between people; the way their dad could sit for hours at a time after dark, watching flickering images on a near-muted tv, the way their mom washed dish after dish without saying a word. The way they both had a gift for letting a person talk to them, and yet making it very clear that they weren’t listening to anything that person was saying. Mom did it the best. She had a habit of interrupting the speaker mid-sentence with a question about picking up eggs or whether or not he’d put his jeans away.

At least Ryan had always had Mi to talk to, commiserate with, shoot hoops with on the far side of the barn.

Rachel didn’t really have anyone, so Ryan didn’t mind indulging her once in a while. It just meant he wouldn’t get as much of his book read that night, or that he’d have one less doodle in his sketchbook.

But of course, there would be homework first.

Ryan sighed, nudging his backpack with his foot before opening it. He resented homework in the same way that he resented making up snow days. It wasn’t his fault that there wasn’t enough time in the school year to complete what people thought that he should be doing. Still, it had to be done, and the sooner he got it over with, the sooner he could get back to wasting his time.
The darkness didn’t help his motivation any. Even though it was only around six, the light coming in through the circular window was already blue-tinted and cold. It made Ryan feel tired. He turned on his desk lamp, dropped his notebook on the smooth, honey-colored surface of the wood. Beside it, he dropped his English Literature book, turned to the pages of Romeo and Juliet. He wondered if Mi was still outside doing something menial – chopping wood, maybe, swinging the axe over his head in broad, sure strokes until it got too dark to see the stump. Ryan thought he probably was. As much as Mi complained about it, Ryan suspected that he actually liked the heavy, physical chores that came from living on a farm.

Sometimes, Ryan wished he was more like that. More athletic, more steady, better at things like fixing fences and changing oil. He’d never had the patience for that kind of thing. He couldn’t wrap his head around which wires went where, always got bored halfway through, and usually wound up half-assing the whole job just to get done sooner.

Glancing at the clock on his bedstand, Ryan noticed that he’d wasted another fifteen minutes just sitting there, thinking about nothing. He opened his notebook, started to flip through it toward his notes on the latest section. He traced his progress through the story by the marks on his notes.

Ryan liked to think that he took good notes – but not clean ones. The margins were filled with scribbled drawings, all roughed in with mechanical pencil during the English class lectures. Some drawings featured their English teacher, Ms. Jones, leaning against her desk or writing on the board. Others were scenes lifted from the play: Romeo, Mercutio, the battle with Tybalt. Cartoons of some of the other students in the room cast in their various roles – one, more unkind than the others, of one of the football players, staring down at his book with a look of utter incomprehension on his blocky face. Ryan had added, at Jesse’s insistence, a sketch of her
standing behind the “jock” in her usual attire, her oversized jeans and skull-and-roses tank. The
sketched Jesse was biting her thumb.

For a while, Ryan had tried to break himself of doing so many doodles – he knew that his
constant sketching made it look like he wasn’t paying attention. That wasn’t true, though; Ryan
was restless in class, had a hard time sitting still. The frantic motion of lead over paper helped
settle him. He always found it easier to focus when he was scribbling.

He wondered how much luck he’d have explaining that to his teachers. Probably not
much. Teachers always seemed to assume the worst of their students, especially the ones who’d
been doing it for a while. Ryan wondered if that was why they usually got the worst – why so
many students didn’t pay attention, didn’t do their work, didn’t try.

Then again, maybe everybody was lazy at heart, and that was the problem.

Ryan had finally found the page that marked the beginning of his reading assignment
when he heard the phone ring downstairs. He thought he knew who it was. That would be Dad
calling from the school to tell Mom that he’d found Rachel, she was fine, and they were both on
their way home. They’d talk, very briefly, about where she’d been, what she’d been doing. Then,
mom would call up the stairs that everything was fine and that Ryan and Mi should get cleaned
up so they could help her set the table.

He waited for the yell. It didn’t happen. From downstairs, he heard the click of the phone
going back onto the receiver. It was interesting, he noticed, how some sounds traveled and some
didn’t – how a ring or a click climbs through wood and metal, but the voices are always muffled
and lost.

It might’ve been a telemarketer. Sears calling about having windows reinstalled, Direct
TV making sure that they didn’t want to upgrade to a new package. The real phone call from
Ryan’s dad would come any minute. Ryan listened for it, his pencil still for once over his notebook. He didn’t know how long. Maybe a few seconds, maybe a few minutes. He wanted to hear the ring when it came.

He jumped when he heard a knock on his door. “Yeah,” he said. “Come in.”

Mi pushed the door open slowly. He was still sweaty from whatever work he’d been doing outside; his white T-shirt, already worn thin and full of holes, was sweat soaked in the front and back as if someone had dumped a bucket of water over his head. His hair, normally a lighter brown, hung in clingy strands, almost black from the water. Ryan decided he’d been right; Mi had been chopping wood after all. And he’d come upstairs without even stopping to take a shower first.

“Hey,” Mi said. “What’s the deal with Mom?”

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked.

“She’s just sitting at the table,” Mi said.

“She got tired?”

“She’s letting the pasta boil over.”

“She’s probably just worried about Rachel,” Ryan said. “She missed the bus.”

“Huh,” Mi said. He leaned in the doorway. “Didn’t Dad go to get her?”

“Yeah.”

“You figure he’d have called by now,” Mi said.

Ryan shrugged. “You know how Dad is. Maybe he forgot.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“We should go on downstairs,” Ryan said. “Help her set the table or whatever.”
“Yeah,” Mi said. “You go ahead and get started; I’m gonna hop in the shower for ten minutes. She’d never let me in the kitchen looking like this.”

Ryan nodded, not sorry to be leaving his Shakespeare. Still, he was nervous on his way down the stairs, unusually quiet, still.

He stopped in the hallway before he got to the kitchen. He listened one more time for a ring. He didn’t hear it. What he did hear were a few rapid intakes of breath, hitched, with just a little voice behind them.

He knew the sound without walking into the kitchen. “Hey, Mom,” he said, to give her time to compose herself. He never knew what to do when his mother cried, and knew she’d be normal again when he walked through the kitchen door.

She was. She was upright, swiping at her face with the dishtowel. She didn’t turn to face Ryan. “Yes?” she asked.

“I came down to help set the table,” he said. “It’s almost ready, right?”

Mom nodded.

Ryan walked to the cabinets, reaching up for the standard weekday plates – off-white, circled in ivy patterns. “Any word yet from Dad and Rachel?”

Mom didn’t say anything for a few seconds. Then, in a voice that was almost too calm, “Your dad just called.”

“Oh,” Ryan said.

“She’s not at the school. At least, not that anybody can find. They’re still looking.”

“…Oh,” Ryan said again. He kept his eyes on the plates – the painted stems, the two-colored leaves, contrasting shades of pine and apple green. “Maybe she went home with Tina?”

“No. She wouldn’t have done that anyway, but your Dad called them.”
The ivy wasn’t really all that well done. It was symmetrical but lifeless, kind of cartoony. Ryan wondered who would ever put such a dumb pattern on a plate. “Are we going to call the police?” he asked.

“Done already,” Mom said. “They’ll be going to the school first, and then coming by here.”

Ryan wondered what in the world they’d want to know that he could tell them. That his sister was missing, and no one knew where she was? That she liked jelly beans and peanut butter, her favorite show was Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, her favorite movie was Balto? That she’d walked out the door that morning wearing jeans and a t-shirt, brown hair tugged back in a ponytail just like almost every seven-year-old girl in the world?

Maybe just that he was worried about her. That he didn’t know what would happen if they couldn’t find her. That she’d never finished reading the Voyage of the Dawn Treader or any of the other books that Ryan had meant to lend her from the book shelf he kept in the corner of his room.

“Okay,” he said. And, not knowing what else to do, he began setting out the plates. All five of them. Mom and Dad on opposite sides of the table, he and Mi, also opposite. Rachel to his right, between him and Dad.

Ryan decided that he was not going to do his reading.
When I saw my father and my uncle Chip come to an agreement, I realized that my nine-year-old world had gone wrong. My father and my uncle could never agree on anything. Dad liked Rugers – Chip liked Berettas. Dad was a labor organizer. Uncle Chip worked as a federal corrections officer. He spent most of his time macing inmates or wanting to. My Dad smoked, my uncle rubbed snuff. Dad had been Air Force, uncle Chip a marine. Neither much cared for the other’s branch. Neither made more than a half-hearted effort to conceal this fact.

A subtle animosity hovered between them – but then, my father and most of my mother’s family didn’t mix. Shouting matches, flung objects, and cops-style domestic violence calls were rare; the tension took other forms. Shooting matches, none-too-relaxed talk of who’d got the biggest buck that year, even whose team would win the super bowl; such things replaced what should have been healthy arguments.

At nine, I was already well-versed in the language of dissonance among mother, mother’s family, and father. I expected disagreement, but that day, there was none. Uncle Chip and Dad sat together at the kitchen table, looking big and gray in the late October light. Their blocky shoulders hunched over the kitchen table in mirroring postures of concentration. Dad stroked his graying moustache. Uncle Chip stroked his cropped, nut-colored beard. The symmetry was frightening. I wandered over to take a look.

The object on the table was not immediately familiar. I thought at first that the PTA had given my mother another ugly centerpiece. A web of what might have been coat hangers hung over a flat wooden base with painted-on red trim.

I wanted to ask what the object was – but the silence was too unfamiliar, like a charged line between my father and uncle. I didn’t know what would happen if I broke it.
“Well,” Uncle Chip said after a minute. “Shit.”

Dad said nothing. He leaned forward a little more, put his chin in his hand.

“Maybe you should try the poison again,” Chip said.

Then, I recognized the object. It had once been a rat trap. Specifically, it had been the foot-long, industrial-strength rat trap that my father had borrowed from my uncle the day before to rid our yard of the massive rodent that had moved in under the bird feeder.

“Ralph,” my mom said from the next room, where she was washing dishes. Somehow, with that one word, she managed to say, “You’re doing it again,” and “this is a bad idea.”

“I’ll handle it, Rhonda,” Dad said, in his what-do-you-know-about-it voice.

Mom rolled her eyes and put another dish on the rack. She clunked it down so hard I was surprised it didn’t break.

No one mentioned an exterminator.

That was a theme in my house. No one ever seemed to suggest practical solutions. It made me wonder what my parents were doing together. They weren’t cozy or fondly exasperated. No sitcom-dramatic music ever played behind their fights. They were a lot more like Yosemite Sam and Bugs Bunny than like Carl and Harriet Winslow or Archie and Edith Bunker.

Supposedly, this had not always been so. There had been, Uncle Chip assured me over root beer, good times.

“Like Carl and Harriet?” I asked.

“Like Bonnie and Clyde,” he said. “They were wild back then. You shoulda been there.”

Of course, I wasn’t. I could only ask for more stories.
My parents met at a bar. But it definitely wasn’t that roguish-guy-picks-up-a-girl thing.

My mother was tending bar to put herself through college. She was eye-catching; not pretty, but gymnast sturdy and compact, a frame that I would inherit. She made good tips.

My father was bartending across the street to make a living after his return from Viet Nam. One Friday night, my mother decided that she wanted a drink. Not daring to go to her own bar for fear that she’d be pulled in for yet another late night shift, she went to the bar across the street, where, for the first time, she saw Dad.

“Your father,” my mom told me once, “was the best bartender I’d ever seen. And he still is.”

Years later, I would sometimes stop into the Holiday Inn, where my father had his second job, and ask him to mix something for me, just to watch him work. Dad never tossed liquor over his head or poured behind his back. He worked like a chemist, measuring every ounce with his eyes, all the while balancing a list of orders in his head: margarita, no salt; whiskey sour, chilled; vodka on the rocks. Every drop its own crystal.

Dad is a different person at the bar. His posture changes to invite conversation, melting into smooth angles with the tap. I can almost see how it happened there. I can almost understand.

My dad had only recently begun feeding the birds. The hobby was, as Mom often reminded him, more trouble than it was worth.

First, Dad decided to build a birdfeeder. He had not gone halfway, first pounding a wooden beam into the ground like a gigantic tent stake. Then, he had hammered a slab of wood onto the beam, creating a roofed hut into which could be poured by the cupfull.

“Y’know, they sell those things at Lowe’s,” Uncle Chip reminded him.
“Those hang from trees,” Dad said. “Makes it too easy for squirrels to get in.”

“You think this is going to be any better?” Uncle Chip said.

Dad pounded nail after nail into the feeder post. “They won’t be able to get around the base,” he said. “They can climb the stake, but they’ll never get on top of the platform. Same goes for rats and chipmunks”

“Is that right?” Chip said.

To be truthful, the birdfeeder was an ugly construct at best, but the birds didn’t mind. That first winter, we attracted a surprising number of birds to our feeder: dark-winged mourning doves, acrobatic nuthatches in Picasso blues, even finches, with their butterfly colors. I used to sit in the kitchen with a bird book that my father gave me and count the different species. Sometimes, Dad lent me his binoculars so I could watch them more closely. I had to admit it was fun.

That isn’t to say that there weren’t problems. I still remember the first day I saw a hawk take a bird. It happened quickly; a flash of brown and red. A fat dove, hit once, reeled in the air. Brown flash again, and then the hawk was sitting in an oak tree over the bird feeder, the broken dove dangling from its talons like a rag.

I flipped through my bird book, finding the culprit easily enough: a red-tailed hawk. I took in the sharp curve of its beak as feathers fell onto the light dusting of snow. There was a sharpness to that bird that I’d never seen in any other creature – the snap of its turning head was so sudden it hurt my eyes. The dove was not dead yet. Its head flopped, helpless and loose.

“Can we save it?” I asked Dad, who had come in to get a cup of coffee.

“It’s too late now,” Dad said. “That’s just the way it goes sometimes. But the hawk has to eat, too, doesn’t he?”
I tried not to stare at the bloody clumps of feathers, the falling chunk that I thought might have been a wing.

Walking through the front door on a gray Wednesday, I sensed trouble in the house. I knew the clues. My mother was sweeping the floor with quick, angry strokes, dashing the hard bristles under the register like a muted jackhammer. I knew better than to ask her what was wrong.

The next clue was the gun case. It lay on the couch like an open coffin. The gun was missing. I edged toward the gaping case as if approaching an explosive device. My father had given me graphic descriptions of punishment for touching any of his guns; I wasn’t sure how this policy applied to gun-shaped imprints in foam. As I’d feared, the two cases of shells that my father always kept in the open side compartment were also missing.

“Uh oh,” I said.

“Did you say something?” Mom called from the kitchen.

“Nothing!” I called back. I searched for my father, making a mental list of what I knew so far. Missing gun + missing father + missing shells + some unknown factor = mom angry.

Dad’s car was still in the driveway. So was Uncle Chip’s white, battered SUV. That meant Dad hadn’t gone to Chuck’s store or to Granddad’s big field, hadn’t gone out to Freddy’s to hunt, and hadn’t gone to have another shooting contest with Uncle Chip. He was within walking distance of the house. I wasn’t sure if I was glad about that or not.

Finally, I checked the back deck. My father, dressed in light jeans and a white t-shirt, was opening up a folding chair. His gun was strapped over his shoulder. Uncle Chip was there, too, leaning against the deck railing with one of mom’s Budweiser’s in his hand.

I opened the glass door. “Dad?” I asked.
“Yeah, Ash?”

“Whaaaat’re you doing?”

“Getting rid of that goddamn rat.” The folding chair jammed. He rattled it, then bounced it up and down on the deck, pressing the rusty hinges open.

“Is that why you’ve got your gun?”

“Yep,” he said. He sat down in the chair, lay the rifle across his knees. “Little bastard won’t know what hit him.”

“What if he doesn’t come out?”

“I’ll just wait here until he does,” Dad said. He began smoothing a canary-colored cloth over the slick barrel, as if to buff away all inaccuracy. “I’ll stay up all goddamn night if I have to.”

Uncle Chip laughed to himself, shaking his head slowly like some people do when they’re watching a standup comedian. “Jesus, Ralph,” he said. “Did you ever think about getting a cat?”

“We have a cat,” Dad said. He jerked his head toward Mr. Blacks, who was dozing in the sun at the edge of the deck.

“I meant a real cat,” Uncle Chip said. “That’s a rug.”

“It’s got whiskers, it claws the screen – it’s a cat.” Then, under his breath, “Freeloading bastard.”

“Whatever you say, Ralph,” Chip said. Then, when he saw Dad loading the rifle, “Hey – those aren’t the ballistic tips, are they?”

“I don’t need advice on what to use in my own damn gun. Especially not from some nut who’d jump out of a perfectly good airplane.” And like that, they were back to the service branch
argument: my father couldn’t understand why anyone would jump out of an air-force plane unless it was on fire.

“Well, I guess that depends,” Uncle Chip said, taking another drink from his pilfered beer. “If you were the one working on the plane, then jumping out of it just might not be all that crazy.”

I decided I’d heard enough.“Good luck,” I said. I picked up my cat – who dangled from my arms like an old jacket – and went back in the house. I was beginning to worry about my father.

I wasn’t worried about dad’s ability to hit his target. Dad is one of those people who have a shoulder-cup shaped for a gun. He had earned his expert marksman badge on the first try before his first tour in Vietnam – something that he never failed to mention to Uncle Chip, who’d never managed that distinction. I had personally seen Dad shoot grouse the size of my fist as they flew between webs of thin branches. It seemed like a magnetic force was drawing the bead of the gun to the bird’s frantically-beating heart.

What worried me was that I’d seen my father like this before, and it always seemed to end in a really expensive home repair. I remembered once, I’d gotten really sick and had been in bed for a few days. Mr Blacks had decided to bring me a chipmunk, as he did from time to time. He’d sit at the door and meow until I came out to see him, and he would drop the chipmunk at my feet, usually still twitching.

On this day, I heard Mr. Blacks calling, but I was too sick to get up. Mr. Blacks must have decided it was his duty to bring the chipmunk to me. He sat patiently by the door until my father opened it to go outside; then, the large tabby darted between Dad’s legs and made a beeline for my bedroom, squirming chipmunk dangling from his jaws.
Dad, always calm under pressure, had turned and bellowed something obscene at the cat. Mr. Blacks had spun to face him, sat down, and in what dad had later described as an act of pure spite, dropped the chipmunk. What followed would have gone very well in one of those old black-and-white slapstick films: father chasing cat, cat chasing chipmunk. The climax came when my father, patience exhausted, hefted an axe from the woodbin.

Dad never did anything halfway.

A 234 lb man, racing through the house with an axe swinging over his head can do a lot of damage. I didn’t witness the disaster; I spent the entire episode in my room under my covers. However, the casualties included one door, one hamper, one set of shelves, and a spot on the floor that was later covered with a rug. My mother eventually removed the chipmunk from the house by means of a box and a piece of poster board. It took dad three days to fix the house. It took Mom almost that long to speak to Dad again.

Given Dad’s luck with animals, one might ask why he thought that feeding the birds was a good idea. It seemed backwards to me given how much Dad seemed to hate nature as a whole. When I asked him about it, he simply said he liked feeding the birds.

Dad would get funny ideas like that from time to time. Like that we needed to go on family vacations, or that it would be a good idea to get a dog so that he could go rabbit hunting. And, once he made up his mind, he would stick to his guns with the kind of ironclad dedication that had served him so well on the picket lines. Dad always forged on…even when the car broke down, even when the boat sprang a leak, even when the dog dug its way under the fence at least three times a week. And Dad was going to goddamn feed the birds, even when it attracted hawks that ate the neighbors’ chickens, even when it attracted rodents the size of basketballs.
With that same lip-pressing determination, my father had decided to kill the rat. I knew better than to stand in his way. Day by day, I could see it eating at him. He would sit at the kitchen table, a distant look on his face, and would stare at the birdfeeder in the way I imagined Odysseus staring at the gates of Troy. There was a chunk missing from the wooden birdfeeder. I did not ask Dad about that.

My father was born in the Chinese year of the Boar.

Boars, said a placemat I’d once gotten at a Chinese restaurant, are noble and determined, often chivalrous. However, they also tend to have temper problems and are prone to marital strife. Boars are advised to marry Rabbits or Dragons, but are advised to avoid Rats.

My mother was born in the year of the Rat.

When I pointed this out to my parents, neither appreciated the irony.

The stakeout was not successful. No one had been especially surprised. Dad had staggered in at around seven. Mom had fixed him eggs and toast, all the while looking vaguely smug.

“What now?” I had asked dad at the breakfast table.

“I’ll think of something,” Dad said, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Does it really eat that much birdseed?” I asked.

“It tears up the yard,” Dad said.

“Doesn’t the rat have to eat, too?”

Dad gave me a sideways that’s-not-funny look, and I dropped the subject. Instead, I turned to look out the window. A dark shape lurked in the birdfeeder that I thought at first might
have been a clump of doves. I picked up dad’s binoculars, which had been sitting on the window sill, to get a closer look.

It was not a bird. At first, I thought it might have been an opossum. But no, the coloring was wrong; it was too bony in the hips, too dark in color, its tail too short and too bare.

“Hey dad,” I whispered. “Is that him?”

Dad twisted in his seat. His eyes fixed on the damaged birdfeeder, on the shape inside. He reached for his gun, never taking his eyes off the feeder.

“Oh, brother,” my mother said.

Dad ignored her. He straightened up slowly. Then, he burst out the door, bringing the gun to his shoulder. But the rat had heard him. It didn’t bother climbing; it jumped like a cat from the feeder, disappeared into its hole even as the ground around the opening exploded from gunfire.

“You win this round, you little bastard,” Dad growled, still staring down his scope at the hole. “But this isn’t over.”

When I told Uncle Chip about it later, he laughed until he cried.

A few weeks later, I was in the back yard, making leaf sandwiches to feed to my friend Daddy Longlegs. At least, until I spotted my father walking down toward the bird feeder with not one, but two five gallon tanks of gasoline in his hands.

“Um, Dad?” I said, as he walked past me.

Dad grunted an answer. He had a shiny black shovel in his right hand.

“Are you gonna mow the grass again?”

Dad shook his head. He began working his way up and down the creek bed, looking for the fist-sized holes that would indicate the presence of a rat. He filled them in, one by one.
“What’s the gasoline for?”

Dad grinned, the same grin I’d seen many times on the face of Wile E. Coyote, right before one of his failed ploys catapulted him into the stratosphere. “You’ll see,” Dad said.

I took off for the house as fast as I could go, nearly stumbling into the laundry room.

“Mom, come quick, Dad’s going to blow himself up!”

My mother did not immediately drop what she was doing. She continued folding clothes, concentrating on every crease. “What’s he doing now?” she asked. The “now” was very strongly emphasized.

“I dunno,” I said. “But he’s got a lot of gasoline.”

“Just stay inside with me for a while,” Mom advised.

“A lot of gasoline,” I said again.

“Well, maybe this will teach your daddy that not all of his problems can be solved by setting them on fire.”

Deciding that Mom was not going to help, I walked over to the glass door, watched Dad continue his strange task. Scoop of earth, drop into hole, pat with back of shovel. Repeat. The black shovel glowed wetly in the afternoon sun; each cut into the earth was precise and hard.

“Mom, why’s dad filling in all those holes?” I asked.

Mom said, “God only knows,” and continued folding.

“Mom,” I said, able to hear my own voice creeping up the octave. “He’s pouring the gasoline in a hole!” And he was. My father was kneeling in the near-frozen earth, tilting a can, starting parallel with the ground, finishing perpendicular to it. He emptied both cans, one right after the other.
“He’s what?” Mom left the laundry and walked over to stand beside me. “Oh, he had better not,” she said.

“Better not what?” I asked, even as I watched my father light a match. He held it up before his eyes for a moment, grinned in an unsettling way as it glowed along the edge of his shovel. Then, he flicked it at the ground. It seemed to fall very slowly, like ash from the smoke of a bonfire – like a phoenix feather.

For a second, just a second, the hole did nothing but light like a candle. Then the yard exploded. An eight foot column of flame roared into the sky in a clash of orange and yellow as chunks of earth flew in all directions like some sort of bizarre confetti. And there was my father, his arms crossed, his head tilted back, watching the unfolding disaster with what could only be described as grim satisfaction. Around him, the earth was already blackening, the grass shriveling to brown and curling in on itself like the dark forests of Cambodia surely must have recoiled from hearty blasts of napalm. Dad, like warriors of old, was taking his fight to his enemy. He was laying siege and salting the earth.

Mom and I both stood still for a moment. In the glass, our reflected faces were lit with orange highlights; Mom with her pointed chin, me with my square jaw and artificial curls, the both of us superimposed over the flames, as would’ve been done in the most overly-dramatic of war movies.

“Wow,” I said at last.

Mom didn’t say anything, at least not to me. Instead, she reached for the phone and dialed a number, her eyes still fastened on the geyser of flame and the yard that called to mind scenes of trench warfare. I knew which number she had dialed without her having to tell me – I
recognized the tones. She put the phone to her ear. “Hello,” she said. “Chip? You won’t believe what he did now.”

I thought Chip probably would. But I didn’t say that.

The rat survived. We weren’t really sure how.

Dad spotted his furry nemesis a few days after the explosion – he saw the creature preening itself on one of the flat rocks by the creek. I had to admit that I was rooting for it a little bit by then. The rat had ceased to be a mere animal in my mind, but it had become a foe of mythical proportions, a kind of folk legend for my house. Mentally, I cheered it on over the next few weeks as Dad returned to his first effort – that of setting out a fresh box of poison every few days.

Of course, all eras must come to an end. The rat did eventually die. It was found sprawled out under the birdfeeder that had been the source of so much conflict. It was as ugly in death as you might imagine that it would be; it looked no smaller or weaker. To the end, its yellowed teeth were bared, thumb-sized and blunt. Nose to tail, it was almost as long as my forearm. A worthy adversary.

Dad celebrated the rat’s death. He carried it around on the end of a shovel the way Mister Blacks sometimes paraded his chipmunks. I avoided that comparison.

The rat, despite my protests, didn’t receive much of a burial. Instead, it was flung into the creek to be carried away like one of the Viking warriors of yore. Dad stood on the bank and watched the corpse of his enemy until it spun away around the last visible bend. He claimed that the poison had finally done its work and that he’d had faith in it all along. Mom maintained the rat died of old age. The rest of us – even Chip - had enough good sense not to comment.
It would be nice to be able to say that, with the rat gone, the house became a peaceful place to live. It seemed to be true. A little less than a week later, spring arrived in the valley where I grew up. The ground softened into mud; the yard filled with dandelions. The birds gathered in the cheap, slat constructed birdfeeder and shook the morning rain off their wings. It was a good week.

Of course, at about that time, another menace reared its ugly head. A bear stumbled down the hill from its den, stole the large container that had held the birdseed, and dragged it across the creek. It put its large bear-paws on the rounded side of the tub and pushed down, rocking its big shoulders until the tub split like a melon.

My father responded in typical fashion: “Twenty five god-damned pounds of birdseed,” he said. “I hope he’s goddamned sick for a week.”

My mother tried not to laugh. She wasn’t successful.

As for me, I was thankful that the black bear was a state-protected animal. I didn’t want to see what my father would do to rid himself of such a massive adversary.

My father finally gave up on feeding the birds. He left the old wooden birdfeeder as a monument of sorts, a brown flag thrust out of our yard next to a four-foot-wide crater, and a swath of blackened earth that supported no grass for years afterward.

“When are you going to fill that in?” Mom asks sometimes.

Dad pretends not to hear her.
Horse Dreams

The horse stands in the middle of the mall, right next to the encased, decorative palm tree. He tosses his cloudy mane, skitters sideways, and deliberately blows soft *huh huh huh* sounds through his nostrils. People pass by him, miraculously un-stomped-on, miraculously oblivious. He doesn’t even kick, though he skitters, thinks about it.

It occurs to Elle that she hasn’t slept in a while – that her hair is fuzzing out like a halo, that her eyes are swollen up like bruises and can’t be trusted. Her horse is a bench and some left-behind bags, a shopping cart, a stroller. But for now, he is a horse, and he is paint-sided like an Indian pony, and he is watching her.

“What?” Sam asks for the third time. His body is small and swallowed up in the folds of his sweatshirt. Elle has known Sam since they were both in a sixth grade play against their wills – since he was the scarecrow and she was the lion. She notes that his clothes have always been at least three sizes too big, and that he has always turned himself around in chairs exactly that way.

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“Someone we know back there?” Sam asks when Elle doesn’t answer. “An overturned billboard? What?”


The horse looks offended. His nostrils puff.

“People-watching?”

“Like, you know, moms trying to juggle kids and bags, people who obviously don’t know where they’re going. That kind of thing.”

Sam faces her again, fiddling with the frayed ends of his hoodie sleeves. “Elle,” he says after several seconds, “are you okay?”
Elle looks to the horse again. He is grazing on the grassy, smaller plants at the base of the palm tree. He seems interested in her response, staring at her with a strand or two of green stuff hanging from his lips. He looks like the hayseeds who used to stand around outside the Dairy Mart, lean way over out of their way to open the door for her, call her “hon” or “sweetie.” She misses that, feeling special just because some old guy remembers to open a door for her. She wants it to be that easy again.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Just fine.” She shakes her head “no” when she says it.

The horse approves. He scratches his shoulder against the rough bark of the tree. His eyes close, content.

Sam looks at Elle the way Elle looks at her grandfather when he calls her by her mother’s name. “Look,” he says with purpose that makes Elle feels tired.

“I just need caffeine,” she says, jiggling her cup. Ice cubes rattle around the remains of her empty iced mocha.

“It’s not that,” Sam says. “I haven’t seen you in three days, you’re not returning my calls…”

“Sam,” she says, “I’m not returning anyone’s calls.”

“Exactly,” he says.

“I’ve been busy.”

“Busy doing what – skipping class? Hiding in your apartment?”

She avoids his eyes by looking down at her cup. The tiny, impossible-to-sip pockets are separating into syrup and milk in floating blotches. Swish-swish. “I have to go,” she says.

The horse disappears behind a magazine rack, and Elle ducks behind a revolving calendar display. They run away in different directions.
Getting to class the next day is harder than it was the day before. Elle stands for several minutes in the stairwell of her apartment complex. She can feel the harsh texture of the concrete against her gloves.

Outside is a fall morning that promises snow. The air is cold, the sky is gray, and the sun is a small gold coin under a blanket.

Upstairs, her bed is still warm, still creased with the shape of her body.

“Fight it,” she says out loud. Her air wisps past her face. Her car is covered in frost fireworks; she imagines how the metal will feel through her thin gloves and thinks again of her blankets.

She tells herself that she’ll fail if she doesn’t go to class. She envisions her mother’s face, saggy and drawn with worry.

“You used to be a great student, Elle,” her phantom mother says.

Her phantom mother is wispier than her phantom horses. That frightens Elle more than the prospect of failing. She takes a deep breath and goes to class. She nearly detours twice – once at Eat’n’Park for breakfast, once at the library. She nearly turns back when she sees cars driving in circles in the garage, a sign of fullness.

By the time she gets to class, she is exhausted. She finds a seat near the back and listens to an old man talk about the Spanish American War. He speaks slowly, so slowly, in front of a blackboard-sized projector screen, backed up by the synchronized snoring of at least three jocks in the back. Superimposed over him as he paces and gestures is part of the picture being projected: a portrait of the rough-riders looking wild and a little dirty. The professor’s face is the dappled shoulder of a pony, and a raised boot is settled over his straining button-down shirt.
Elle thinks that his – Dr. Murray’s – moustache looks a little like Teddy Roosevelt’s. She wishes that she could draw Mr Murray with his pudgy belly surging in all directions over the saddle as he leans and leans and tries to get a foot into the stirrup. She imagines him still talking, so slowly and deliberately, about yellow journalism, the Maine. She imagines that the horse rolls its eyes. She imagines she is doing this to stay awake.

Dr. Murray bumps the projector screen, and for a moment, the projection is alive, full of horses and tossing heads, the men’s hands suddenly straining to hold them, and Elle wishes they would all scatter and run from the great ship pulling in behind them. She can see them pouring out of the screen like water, a moving tide barreling through the auditorium seating, shocking dozing students out of their crossword puzzles. There would be spilled Mountain Dew, a toppled projector still whirring its sleepy whirl, sloppy, sweat-suit-clad students turning this way and that, reaching out to touch glowing red or glossy bay as it flies past them.

The picture is better than the lecture. Elle doodles the horse-tide in the margin of her history notes, with stick-legs and round eyes. She smiles as she scribbles wibble-lined manes and tails. She shades their bellies and their backs, makes hooves with the flat scrape of her pencil. She has no idea when the battle of San Juan Hill occurred.

She names one of the mares “Malaria.”

Aunt Milly runs a new-age shop in Frostburg – the kind of place that offers the first tarot-card reading free and decorates with healing crystals. Elle is secretly convinced that she only wears the fancy headscarf to cover a bald spot, but she doesn’t know who else to talk to, so for the first time ever, she pulls out the rolodex that her mother sent upstate with her and flips to the right number.
“Sweetie!” her aunt says when she picks up the phone. Milly, Elle remembers, speaks in exclamation points.

Words tumble out of the phone after that, words like “long” and “wonderful” and, “so glad.” Elle says the expected, polite things in response. She smiles in spite of herself when Milly tells her about her husband and his latest efforts to repair the sink. Elle apologizes the expected apology for not calling in five months, which was the fourth of July, when Elle’s mother put the phone in her hand and left her no escape. “Talk to her,” her mother had mouthed sternly, and Elle caved.

Finally, Elle finds an opening for her question; she blurts it like a child. “What does it mean when you dream about horses?”

“Do you have a man?” Milly asks.

“No,” Elle says, knowing that she lies.

“Well, then it means you want one!” Milly says, and laughs.

Elle wishes that modern-type phones still had phone cords so that she could twist her fingers in it. She settles for twisting them in her hair, and she reminds herself to count to ten, fifteen, however much counting is required to retain civility. She reminds herself that she has no one else to call.

“I don’t think that’s it,” she says when Milly trails off to giggles.

“Oh dear. This isn’t about your father, is it?” Milly asks.

Elle wonders why it is that whenever a woman has some kind of problem, people either assume she’s having too much sex, not enough sex, or daddy issues. “I’m not one of your clients, Aunt Milly,” she says.

“Well alright, sweetie, now don’t get your fur ruffled. What kind of dreams?”
Elle breathes deep and tries to explain. It started small, like a flu starts with a single sneeze. When she flips through her dream-journals, the first horse appeared once, maybe twice, years ago, in the dream-version of a cameo. Being chased by a combination of the boogey-man and her first babysitter, Elle spotted him, ghost white, galloping through a field. Elle caught him by the halter and, unholy boogey-babysitter forgotten, took him back to his stable.

Elle didn’t expect to see the dream horse again, but the next night, he was back. That time, he was bay, deep and rich like walnut wood. And after that, he was chestnut – sun fire down his shoulder. And after that, he was bucksin, the same color as Elle’s hair, feathery dark in the rain.

Elle does not tell Milly that the dreams come when she’s awake now. She does not tell her that she wants to know his name, or that he’s waiting for her, and she knows that he is.

“Well now, honey,” she says. “That means one of two things. Either he really is some man who’s giving you trouble, or he’s come to tell you something, and you better listen.”

Aunt Milly, Elle remembers, has always been a few bangles short of a bracelet. “I’ll listen,” she tells her. “Thanks.”

“Elle,” she says to her before she can hang up. “You come and visit me soon.”

Elle tries not to think about the long trip, the hours in the car feeling confined and small, legs tingling from being tucked up for too many miles. She tries not to think about how much she would want to crawl out of her skin. “I will,” she lies.

Another piece of her breaks loose and gallops away.

Elle is not surprised when she gets a seventy three on her history test. She knew she was going to blow the short answer section. The essay section, too.
She knows the instructor asked the wrong questions. Dr. Murray asked whether or not the war was justified, which party felt which way about it, what year it happened.

Elle doesn’t know or care about fuddy-duddy politics, or the laws that prevented Roosevelt from receiving a medal of honor until years, decades, a century after his death. History, as far as she is concerned, is just stories, and the stories that are important to one person may not be important to anyone else.

The story Elle remembers is this: Teddy Roosevelt went into the battle of Kettle Hill on a small, tough horse by the name of Little Texas. Little Texas appears in no photos, and in paintings, he looks just like any other horse. He is usually painted brown, with four white feet and a cheeky blaze.

But when Little Texas grew tired in the jungle heat, Teddy Roosevelt climbed down from his saddle and walked up the hill on foot. She can see, in her head, that little horse standing at the bottom of the hill, his sides damp and heaving. She can hear the wet slap of Teddy’s hand on his side. The swish of his pants as he dismounts.

Elle’s grandfather kept horses. Or, rather, he kept a horse, singular, scruffy, and gray, and a pony, shaggy and chocolate-colored, a Shetland. The pony’s name was Gus, and he belonged to Elle.

Elle loved that cranky pony. She would walk all the way up to the top pasture, bundled up in her metallic-blue coat and her Rainbow Brite sneakers, even when it was muddy, even when it was cold enough that the mud froze into jagged ruts. She’d walk past the Angus cows with their bored faces, jump the ditch, turn her ankle almost every single time. Then, she’d stand up on the fence and coax Gus over to the rickety posts with an apple, because carrots didn’t
work, and sugar wasn’t good for him. And he would come, stomping his feet, to let her feed him, let her tug on his mane, though he would always toss his head if she tried to touch his nose.

Secretly, Elle promised herself that she and Gus would run away. She didn’t know what she wanted to run from, just away – that magical away that every book said could happen.

“Hop on over that fence,” her grandfather told her one day, leaning up against the sturdy pine post. His long, gray braid is thrown over his shoulder like a rope. That was back when Elle was still doing as she was told, so she did, and grandpa followed her in with a blanket and a bridle.

Elle does not go to class the next day.

She hears her alarm go off. It is a small voice very far away.

Elle rolls over and goes back to sleep.

She does not go to work that night, either. She calls in sick an hour before her shift, coughing into her cell phone and promising to arrive early the next day.

“Just a bad day,” she tells the horse-shadows that her coat rack casts against the door.

“It’s not getting worse. It’s a bad day.”

Still, she pulls up her laptop and takes a few online quizzes. Depression. Anxiety. She even tests for some strange ones – Borderline, for instance, and Bipolar Disorder. She reads the results and squints. Horses aren’t mentioned anywhere.

She plays space ping-pong on her computer for an hour and goes back to bed.

Elle couldn’t have learned to ride on a better pony. Gus never bucked and never tried to run. Elle would find out later that he had mild arthritis, especially in his knees, and did not like to do much
more than trot. But he dutifully made laps of the muddy pasture, always with her grandfather standing in the middle, looking like a wiry pole in his flannel shirt and high-waisted jeans, just another fence post. His long hair hung woven down his back like a jumble of wire, gray and white, a braided mane on top of a leather face. He would call at Elle to speed up or slow down, press tight with the knees or loosen up.

In this way, Elle learned to ride in the upper pasture. She learned it mostly in circles. First with her grandfather leading the pony, then on a lunge line, then by herself, clockwise or counter-clockwise, with perfect clockwork steps. She doesn’t question the sense of this. No one argues with a circle.

It is only when she is walking back to the barn by herself, Gus in tow, that she looks out at the hills that don’t have fences and wonders why she bothers with circles at all.

When Elle skips class for the third time in a row, Sam knocks on her door. She knows that it’s Sam because it’s a tiny knock, the kind you do when you’re trying not to bruise your knuckles on the too-cold metal of the door. UPS workers and door-to-door salesmen have learned to knock with authority.

Sam’s knock makes Elle think of hailstones on the roof. She opens the door.

“Hey,” Sam says. His breath is vapory and his hoody is drawn up over his head; his mouth looks stubborn.

“Hey,” Elle says.

“You’ve been gone again,” Sam says.

“I know,” she says.

“I mean,” he says, “have you talked to anybody about this?”
“Just you, and my crazy aunt,” she says.

“What did she say?”

“That I need to get laid.”

Sam gives her his you-are-nuts look.

“She’s interesting,” Elle says without conviction. Which, she thinks, communicates “psychotic” without saying it directly. She shuffles her feet on her welcome mat.

Sam looks down at her foot. At how it sits right between him and the entrance. “I meant you need to talk to a professional.”

“Sam,” she says, “it isn’t the dreams. I mean, it isn’t because of them.”

Elle thinks that Sam can sense how much she wants to disappear into her apartment. He makes a show of reading the stairwell graffiti, even traces his free thumb over a red-on-gray proclamation of hot lesbian love, dial 527… “Well, something’s up,” he says.


There is a long pause made of the traffic sounds outside and the faint hum of the hallway pipes. “You know, I think they have a pill for that,” Sam says at last.

Elle unlocks her apartment door, fingers already numb from the cold, and holds out her hands for the bags that he reluctantly gives to her.

“We’re going to dinner tonight,” Sam says. “Over at Cheddars. Me and Shelby and Jake. You should come.”

“Okay,” she says. “Sure, I’ll try to make it.”

Sam catches the door before Elle can close it. “Elle,” he says, “at least call.”

He’s trying hard to look serious, shaggy forelock in his face. He looks less like a mule, more like a tall, thin pony, but she won’t tell him that, ever.
“I will,” she says.

He stays in the doorway for an awkwardly long time before shoving his hands in the front pouch of his hoodie and shuffling away.

Elle tries not to think too much about Sam as she packs her suitcase. Instead, she thinks, for the first time in years, about her father. About where he is, what he’s doing. Why he left – if it was another woman, like everyone says, or if he just felt like running away. If the woman is easier to understand than the need to be somewhere else.

She wants to write him a letter, ask him which it was, even if he won’t write her back. But she doesn’t know where to send it. She likes to think she would be brave enough to send that letter. It would be too much hassle; she would never get to the post office, never wait in those long, sad-looking lines.

When she should be going to dinner, she zips up the battered old suitcase and leans it up against her door. Then she sits down heavy on the bed, folds her hands in her lap, and tries not to think. Tomorrow, she will go to see Aunt Milly in her tiny white house in Frostburg. She will ask her everything she knows about horses. She’ll ask about her grandfather, the old farm, the circles worn in the grass. And maybe, if there’s time, she’ll ask about her father.

“I’m going to get better,” Elle says to her bedroom. In the pseudo-dark, the shadows move on the walls, dancing as the lights from the cars go by. It makes her think of the cave paintings she learned about in her history class, the way that some people believe that the drawings were made to be animated by firelight – to suggest motion and life. And, though she knows she shouldn’t, she lets her eyes blur – she lets the shadows resolve themselves into the expected shapes of arched necks, deep shoulders, manes blowing in the weird shadow-wind of headlights and dark.
Primitive

The snake and I stare at each other across the dusty black mound of the coal bin. I rock back on my boot heels. He lifts his head another inch.

He isn’t a pretty snake. He has a flat head like a toad that’s been run over by a bicycle tire, a body like a sausage, a fat, stubby tail twitches naked against the rocks, and I wish he had a rattle. Rattles, so I hear, are useful things, tell you when you’re in trouble, how old a snake is, how likely he is to be full of himself.

“Mr. Copperhead,” I say, though it might be a she for all I know. I wonder what made me wear shorts and rubber boots down to throw coal on the fire this morning, what made me decide it was too much trouble to shimmy into a pair of my brother’s jeans. Why I decided a hot shower was worth maybe getting bit. “Mr. Copperhead,” I say again, like an idiot.

The snake rears up a little…not all the way…from where he’d been sunning himself on the hidden side of the coal pile, his sides dulled with the dust. The morning chill is making him lazy, or I’d be bitten already. He looks at me like black snakes don’t. Malicious. His eyes are further forward, able to focus on me from beneath the hoods, a perpetual, down-tipped glare. Like a wasp when it hovers in front of you, something inherently combative about it. Daring me.

He raises up a little higher. Preparing to strike or trying to see me better. I try not to think of myself reduced to heat-blobs, the best targets moving slices of juicy red, orange, yellow.

I hold the shovel a little tighter, feeling the weather-roughened wood dig into my hands. It reminds me of a story my dad once told me about my grandmother and a snake like this…how she’d been hoeing her garden and come across a copperhead.

My grandma was a tough little woman who only cursed in German. She waved a swastika flag when she was sixteen, rode away from the red army on her bicycle, swam across a
river with her bag held over her head, and once she was in the states, she lost her husband while still in her thirties. Her best friend, an Italian woman who lived across the street and raised beautiful pepper plants, called her Hell-on-Wheels Johanna.

So when my grandmother met her snake, she didn’t scream or bring her feet together like a cartoon woman who had seen a mouse. She didn’t run away. For her, the snake wasn’t a Russian soldier or deep, cold water. It wasn’t the sharp pain she’d felt in her stomach when she’d watched her brothers march for Berlin. She held her hoe up over her head and brought it down like an axe.

Dad always talked about it with awe in his voice – how she dug the business end of the hoe right behind the ugly triangle-head of the snake. How even with its head half-severed, the snake had thrashed with incredible strength, its body beating against the old wood of the handle, climbing up the hoe. My grandmother didn’t falter. She gripped the hoe with both hands, went up on her toes and leaned her whole weight against the handle, bearing down with all her strength to keep that head from coming up.

“You get that shovel, Carl,” she’d yelled at my twelve year old father, her face flushed and red. “You get that shovel and you cut its head clean off!”

Dad never could tell me where he found the shovel – if it sat against their coal bin or if he found it in the basement. He couldn’t remember how long it took him to find it, if he’d fumbled around the shed or tripped in their uneven, unlandscaped yard. But he told me all about cutting that thing’s head off. How, even with its neck sliced to show the meat underneath like a half-gutted fish, the snake did not want to run away. How even with the heavy shovel, it had taken some sawing to get the head off. That snake, he’d said, wasn’t right.
Then he’d tell me that I look like my grandmother. That I sound like her when I’m angry, and maybe that’s true. But I’ve never run away from Russian soldiers on my bicycle, and I’ve never swum out of my country with a blanket bag on my right shoulder, and I am afraid of copperheads with their dull backs and distorted faces.

I also don’t have a hoe, or a twelve-year-old father standing at the corner of my garden. I have a shovel and a pair of boots. Nobody here but me.

As the snake wraps its lower half tighter, I think about the distance. About how long my arms feel, how heavy the shovel is, the blunt coil of the snake on the coal. I wonder if I can hit him if he strikes, if I could get the flat end of the shovel into the back of his head before those fangs sink into my calf. And then if I missed, could I get myself to the house in time to call an ambulance, and why in God’s name is everybody else in town today, my brother at school, my parents working – my damn day off.

“I’m backing up,” I say to it, softly. “Mr. Copperhead.”

The snake rears a little higher, swaying in slow wobbles like every toy snake ever made, considering his options. “I don’t like you,” his weavings seem to say.

“You can have your coal pile. I’m backing up.” I move only my right foot. Slowly, still holding that shovel before me, I edge the right foot back, point it behind me. If I can move back just that far, I’ll be safer – not out of strike, but far enough that I might just be able to get out of the way in time. I wonder how red I must be in the snake’s eyes, fast as my heart is pounding. I wonder if my heart might scare him. I ease my weight back down onto that foot, feel it turn a little on leftover pieces of coal, dust, ashes.

The snake jerks – not a strike, thank God, not a strike, but a fast, small recoil of the head. I jerk in response.
I hate reptiles. Hate them. Mammals, you know what’s going on, you can read their faces, their snarls or lacks. I can’t see his fangs. I know they’re there, but snakes have poker faces.

“Mr. Copperhead,” I say. It comes out a little bit Australian. Like the Crocodile hunter. Which gives me hope. People do this every day, I think, and survive. They make nature shows where they poke and prod at animals that can kill them. Granted, they do it with highly-trained medical standbys. But they don’t need them. Often, anyway. I bite the inside of my cheek, and slowly, I settle my weight, remove my left leg.

That fast, it’s over. The snake turns, slinks off, its belly-ridges accordion-wriggling over the coal in slow procession. It seems offended, dignity wounded, nap disrupted.

I let the shovel clank to the concrete floor of the bin. I feel as if I have a bird trapped in my chest, and I am no longer brave enough to make fire.
Sixth Time Around

On the day of her sixth lifeguard recertification clinic, Kambra showed up in a red Speedo that hugged her body like a latex glove. She didn’t bother with a cover-up or with wrapping a towel around herself as she stepped out of her car – she was years past the stage of hunched shoulders or worries about her bikini line, and the May bite in the air that always seemed to wrap itself around mountain lakes was so familiar that she didn’t notice it.

Kam took a minute to lean against the side of her car – the same tan Subaru Legacy she’d tortured through a decade of sand and water – and braided her bushy hair with slow, precise pulls. She tried not to think about how many times she had repeated this exact routine, this exact set of gestures, before a long day in the guard chair. She tried not to think about how many times she had pulled the sand-colored floor mats out of the car and huddled into back seats with cheap gas station vacuums, sucking up the sand that saturated every crevasse of her life from late April to early September.

Instead, she leaned her head back as she tied off the end of her braid and stared at the sky – at the mounds of clouds stacked on top of each other, at the way the wind tumbled them. The morning sun struck her upturned face like the flat of a hand, giving little beyond a faint sting; it left her chilly, but promised dry heat later on.

“Beautiful day,” she said quietly. She threw her towel over her shoulder and walked down toward the lake.

As she expected, there were people gathered already: a chubby girl sat on the foot rest of a guard chair, huddled in a towel as if she expected snow. Beside her, a girl with strong, linebacker shoulders hunched with her hands shoved deep into the pockets of her hoodie, her feet square and her face grim. A boy built like a softened-up scarecrow stood in the water with rolled-
up sweatpants, his tan face giving mute testament to the fact that the lake was cold as Hell.

Another boy, more squat, freckly, lay sprawled out on the imported sand like a true beach bum.

He was wearing jeans and tennis shoes, and seemed, like a lizard, to be storing up heat.

Kam expected funny looks and she got them. She wasn’t sixteen anymore, though for years, she’d managed to look it; her wiry frame, small bust, and square shoulders buried the years. A lifetime of swimming had kept her trim and muscular, and a lifetime’s worth of sunscreen had kept her face from turning to a dried apple. Now, she was told, she looked like a healthy 25, not 34. But even the age that she looked was a solid 5 years older than the next oldest trainee would probably be that day. She wondered when that had happened – when guards had started getting younger. When she had first certified, it was a job for college kids. Somewhere along the line, it had become a part-time job for high schoolers who wanted the ipods or the designer t-shirts their parents wouldn’t buy for them. Kam wasn’t sure how she felt about that – if she liked the idea of the life-guarding world getting younger. She sometimes felt like she was just finally starting to get the hang of it herself.

She realized then that the looks were continuing well past what she actually expected – and no one was being subtle about it. In fact, every one of them was staring straight at her, as if she were going to suddenly pounce on one of them and rip off something vital.

“Hi,” she said.

She was met with a chorus of hello’s. And more expectant stares.

Something clicked in her mind. “I’m not the instructor,” she said.

The mixture of awkward stares that she received told her that she’d made the right guess. Everyone found something else to look at.
Kam didn’t let it bother her. Instead, she walked over to stand beside the guard chair and found herself envying the guards who worked there. The water was painful-looking clear, the kind of glassy finish that promised a breath-stealing entry later. She could see the bottom clearly even ten feet off the shore, could see the dark blobs of bluegill cruising back and forth in the shallows. The sun set knife edges on all the miniature waves, and across the lake, a heron balanced on one leg.

Hoodie girl poked her foot in the sand, squished it back and forth. Chubby towel girl looked like she wanted to say something.

“Nice view,” Kam offered.

Towel girl nodded quickly. “Sure is cold, though.”

Kam shrugged. “Goes away quick,” she said.

“So, um – you’ve done this before, right?”

Kam shrugged again. “Once or twice,” she said.

“Is it hard?”

Kam thought about her answer for a long time. About her first time through the certification course, whether or not it was hard, whether or not she’d struggled. It seemed to her now that she’d done the maneuvers so many times, both in practice and for real, that she didn’t really have to think about them. “It’s not too bad,” she said, though she honestly didn’t know whether or not she was telling the truth. “You a good swimmer?”

Towel girl looked uncertain, and Kambra remembered – one of the core tenants of being a high school girl is that you’re never allowed to acknowledge that you might actually be good.

“We’re on the swim team,” Hoodie girl said without looking up. She was using her feet to scoop the sand into a small mound. “Carly does the 500 freestyle. I do breast stroke.”
Kam decided she liked that girl. “You won’t have any trouble,” she said.

“What all do we have to do?” Towel girl – Carly – asked.

Kam shrugged. “Depends on the instructor,” she said. “Mostly, we’ll probably just paddle around with the rescue board, do a few surface dives, swim a long way, and tread water a little. At this point, they figure you’ve already passed the poolside test; most of the lake crap’s just a variation on that.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Carly said.

Hoodie girl said nothing. She was drawing turtle patterns on the mound with her toe. Kam thought she was the kind of girl she’d like to work with later on. Quiet, not nervous.

The faint growl of tires on gravel announced another vehicle, then another after it. Their numbers were swelled by three; a small, curvy girl who looked a little bit like a My-size Barbie, a tall boy with a farmer’s tan, and an older woman, beachball round with mutton-leg arms. The woman walked down to the guard chair with a black rubber-coated brick tucked under one arm, a fifteen-foot long yellow board balanced on her head.

This was the real instructor, and everyone seemed to know. Lizard boy rolled to his feet, and Rolled-up-pants boy sloshed his way out of the water.

“Hey all,” the round woman said. “Name’s Deb, I’ll be running the course. Just to warn you, we usually take about a week to do this, but the manger here wants it done in three days. So we’re gonna be spending a lot of hours in the water at once, and it’s kinda chilly, so watch yourselves.”

The heavy woman – Deb – let the board slide off her head and lowered it to the sand with a thud. “Everyone here?” she asked.

“Don’t think we know,” said Hoodie girl. “But it’s ten o’clock, so probably.”
Deb nodded. “Alright,” she said. “I don’t know your names, but there’s no sense calling roll yet. We’re going to do a little pre-test first, just to make sure you know what you’re getting into.”

Deb stepped out of her black shorts and her Last of the Mohicans sweatshirt, revealing a simple black bathing suit she’d probably bought at Walmart. She picked up the rescue board and the brick, walked down to the water. She placed the board carefully on the water, placed the brick on the nose of the board, and laid herself out on it, beginning to paddle away from shore. “Follow me,” she said.

Everyone on the beach stripped out of their clothes but Kam – she had nothing to do but drop her towel and pull her battered pair of swim goggles over her eyes. She walked down to the water and straight in, feeling the cold as it crept up her body, and she thought it must feel like this to die – the first shock, then the growing numb, then the breath-drain of immersion.

Kam used to joke that the water was her second home. Far back as she could remember, she had been wet; her father had taken her boating, taken her swimming in every river they could find, had even taught her to dive from the back of a parked motorboat, a habit her mother had more than once called idiotic. “It’s a sure way to break your neck,” she said. Kam could have mentioned that her continued failure to paralyze herself proved that it was not, in fact, a sure way, but she never did.

She also never mentioned that it was by far one of the least dangerous things that she and her father did on their trips to the river – miniature vacations that neither Kam’s mother nor her more pageant-minded sister showed up for. There were rope swings and backflips from
shoulders, diving lessons from one of the broken down railroad bridges. Kam could remember clearly the first time her father had invited her to swim with him across the river and back.

“Think you can make it, girl?” he’d asked her, cigarette somehow balanced in his teeth in spite of all the wet. Water stuck to the dark hairs on his chest like dew to spider webs.

Kam had looked at the stretch of water, the long reach of it, and had nodded her small, bowl-cut head, and they had started to swim.

She remembered that it took longer than she thought it would. That it was so easy at first, her hands cutting the water up like small spades will cut the earth, and she had thought that this was the closest to flying she’d ever be. But every time she picked her head up to look, the other shore seemed farther away. She did not know then that distance over water looks smaller than it is, that the light warps and tricks you.

She could still remember the way that her arms had started to burn, the way that she couldn’t seem to breathe often enough. The way her spade-hands had turned into leaves, floppy and useless. The river seemed, for a moment, to open beneath her like a mouth. But it was only a moment, because she felt her father’s strong arm around her like a constrictor snake.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he said, “you’re alright.” He leaned back in the water, his legs moving in long, wide kicks. “Breathe a minute. You’re alright.”

The cigarette was still balanced perfectly between his teeth.

“Here we are,” Deb said, lying flat on the monster rescue board like a surfer. Kam drifted to vertical in the water, treading carefully as she waited for the rest of the group to arrive. They did, in varying degrees of winded, all of them looking puzzled – there was nothing at all where they were, save for water, which was everywhere.
“Form a circle,” Deb said. She slid her body off the board, and Kam was reminded, briefly, of a Discovery Channel program she’d watched about seals.

They did, the lot of them. Lizard boy was mostly floating – the rest of them were treading, some easily, some not.

Deb still had a hand on the rescue board – not for support so much as to keep it from floating away. “When you dive for a victim,” she said, “you have to bring them back up without your rescue tube. And sometimes, you have to tread for a few minutes before you can even start adjusting that tube so that it can help you. So, to make sure that you’re able to do this…” Deb reached onto the board and plucked the brick, holding it up for all to see. “We’re going to take turns. I want you each to tread water for two minutes with this held above your head. I want you to keep both hands on the brick, because you’re going to need both hands for a swimmer. Do we understand?”

This pronouncement didn’t worry Kam. Like most things, treading with a weight was easy once you learned the trick to it. The trick was slowness. You make big motions with your legs, you keep your lungs full of air, and you try not to rush, to wear yourself out too quickly.

She held out her hand for the brick, and Deb gave it to her. Her legs moved automatically to catch her at the sudden increase in weight, but she did not sink. She felt the water tear past her legs, remembered how much she liked the feeling of strain in her quads.

“Good job,” Deb said. Then, a little louder, “there’s one more trick to this little exercise. I only have one brick, so if you drop it, you have to dive for it.”

Kam couldn’t look around – her head was back slightly so that she could borrow a little more lift from the water – but she could imagine the nervous expressions on the faces of the new
guards. The idea of diving to the bottom of this strange lake was unnerving even to Kam, because you never know what’s going to be down there, or how far “down” is.

Water splashed into her eyes. She ignored it, kicked harder to raise her face a little more out of the lake.

“Pass,” Deb said.

Kam turned her body and handed the brick off to Lizard Boy. Lizard Boy bobbed in the water desperately for a moment or two, panic clear in his wide blue eyes, before he seemed to catch himself, took a deep breath.


No shit, Kam thought.

The boy grew paler under his freckles. Kam could feel the water churning beside her from the force of his kicks, and she thought of all the drowning swimmers she’d seen who had looked just like that – head back toward the sky, limbs whirling from how much they wanted to live.

Kam’s first year on the job, she was seventeen, and college had loomed up in front of her like the kind of wave you pray you can duck under in time. Life guarding seemed like a good way to make some money, start setting aside for the long months she would spend away; maybe more important, it was a way to refresh herself before going away. It was a way to store the familiar things in her skin, her hair, her pores, and carry them with her – to saturate herself in the past.

She spent that first summer on the bank of a lake at a state park. The water was muddy and cold and the color of mildew; motor boats zoomed back and forth across the wide part of the lake, sending miniature whitecaps to break on the crusty sand. She left work every day smelling
like dead fish and something indefinable – not motor oil, not wet grass, but something in between, boggish. The sand clung to her like a stain, and by the second week, she wished she’d had some sense and applied at the seasonal Dairy Queen like everyone else she knew.

The third week, the bad thing happened. A little boy on his way out to the floating platform that marked the end of the swimming area slid off his boogie board. His hands went out instantly, his palms flat, and he moved like he was making snow angels – hands in large sweeps at his side.

Kam had been worried that when the time came, she’d make a terrible fool of herself. The guard chair was tall, the beach was slanted, the sand was grainy and deep – she was sure that she’d fall face first into the coarse, cheap sand and not get up again. Instead, her feet hit the ground perfectly, and she ran into the water with her knees high, the whistle that she’d completely forgotten to blow (or throw aside) flapping around her neck like a lariat.

When she tried later, she could not remember the effort of swimming to him or the shallow dive she’d had to make when he’d sunk seconds before she reached him. She could remember only the break from the water, the slipperiness of the foam tube as she wrestled it between their slick torsos – the way his legs had still been kick-kicking against hers.


The boy had been still for all of a second. Then he filled his lungs with air and let out a wail that shook its way across the lake like the warning horn that blared whenever someone saw lightning. He sobbed like that all the way back to shore where his mother stood knee deep in water, hands outstretched long before they were anywhere near close enough to reach.
Hoodie girl had no problem with the brick. She balanced it on her collarbone, her shoulders rigid, her legs making perfect clockwork turns under the water. The only sign of strain was in her lips, which were pressed white to a bloodless line in her face that got smaller and thinner as the seconds ticked on.

“Pass,” Deb said. Her voice was thick with satisfaction.

Hoodie girl obliged with the same mechanical efficiency, turning her body and handing the brick carefully to My-size Barbie girl – Megan, Kam had heard her called while they were on the beach shucking their layers.

It was almost comical. Megan stayed above water for all of a second, her eyes fish-wide, her legs cycling rapidly – not the big split-kick, Kam noticed, but a flutter, like you use for freestyle – and then she sank, brick and all, blonde hair a smear of yellow under the sheen of the water.

She surfaced a second later, but her hands were empty, her face was flushed.

Deb looked at her severely. “Where’s my brick?” she asked.

Megan looked defeated. “I dropped it,” she said.

Deb nodded at the water. “I want it back,” she said.

Megan looked like she was going to refuse to do it, and Kam almost hoped that she would – but in the end, she didn’t. Megan inverted herself in the water – her feet briefly sticking up like a buoy – and then she dove, disappeared.

It was several seconds before she came up – and when she did, she was still brickless.

“Well?” Deb asked.

“Didn’t make it all the way down,” Megan said. “And it’s slimy under there.”

“Try again,” Deb said.
Megan inverted again. This time, she stayed under for longer, came up redder. She
coughed once.

Kam shot Deb a significant look – one that she hoped would say “do you want me to get
it for you” instead of “stop being such a hardass.” Deb shook her head marginally. “Try again,”
she said.

Again, Megan inverted herself, disappeared under the water. Kam counted her kicks as
she waited. One. Two. Eight.

And somehow, she knew it would happen. She didn’t know if it was the blurry image she
saw under the water or something else – some sense that warned her of the danger before it
came. Either way, she was unsurprised when Megan took her breath too soon, came up flailing
and choking, her arms making the familiar snow-angels in the water.

Kam kicked over to her in two easy strokes, noting with some relief that everyone else
seemed to be kicking away from her, seemed to realize that Megan’s hands would grip whatever
they could reach in this brief, blind panic that was the body’s natural reaction to drowning, which
so often, ironically, lead to that.

Kam ducked her head and dove beneath the water – because no amount of hurry justifies
coming at a drowning victim from the front – and came up behind her, took a second to blink the
water out of her eyes, and kicked herself forward, sliding her arm around the other girl. The top
of her arm was under Megan’s arm – the hand was fisted against her shoulder.

“I’ve got you,” Kambra said. Then, belatedly, she remembered that lifeguards these days
have to announce who they are to avoid lawsuits. “I’m a lifeguard,” she said, though she was
pretty sure she was the only one who understood the irony - the only one in any kind of mood to
joke.
“You alright?” Hoodie girl asked. Kam could see her from the corner of her eye. She hadn’t moved as far away as everyone else, didn’t seem as tired.

“Sure, fine,” Kam said. Megan’s hair was in her mouth as the girl twisted right and left.

Only then did it register that Deb was talking in a sharp, military voice – was saying again and again to steer clear, to get away from her. It was sound advice, Kam knew – a drowning victim would latch onto anything she could reach to stay above water – but she already had her, so there was no point in letting go. “I’ve got her,” Kam said.

Deb slapped a hand on her board. “Never approach a victim without a tube,” she said.

“It’s dangerous.”

“That’s fine,” Kam said, “but I didn’t have a tube.”

Deb brought the board around in front of her so that she could climb on, but with her weight, Kam knew it would take at least a few seconds. “That doesn’t matter. You never…”

“Well,” Kam said, “Maybe you should have beat me to her.”

Deb pulled herself onto the yellow board, rotated herself around, and glared. Kam wondered if she was going to get her certification pulled, decided she didn’t especially care if she did. Meanwhile, Megan continued to cough, though she didn’t flail anymore – her chest rattled with the effort of breathing. It felt like dice rattling against Kam’s chest, and her legs pulled with the effort of keeping the both of them up. Because a body sprawls, it bends, it is harder to float than a brick.

A few feet away, the lake sloshed as Deb rolled her way onto the rescue board and paddled over to them with slow, sure strokes. She didn’t seem to be in any great hurry, which at once made Kambra feel proud and annoyed.
The big board cut through the water like a duck and settled beside them. By then, Megan was herself again, was able to reach out and grab the edge of the board, which she wrapped herself around like a squirrel to a shaking branch.

“We’re going to shore for a while,” Deb said. Her voice was tight. “Take a break, shake your legs out. Then I want to talk to you,” she said, and Kambra knew she meant just her. Deb started to help Megan onto the board, and Kam let her, kicking her way back from the too-yellow plastic. Her legs, she realized, felt rubbery, her head hurt.

Around her, people were starting to kick toward the shore – Carly moved her hands in a perfect arc, the beginnings of a crawl. Hoodie girl continued to tread water. “You alright?” she asked again, and Kam knew she was feeling it, too – the weakness that comes after the adrenaline burns itself out.

Kam took a minute to think about her legs, about how much strength was left in them.

There’s enough, she thought as she pointed herself toward the shore – it looked so close, like she could brush the trees with her fingertips. “Yeah,” she said, “it’s not far.”

Hoodie girl nodded, pulled her goggles over her face, and flattened herself in the water. Kam followed. She tucked her body into a breast stroke, inserting herself into the water and pulling herself out like a letter going into and out of an envelope, and barely a ripple to show where she had been.
Blur

Ryan dropped the kick stand on his bike in the loose gravel drive that passed by the playground of the elementary school. The handlebars rattled against the chain link fence that guarded two sides of the play area – the sides that would allow kids to wander out toward the road or the parking lot. The rest of the playground was framed by a thin strip of dense trees and greenbriar. Past the trees, a small lake glittered through the branches. On hot days, Ryan remembered, it shimmered like an oasis. Or, on cloudy days, it sat in a gray streak, like ink looks when it runs. Ryan brushed his fingers over the damp wire weave of the fence, felt the droplets of water there. It had been drizzling all day, would probably rain hard again before night.

“You know you could get into trouble for this,” Jesse said. She leaned her bike against the fence too and hooked her thumbs into the beltloops of her three-sizes-too-big punk jeans.

“So could you,” Ryan said.

“I’m always in trouble,” Jesse said. Which was true enough. On Saturdays, Jesse was usually camped out in the olive-colored detention room with the official “bad” crowd. It was just luck that left her free to bike around town with him.

Ryan bent his knees and jumped straight up, hooking his hands on the top of the fence and swinging his leg over the top. It wasn’t all that different from climbing fences on his family’s farm – just metal instead of wood, and a little easier. Cold wire bit his hands.

“You really think she’s here?” Jesse asked.

Ryan balanced himself on top of the fence for a second, judged the gravel at the bottom, and jumped. He landed with a grinding-teeth sound on the gravel, readjusted his almost-empty backpack on his shoulder, and stood up straight. “I dunno,” he said. “Won’t know till we look.”
Jesse didn’t tell him that they weren’t going to find anything the police hadn’t already
looked at, and he was grateful for that. Instead, she walked up to the fence, dug one Chuck
Taylor into the links, and started climbing. He listened to see if the loops or buckles on her pants
were going to get stuck on the metal, but none of them did.

He waited for her, and was glad she didn’t take long – but Jesse, he knew, had a lot of
experience at climbing over fences, and under fences, and once through an air vent like someone
out of a spy movie. She was a good person to have along if you might want to get into places
where people didn’t want you.

Jesse jumped off the fence. She landed the same way, knees bent, hands out to the sides
like an acrobat. “Where first?” she asked.

Ryan didn’t know. It was actually starting to dawn on him how stupid this was. There
was nowhere on a playground for an eight-year-old girl to hide. Courgarland, the decrepit old
wooden play-building, was empty – no one was ducked down behind the see saws, or hiding
behind the bare-bones swing set. And even if they had been, the rain that’d been coming down
steadily the past two days would’ve driven them to look for an adult, a warm place to sleep.

“Down by the trees,” he said. He started walking that way.

Jesse shoved her hands deep in her pockets and walked with him. It was starting to rain
again in misty, barely-there drops, and he wondered if she was trying to keep warm.

“Poor kid,” she said, and Ryan pretended not to hear her.

The hill sloped down to the tree line, where the small stand of trees sat. Some of them
were labeled with small, wooden planks that the sixth graders stuck there back when Ryan was
still in gradeschool – white oak, red oak, maple, and even the big, old white pine tree with the
exposed roots that Ryan had played between for years and missed when he moved up to the high
school. He wondered if this was where she was, if someone had walked up from the lake through those old trees, parked like the duck hunters or the fishermen do by the side of the lake, if he’d taken her by the hand and walked away with her. If he’d asked her if she wanted to go fishing, which Rachel loved, which she did all the time with him and their older brother.

“Want to walk by the lake?” Jesse asked.

“Yeah,” Ryan said.

It was starting to rain a little harder.

“She’s been missing since when, again?” Jesse said.

“Wednesday,” Ryan said. He started to walk along one of the thin paths, turning his body sideways to avoid the thin, green ribbons of briar that hung from the nearly-naked tree branches.

“Last we saw her, Dad was putting her on the bus.”

Jesse didn’t ask if he thought she was staying with a friend, or playing a joke, or staying with some relative or other, or any of the other stupid questions that the police had asked him and his brother and his parents all separately, as if they thought they’d get the story wrong somehow. Jesse knew better. She’d lived down the street from Ryan’s family as long as she’d been alive. She’d taught Rachel how to pitch a baseball like a boy and how to dye her hair with Kool-Aid, though she’d made her promise to wait until she turned 12 first, and never tell her father where she’d learned it. She would, Ryan was sure, have helped her dye it. They would have picked something bright first, pink or purple, the day of her 12th birthday. Jesse would have been standing at the sink with a spritz bottle and a wicked grin.

Jesse wasn’t grinning now. She knew that Rachel wasn’t hiding anywhere, that something had happened to her. And Ryan figured that Jesse also knew that they weren’t going to find his sister here and that he didn’t expect to. That he was just here because he couldn’t
stand to sit at home and pretend to do his homework while his mom sniffled over the dishes and
his older brother tried ineptly to help out in the kitchen, and his father kept turning up the volume
on the tv and sitting by the phone.

The patch of woods was wider than Ryan thought, and the path was getting smaller and
more crooked. Ryan scuffed his boots and tried not to trip over the ropey tree roots, keeping his
eyes on the lake, so bright blue on the hot days, but today was like a puddle in the gas station
parking lot. He had to step around a pile, and he wondered if it had been left by one of the big,
police shepherds they’d brought through here a day or two ago, showing them slips of colorful
cloth – her Hello Kitty hat, her favorite coat – to give them her scent.

Ryan had known – Hell, any farm kid would’ve known – that the dogs wouldn’t find
anything. That the rain that’d started falling the afternoon she disappeared would’ve wiped the
scent away, that even if it hadn’t, the scent of Labradors and fishermen and the exhaust from the
side of the road would’ve ruined the rest. Rachel had probably already gone into someone’s car,
speed out of the county long before any of the dogs arrived.

“Fuck,” Jesse said, sharp and natural, but she didn’t say why. Ryan kept walking.

Finally, they stepped out of the last, coiled branches to the side of the lake. It felt like
something forbidden – the teacher’s lounge, the upper hay loft, the girl’s bathroom, somewhere
he’d always secretly wondered about in the back of his mind, but never gone to. And, like the
one time in the sixth grade when he’d actually snuck into the girl’s bathroom, it was even less
than he’d expected it to be. Rain and water and cattails, just like the pond out back of the house.
Not a mystical lake on the side of the world, like they’d pretended back when he’d been on this
“See anything?” Jesse asked. Ryan looked over at her and saw that her bare, white arms were crisscrossed with little red lines from the greenbriars.

“Nah,” he said.

“We could go down by the road,” she said.

“It’s getting dark,” he said. “Might as well head back.”

And that’s when the rain really started coming down.

The ride back to Ryan’s house was wet and hard – down two paved streets slick from the mix of heat and rain, then down a long, dirt road that was already turning to mud – standing on the pedals and weaving back and forth as water dripped down from his bangs and into his eyes.

There was a quick mart on the way – not even a gas station, just a little one-room stop for things like pepperoni rolls and slim jims. Ryan pulled his bike into the parking lot and didn’t bother to lock it, felt a splash on his leg from Jesse’s bike as she pulled in beside him. “Want some coffee?” he asked her.

“I’m always game for coffee,” she said.

They walked in dripping, ignored a sharp look from the white-haired man behind the counter, and went straight for the coffee wall – the three steaming pots, the ancient, faded cappuccino machine. Ryan decided on hot cocoa at the last minute. Jesse chose coffee with four creamers, three packets of sugar. They paid in quarters and sticky bills and then sat under the roof by the door to drink them.

Ryan sat himself down on the edge of the trash-can-shaped ash-tray, and Jesse sat down Indian-style on the concrete. He cradled his hands around the coffee cup and thought about how weird it was going to be to make hot chocolate without Rachel around. It still didn’t feel real to
him – sure, there had been police. Sure, his sister had not come home in four days. Sure, he had not walked her to the bus, listened to her rattle on about how Sarah Scholey was so mean to everyone, he had not watched Ninja Turtles with her in four days. But it didn’t seem like it had happened, not really. It was a story that had happened to somebody else, but not him.

“Sure is coming down,” Jesse said. Water tumbled down the back of her neck from her jet-colored hair. Ryan tried to remember what color it had been before she started dying it. If it had been tabby-cat brown like Rachel’s, or yellow-blonde, or even red, pale as she was, but he couldn’t remember.

“I’ll call mom in a minute,” Ryan said. “Tell her we’ll be getting back late.” His mom had been fanatical about that since Rachel disappeared. “You be sure you call me,” she would say six times before he or his brother walked out the door. “Call me and tell me the minute you start back.” He’d been tempted to tell her that he wasn’t an eight-year-old girl. That he’d been riding around on his bicycle by himself since he was twelve and he was seventeen now, that no one was going to run off with him because nobody wanted a seventeen-year-old boy. But he didn’t, because she’d been crying enough lately, and Dad was probably just looking for an excuse to hit something about now.

“It’ll pass over quick,” Jesse said.

“Yeah,” Ryan said. But in the meantime, he had nothing to keep him busy. Sitting on the porch in front of the quickmart and waiting for his drink to cool, he couldn’t help but let the thoughts come again – about where she was, what was happening to her, if she’d been snatched up by some nice couple who’d secretly always wanted a kid but hadn’t been able to adopt, or if she’d been taken by one of the people you actually do see on the news, or any of the tv show on the networks.
He opened his drippy backpack and pulled out his sketchbook, protected in a one-gallon Ziploc bag, and his notebook from school, which lately had more scribbles in it than notes. He pulled them out carefully and balanced them on his knee, started to flip through.

Jesse glanced his way but didn’t talk. Didn’t ask him if he had anything new or reach for the familiar, charcoal-blackened pages. She went back to quietly burning her tongue on her coffee. Ryan thought she was smarter than she looked. Smarter than she acted, in detention all the time, smoking behind the building with the other black-clothes kids.

He had a lot of drawings of her in his book. Sitting in the concourse for lunch, leaned against one of the roughed-up pillars that was supposed to look like it belonged in a castle to support the Dollar-General brand of medieval that was his high school’s decor. Facing him across the table in art class. With him in cartoon form, standing on either side of a burning Algebra book. There were pictures of other things, too. Ned the farm dog sleeping in the sun. Cows so vague they were like milk-spots dropped on the page. Some pictures from English class: sketches of Romeo falling off the balcony, Romeo as a drama geek, Juliet dressed in the fitted sweatpants and ipod uniform of the whiny girl, tossing her hair and complaining about how her father hated her boyfriend.

He wondered why it felt as if he’d drawn those things years ago – like pictures from the box he kept under his bed, sketches he’d done in kindergarten with crayons. Leftovers.

It occurred to him that he didn’t have any drawings of Rachel in his sketchbook. Not a single one.

Jesse cocked her arm back like a football player and threw her foam cup into the open-top garbage can. “Almost done?” she asked.

“Halfway through,” he said.
“I meant the cocoa.”

Ryan remembered that he had it and took a sip. It was cold already and grainy in his mouth – he could taste the water and feel the powder. He drank it anyway.

“It’s getting dark,” Jesse said. Which meant, your mom is getting worried and you should go home.

Ryan crunched the cup in his hand. ‘Yeah,” he said. “Okay.” He threw it at the can, but he missed.

“Are you gonna get that?” Jesse asked.

“No,” he said.

The house was dark by the time Ryan made it home, though he could tell someone was still awake. He could see the flickering light of the TV in the family room, though he couldn’t hear it – a muted war program. He could make out the wide-shouldered silhouette of his father in the arm chair, sitting still, maybe awake, maybe not. His Dad didn’t sleep upstairs with his Mom anymore, or even downstairs in the basement. He slept in the living room with the tv sputtering like a firefly in a spider web. All light and urgent, but really going nowhere.

He left his backpack in a chair in the dining room, so that when his parents woke up they’d see it. All except his sketchbook. He took that with him.

He walked slow up the staircase – past the cracked third stair, keeping his feet close to the wall because the steps had bowed in the center, creaked more there. He only misstepped once, near the top…the wood gave too fast under the ball of his foot and made a sound like an old cat. He paused then, waited for his dad to tell him not to make so much noise. But he didn’t. The TV kept flickering. Ryan climbed the rest of the stairs. Walked down the narrow, roof-
sloped hallway and into his triangle-shaped room that had the bed by the window and the lamp on the bedside table.

Ryan left his wet clothes in a pile by the door – the socks still rolled up in balls in the legs of his jeans, the shirt-sleeves inside out. He knew he’d step on them the next morning, knew they’d feel cold on the arches of his feet. He left them anyway and climbed into bed, turned on the little yellow lamp he’d spent so much of his life reading by, and he tried to draw her like he remembered. Sitting with Ned on the porch, her small white hands buried in the gray ruff of his fur. Running down the driveway, her fresh white socks already spattered in mud, one of them falling down into her shoe. Hunched over the table, cranky in the morning over her cold cereal, a fuzzy blanket with leaping deer-shapes over her shoulders. He tried to draw her, but none of them looked right – too old in the face, too lanky, too much like a cartoon.

The closest he came was a rough sketch full of scribbles – blurry, his hand kept resting against the page, kept running the lead together. He roughed in her hair, the grass, squinted his eyes so that they’d blur. And then finally it was almost her, kneeling with her head tilted back. He drew her eyes four ways, all of them wrong, then finally erased all the efforts, leaving the face blank. He would look at a picture later, he thought, and he’d get it right then. Because he’d already forgotten how close her eyes were to each other, the exact shape the corners made, which way her bangs fell on her face.
How to Find a Dog

The key is need. First, you must find the hole in yourself. We all have one. For some, it’s square in the center of the chest; for others, it’s the stomach, just below the sternum. Feel around the edges, sharp or burnt, jagged or smooth. Taste the dimensions of it. Don’t be afraid to stick your fingers in, poke around like you used to do when you lost a tooth. Don’t be afraid to know where you are empty. That is the first thing.

It will, after this, mostly be waiting. Waiting has never been easy, but for you, it’s especially hard. You will watch every single dog show on Animal Planet. You will buy dog-calendars with glossy pages. You will buy a rubber dog toy, wrap it in newspaper, and stick it in your desk drawer, just in case. You will grow weary of patience. You will decide that you aren’t ready after all.

You will (briefly) consider getting a goldfish.

You will go to the pound because you are the kind of person who likes to skip to the end of novels. You will follow a man dressed in khaki from head to foot into a concrete hallway with puddles of standing water from hose-cleanings. All around you, there will be cells that look like they were carved out of the concrete walls with a spoon. There will be standing bars, and at each set of bars there will be sad eyes, wet noses. The air will choke with noise; low bays, high yips, a hundred voices saying, “I am here, come get me.” You will turn around and leave without giving your visitor’s pass back.

You will cry in the car as you turn on your windshield wipers and drive home.

After that, you will sit on your couch for two hours, popping Dove chocolate after Dove chocolate into your mouth. You will decide that you can never go to the pound again. Or you will go only when you can afford to adopt twenty dogs.
Time will pass. Like all phases, like you did with that boy you liked in the sixth grade but were too scared to send signed notes to, you will push all thoughts of dog to the back of your mind. You will have other things to worry about. There is the copy machine at work that you are sure is out to get you, that jams, that spits out fragments of chewed paper. There is the mysterious fifteen dollars always deducted from your paycheck. There are five voicemail messages your mother has left you in her weary voice, the one up in her soft palate that says without saying, “why do children always disappoint their parents?” The actual message, of course, is about your great aunt’s funeral, which you plan to avoid.

Eventually, this guilt will get to be too heavy. You will delete those messages one by one, will think about switching your phone service. But you won’t, because sometimes, it’s good to get a message. You will wonder if this makes you more or less crazy than your mother. You will hope that asking this question makes you less crazy. You are probably wrong.

Next, you must notice things. You will notice that the leaves are beginning to turn, flipping their silver undersides at you like a snake’s skin turning inside out. You will watch the clouds roll in, will close your eyes as the first drops of rain freeze your upturned lips. It will be fall, late fall, and something inside you will begin preparing for hibernation.

Still, you will not have your dog.

You will try not to let this get to you. You are a patient person. You can wait. You will try not to stare too hard at the happy owner-and-pet ensembles that seem to line the sidewalks, taking advantage of the good weather while it lasts. You will try not to think, “Why not that boxer; why not that lab?” You will wish that one dog or another will secretly pull his way to you, will turn out to be the one. But of course, this will not happen. It will start to annoy you, will rub
at you like a grain of sand in a pair of worn-out tennis shoes. Who needs a dog, anyway?

Certainly not you.

You will (briefly) consider getting a cat. Or a boyfriend.

Then again, you will decide, the cat will be more likely to claw your favorite couch than a dog is, and a boyfriend would require more cleanup. After the first month, neither cat nor boy is likely to show you much attention. You don’t get either.

Step four – of all steps, this is the easiest. You must fall in love. Not real love, but glorified office love, the kind you mostly fall into out of boredom. The kind that starts with a cherished compliment on your newest pair of Mary Janes, the smooth patent polish, the crisp line of the strap. The kind that grows slowly over shared lunch-hours, over liking the same things on your Subway sandwiches, over not-quite-accurate references to Scrubs. He will not be the boy you thought you always wanted. He will not have a briefcase or pants with a smooth crease. He will be that guy who comes to work in jeans, wears black metal t-shirts under his button-downs. You will think maybe you can live with this. Maybe this is what you really need.

You will not realize that he is married. You won’t see his wedding ring because his wife is a progressive, tough little woman who does not believe in “marking.” You will promptly realize your error when he invites you to meet them for lunch. Over lightly-toasted ham sandwiches, you will listen to the two of them argue in that we’re-a-cute-couple way. Her jokes will actually be pretty funny. This really doesn’t help anything.

The two of them will plan to see a movie later and will invite you to come along. You will politely decline. After all, you’re a busy girl. Busy girls have plans, too. Yours will consist of stopping by the Quickmart you go to on the way back to your trailer and picking up a cheap
sixpack of Honey Brown Lager that you intend to plow through all by yourself. You will make a mental note to yourself that plans need not be classy.

That night, you will drink like you did in your wild college days - by yourself. For a while, stare in a mirror, lift your hair, tell yourself that she’s not prettier, that she only seemed smarter. You will remind yourself that it wasn’t a big deal, after all, it was only a month of your life. You’ve wasted more time on stupider things. You’ll start to watch Scrubs reruns, but that, you will realize, is just a little bit too Hot-Topics-teenager for you. You are, after all, a respectable twenty-something adult. You will decide you’d much rather hook up your Playstation and smash a few cars.

In the middle of a cathartic game of Grand Theft Auto - somewhere between beer five and beer six - you will remember two very important things. The first is that too much beer makes you sick. The second is that you never actually liked beer in the first place. This lesson is important, but painful.

The next day, you will not go to work. You will think about not even calling in sick, but you will, and you will be sure to make your voice even more gravelly and tired than it already is, even though you know the secretary won’t ask you any questions. This grade school habit is hard to break. Sometimes, you wonder if you will ever grow up.

You will intend to spend the day in bed. The morning will be spent with lukewarm coke and nibbled crackers, children’s cartoons with oversized mallets and anvils. You will wish, just a little, that you had a great big mallet. You won’t be sure what you want to do with one; maybe just swing it through the air, feel the weight of it. Smash it hard into the ground and announce to the world that your life will not go unwitnessed. You will blame this odd thought on the medicine you just took; you will promptly pick up the bottle of Pepto Bismal and read the label
very carefully to find probable side effects. Yet again, you are destined to be disappointed. Giant-hammer fantasies will not be listed.

You will be surprised to find that, around noon, you will start to feel at once better and worse. Your stomach will ease, if maybe continue to feel a bit empty, but the problem will be in your legs. They will shake, twitch. You will cross them one way under the covers, then the other way, but they will not be comfortable, they will not be still. This will irritate you because you’ve been tired lately – been really, truly tired, the kind of tired that hurts your back – and now you have time to sleep, and can’t. Stupid legs. Legs always need walking.

With a hearty internal protest, you will finally get up. The day will be gray and thick with the promise of rain; the remaining, yellow leaves will stand out against the dark edges of the world like Magic Markers. It will be too warm for your thick, brown coat, too cold for just your frayed t-shirt. You will finally decide on a flannel overshirt, mint and pine colors, faded to frost-colors at the elbows. This was your brother’s shirt. It will come down past the center of your thighs; the sleeves, if you don’t push them up over your wrists, will hang down beyond your fingertips. When you talk to your brother on the phone, you promise every time that you’ll mail this shirt back to him, this one and the other two, the red one and the brown one. Yet, you never do. You like the softness of them too much, and the smell; Brute aftershave, wood smoke, a piece of home that you can wrap around you.

You take a walk.

Most days, when you go walking, you know where you’re going…but the wind is different today, gathering up behind you, making your body into a sail. It feels good to let it push you, like having a pair of strong hands on your shoulders, guiding you, running with you down a hill. You will let it pull you over the bridge, will follow its push to the park…you will wonder if
this is really what it’s like to shove off into the ocean, to set a new course just on wind and
distant lights. You will wish that you could be as brave as that.

Finally, you will come to a park bench, and you will remember that you are tired. Your
legs – whose stupid idea this was anyway – will ache up and down the outsides, your knees will
want to pop. You will sit down heavily, will not worry about who sees you. Your elbows will go
to your knees, your hands to your cheeks…your fingers will hold onto the hair around your
temples like the fingers of a drowning man will clutch at wild reeds. Sitting like this makes you
feel contained, safe. You will concentrate on your breathing. In and out. In and out. Just that, and
no more, save for a brief moment when you wonder if this might be zen, if, years after your
failed attempt at Buddhism, you have finally found your meditation.

That is when you will feel it just at the side of your knee - a slight poke at the side of
your leg. This will be your dog.

You will begin to look down. This moment is key because, somewhere deep within your
subconscious, one tiny little neuron is reaching out to touch another. This is the moment that will
shape the appearance of your dog. After all, while the concept of “dog” is not variable, the form
is. And dogs aren’t picky. This is a trick of dogs; this is the way that they can be what you want
even when you don’t know what you want.

The dog that you will find will not be a standard breed. Collie-faced, he will be the color
of coal; his long fur will feel like a horse’s mane, wiry and tough. He will not bark. He will not
jump. He will raise his plumed tail like the flag of a mailbox as if to say, “I am here. I have
delivered myself. Didn’t you know I was coming?”

At first, you will not move. You will just sit still, stare, wonder if he’s really smiling at
you, or if that’s a trick of his long face. Worried, you will look to your left and to your right, but
there will be no one around…no child with a Frisbee, no adult waving a leash, yelling “Come back here, Fido! Come back!”

“Are you lost?” you will ask.

It will look to you as if the dog is laughing. Then, he will yawn. His tail will make whisper sounds in the air.

You may notice, then or later, that he does not have a collar, or that his coat is full of burrs. You may see the roughness of the pads of his feet, the broken nail, the thinness of him, all ribs and hip bones. He has come a long way to find you. You have come a long way to find him.

In one smooth motion, you will slide down from the bench, will gather yourself on the pavement, kneeling. You will wrap both arms around the dog, because this has been a long time in coming, because you finally understand that something has to be wrong before it can be fixed.

You will both be glad to be found.
A Man of Average Intelligence

(With a Screwdriver)

Andy Smith and I were both seven years old when he told me that my Dad was going to Hell. We were sitting on the front porch step, watching my father and my uncle as they pulled what was going to be a swing set out the back of the truck in boxes.

“He is not!” my younger brother yelled, because Alex was four, and an expert is-not yeller. His round face turned swollen red as he stomped a stubby leg and yelled it two more times. “Is not, is not!”

“Yeah he is,” Andy said. He was using a stick to draw ever-shrinking circles in the driveway sand, which was the exact color of his hair, white-yellow, a little dusty.

I didn’t scream “is not.” First, because Alex already had, and second, because Andy was right. My Dad was for sure going to Hell. I just wanted to know why he thought so, so I asked him.

Andy looked up solemnly at my father and my uncle, who were a good ways away and not paying us any attention. Dad was kneeling in the grass, hacking at the yellow tape with a dull box cutter like I’d once seen him hack at a deer carcass he’d dragged home on Thanksgiving morning. He was balancing a cigarette on his lower lip, and every sharp jerk of the knife brought a fresh curse – “Damn. Christ. Fuck.”

“He smokes,” Andy said.

Uncle Chip wasn’t helping Dad open the box. He was just standing still, chewing his own snuff, shaking his head slowly, sort of like a cow. “Shit, Ralph,” he said, “They’ll put those things together for you at the store.”

Dad growled at him and kept cutting. The cigarette bounced in his mouth.
“Where’s it say smokers go to Hell?” I asked. Because I already knew where it said that people who curse go to Hell, or where people who “deny Christ” will go to Hell, where people who are “quick to anger” will go to Hell, and from what the preacher usually talked about, the Bible said in several places that gay people would go straight to Hell, and maybe to the hottest pit of it. But I’d never heard about the smoking thing in church.

“My mom says,” Andy said.

Dad finally got the box open. Metal beams of three or four different colors spilled onto the browning grass of the back yard, jangling like wind chimes.

“That’s a lot of screws,” Uncle Chip said.

Dad grumbled, squinted at the mangled side of the box.

“Does your mom go to church?” I asked.

“She just knows,” he said.

Andy’s mom was my babysitter, which was how I knew Andy, even though I didn’t really know any other kids. His mom’s name was Eudora, which made me really excited the first time I met her, because it sounded like “Adora,” the girl in one of my favorite cartoons. She turned into She-ra, Princess of Power. We tried to get Andy’s mom to play Adora with us once or twice, but she never got it right – when Alex jumped out at her and proclaimed himself “the evil Hordak” she covered her face and yelled, “Oh no, oh no, someone save me” instead of pulling out her sword and turning into She-ra – so I guess I knew that she didn’t know everything.

She knew a lot, though. Like which channel the cartoons were on, and how to make cookies, and what poison ivy looked like. She might be right about the smoking-thing, too.

“Doesn’t that make you sad?” he asked. “I’d be sad if my Dad was going to Hell.”
Dad and Uncle Chip were still poking at the pile of metal and tires that was (somehow) going to be a swing set. “Just saying, five minutes down and back, I could go get Willy,” Chip said.

“The last fuckin’ thing we need around here is Willy,” Dad said.

“He is a mechanic,” Chip said. He was holding a bag of shiny red bolts up to the sunlight, squinting at the label like it was in a different language. Which, knowing Chip, it well might have been – he might have been puzzling through Spanish or French or German.

“Having fifteen halfass-broke cars parked in front of your trailer doesn’t make you a mechanic,” Dad said.

I looked down at my stick. I was drawing Mr. Blacks, my cat, who was smarter than any of us, because he’d already figured out that something bad was going to happen and gone inside to hide under my bed. “Sure it does,” I said, “but it’s not like I can do anything about it.”

“You could get him to stop smoking,” Andy said.

I couldn’t completely blame Andy for coming up with such a stupid idea. It was what all of our teachers were telling us. Not just that smoking is bad, but that we should tell our parents all about it – that, and how much we needed to recycle, and how we needed to eat lots of vegetables, as if anyone who was a parent wouldn’t know that stuff already.

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” I said.

“You can try,” he said.

I tried to imagine myself walking up to my father where he always sat at the breakfast table. I imagined myself telling him that smoking was bad for him, and if he wanted to go to heaven, he was going to have to stop.
My head was usually a good place to be. I could imagine myself doing anything, from beating up on Hordak to actually talking to somebody at school besides Andy. But even in my head, I couldn’t see myself telling Dad what to do.

“Maybe,” I said at last.

Meanwhile, Dad and Chip had managed to agree on a starting place. Rolling two long, silver poles out like a set of railroad tracks, the two of them knelt between them, heads bent, staring at the single sheet of directions.

“I’m going to need a beer for this,” Chip said.

“Wait ‘till the kids go in,” Dad said. “It’s almost time for cartoons.”

The next morning at our house was a bad morning. I woke up and knew. I didn’t know how I knew, but I knew.

Usually, bad mornings were obvious. I’d wake up to hear Dad screaming something, or Mom screaming something, or both Mom and Dad screaming at each other, or in really bad cases, I’d wake up and there would be four inches of water on the floor, which had maybe been the worst morning ever.

This was a different kind of bad morning. It was the kind of bad morning you feel.

I got myself up carefully and picked up Mr. Blacks for moral support. He made a frustrated sound at being disturbed, but went limp right after, dangling like a doll as I crept toward the kitchen, his back feet almost dragging the ground.

My mother was sitting at the kitchen table, hunched over her seat like an old woman. Her hands were fisted in the normally-floofy brown wave of her perm, and she looked exactly like she did at Thanksgiving, when Dad brought the deer home in the middle of her fixing dinner and
she told him if he brought home one more mess for her to clean up, she was going to shoot him and stuff him in a freezer.

I decided I could live without my Count Chocula that morning and started back to bed with Mr. Blacks.

Mom did not look up from the table. “Ashley,” she said. “What in the Hell made you ask your father for a swing set? You know how he is.”

I bent over to put Mr. Blacks down, because he was a heavy cat, and I’d been holding him a long time. He wrapped himself around my feet and huffed. “I didn’t,” I said.

“What did you ask for?”

I pointed out the picture window to one of the old oak trees that was crutching itself against the creek. “A tire swing,” I said.

“A tire swing,” Mom said.

“Like the one at Grandpa’s,” I said.

“So just a rope,” she said. “And a tire.”

“Dad said they weren’t safe,” I said.

Mom banged her forehead lightly against the table. Twice.

“Can I have my cereal?” I asked.

“We’re going out to breakfast,” Mom said. Which was weird, because to go out to breakfast, we had to drive for at least half an hour – but it was Saturday, so I figured we must be going shopping, too.

“Can Mr. Blacks come?” I asked.

“No,” Mom said without moving her head from the table.

“Sorry, Blacks,” I said.
Mr. Blacks flicked his crooked tail at me and wandered off.

“Go get your brother up,” Mom said. I did.

Outside, the sun was shining down sideways into the valley, and Dad and Chip were already up. They weren’t working on the swing set yet, though. Dad was sitting in one of the porch chairs, holding a bloody rag to his hand and glaring at the new day like he so often glared at our broken lawnmower, our patched-up pipes, the sink that kept on running.

The swing set was not finished. The slide was still coiled up on the ground, shiny and cold-looking. Monkey bars arched down like a spine, support beams stuck off in what I was sure were the wrong directions. It looked like an exhibit we’d seen at a museum the one time we went – a dinosaur skeleton that had been put together wrong, just to show how easy it was to figure out which bone went where. Like any idiot could do it.

Uncle Chip was much calmer. He was balancing one of Mom’s Budweisers on the railing of the porch, reading over the now-battered, soggy sheet of what I guessed were the instructions. He laughed.

“What?” Dad said.

“Some assembly required,” Chip said.

Dad’s face swelled and reddened; the air around us seemed to disappear into him. Mom hurried us to the car. And we drove off to breakfast faster than we had any right to go down the rough gravel driveway.

We did go shopping after breakfast – at Ames, one of the few big stores in the county. Mom went there when she needed stuff for the house, like shelf paper or an extra plunger. Usually, it was a slow trip, but that day, she drove her cart through the racks like they were personally responsible for all of the bad things that had been happening in the yard. For a while, I tried to
ride on the front of the cart as Alex kicked his feet in the bucket-seat part, and it was easy to imagine that I was clinging to the side of a shuttle as we zipped at near light-speed through the circular islands of clothes. But it didn’t take long for my arms to get tired as we swerved from rack to rack, so as we passed the decorating section, I hopped off. Mom, who was busy wrestling an action figure – probably Hordak – away from my graspy brother, didn’t notice.

Even if she had noticed, I doubt she would’ve been upset. Mom was usually pretty paranoid about where I went and whether or not I was in sight, but she knew what I was like in stores. I liked to wander, but I wouldn’t go very far, working small circles around the cart like a mini-moon as she flew from one side of the building to the other.

I wondered if she was still going to be mad at Dad by the time we finished shopping, and if it was my fault for wanting a tire swing.

And that was when I saw the sword.

It was hanging with the wall decorations, right next to a fake mounted fish and a fancy mirror that was made to look like it had come from the inside of an old ship. It may or may not have been real, but it was metal, engraved down the front in some language I couldn’t read. It was almost as tall as I was, and dangling there like that, it looked like the answer.

I looked around to make sure that no one was watching, because secret identities were important, and then I reached for the hilt. I had to stand up on my toes to reach it, but when I did, I turned my hand upside-down like I’d seen on TV, and I gripped it like I meant it. It was cold, but the metal felt good, kind of like the metal post on a carousel horse, like it would warm up fast and feel alive.

It was heavier than I thought it was going to be. I had to use both my hands to yank it off the rack, and it still almost clanked against the tile. I lifted a little with my arms and decided it
wasn’t quite as heavy as the logs I helped Dad carry to the truck, or Alex when he wanted picked up, and I was pretty sure I could handle it.

I looked around again. No one either way. Very slowly, I lifted the point of the sword toward the bright white store lights.

*I have the power,* I thought, but wasn’t brave enough to say.

“Give me that!” my mother snapped, and just like that I was swordless, a kid again.

Mom shook the sword at me like a rattle. “What were you thinking?” she asked.

I looked up at her and wasn’t sure. I didn’t know if I really thought that holding a sword over my head would turn me into somebody else, if I was pretending, if I just wanted to see what it felt like to hold a weapon up over my head like a lightning rod and wait for a miracle. “I dunno,” is what I said.

“You don’t know,” my mother said. She shook the sword at me again, and I wondered what it must look like, a frazzled looking woman next to a double-parked cart, brandishing a sword at a little girl who stood still and confused. “What’s the matter with you? You could have put your eye out.”

An Ames worker wheeled by, carting boxes toward the shoe section. She looked at us once, then again, then walked by quickly.

I thought about telling my mother that I wouldn’t have put my eye out. That I was going to put it back. “I won’t do it again,” I said. And I knew it wasn’t true when I said it.

“You have to think first, Ashley,” Mom said. And I knew what she meant. She meant trying to fly off the bank, or putting poster-board wings on my bicycle, or trying to “talk” to raccoons. Things I knew I couldn’t do, deep down, but had to try anyway.
Mom put the sword back on the rack with a sad little clank. “But you don’t,” she said.

“You just rush in and, sooner or later, you’re really going to hurt yourself.”

“I know,” I said.

As we walked way too quickly toward the checkout counter, I looked back at the sword. My handprints were still on the handle, smeared like oil on a water puddle, and I wanted to run back and grab it, but I didn’t.

Mom caught the direction of my gaze anyway. She hunched over the cart, back humped up like a crow’s. “Sometimes,” she said, “you’re just like your father.”

The box said that a man of average intelligence with a screwdriver could put the swing set together in under thirty minutes. It took Dad and Uncle Chip something like four days. First, they put the wrong bolts in the wrong posts, and then the sliding board wouldn’t attach, and finally, the whole structure wobbled enough that Dad drove off to Lowes and bought enough concrete mix to set the whole structure in the ground, planted it like a monument.

“I think we were using the wrong screwdrivers,” Uncle Chip said when it was finally together, pouring a healthy squirt of vodka into his orange juice.

“You’re not funny,” Dad said. But he took some Vodka orange juice, too.

They burned the box afterward, and I think even Uncle Chip might have kicked the smoldering remains a few times. In the end, though, the swing set was beautiful– red and silver, a pair of tires swaying from the ties, a sliding board, monkey bars, a knotted rope for climbing.

Alex, of course, hurt himself right away by falling off the monkey bars that Andy and I told him he was too little to climb on. As he ran up to the house crying, Andy and I stayed each
on our separate swings. We could see the kitchen windows from where we were, could see the
two shadows of Mom and Dad behind the blinds, and Alex crying between them, and I didn’t
know if Andy knew they were going to fight about this later, but I did.

“Does your Dad still smoke?” Andy asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

We swung back and forth slowly. It was already too dark to see each other very well, and
soon, there would be lightning bugs.

“Do you think he’ll ever stop?” Andy asked.

“No,” I said.

We swung some more. And for the first time, I tried to think about heaven, about my Dad
in heaven, about whether or not there would be white clouds and harps, or swing sets, or bolt
cutters, or cartoons, or magic swords that could change you from a little kid who kept messing
up to someone who always knew exactly what to do.

“Maybe I don’t want to go either,” I said.

“Go where?” Andy asked.

The kitchen window was a square of yellow light against the blue-white side of the
house. The first lightning bug flickered itself next to the black ribbon of the creek bed. I kicked
my legs out to feel the creak of the chains as they took my weight and said, “Nowhere special.”

Then the back door opened, and my brother came running down the slope of the yard
with a jar in either hand, exactly like a pair of lanterns.
My Brother, the Dog

Sam had already been driving for half an hour on a Saturday when he had to stop the car on account of geese. They stood in the road like a band of lawn ornaments, their beady black eyes shiny like glass. Like the fake geese his mom bought at Cabellas.

Jackson, the Labrador, put both his monster, chocolate paws on the dashboard and made zebra sounds— not a real bark, but working his way toward one – pushing his nose against the window in scooting circle patterns. His otter tail wagged.

Sam, less happy, banged his forehead on his steering wheel. It made a sad, honking noise. Some of the geese honked back. Others puffed their chests and stomped.

Jackson slapped his paw on the dashboard twice. “No way, bro,” Sam said. “Not this time.”

Jackson grumbled and jumped into the back seat, hopping from one side to the other, leaving even more nose-marks on the windows that would need to be windexed away later. Like the piss stains on the carpet of Sam’s barely-studio apartment, the mud prints on the wall, the chocolate-colored hairs all over the couch covers, the scratch marks on the door. The artifacts of dog ownership.

Sam closed his eyes and willed the geese to move. They didn’t.

He hunkered down into his seat and growled. Jackson made an answering growl. “Shut up, Jacks,” Sam said. Which had always worked for his mother – she could tell Jacks to shut up, to get off the furniture, to lie down, to get her flashlight. For Sam, the commands were less of a sure thing; Jacks would stare at him, visibly evaluate whether or not he was going to listen.

This time, it worked. Jackson sighed and flopped himself down, settling his head on the armrest and staring at Sam’s reflection in the mirror mournfully.
“We’ll go swimming in a minute,” Sam said. He could see the slate gray slap of the lake up ahead, wrapped around by the little path his old Buick sat stopped in the middle of. The only thing stopping them was a line of geese.

“Fuck this,” Sam said. He started to edge his Buick forward slowly. Revved his engine so the geese would know he meant business.

The geese milled and puffed. Sam stopped the car again. He judged that a flying goose would come at about windshield level if he drove forward too fast. Sam could envision it clearly: the spiderwebbed glass, the broken, twisted bodies of fowl, the old ladies walking down the path who would rush at him, shaking their canes and bemoaning the slaughter of Alpine’s precious wildlife.

Sam stared at the geese. The geese stared back. And Sam blinked first.

“This is a sad state of affairs, buddy,” he said to Jackson. “Us getting pushed around by a bunch of birds, huh?”

Jackson huffed again. Patted his paw on the back seat blanket. It’s okay, he seemed to say. We can’t all be top dog.

Jackson wasn’t Sam’s dog. Or at least he didn’t think of him that way. Jackson was Mom’s dog. And also maybe her child.

Sam would admit the last part was his own fault. Because his mom loved to go hunting. Would sit out in the rushes with Jackson from first light on in a folding chair with his head resting on her knee. She was a wiry woman who always wore thick-bodied vests, hats, long-sleeved men’s camo. She looked like a block with cropped blonde hair, more salt-and pepper as she got older, an ad right out of Field and Stream.
Sam went with her twice. The first time, he hugged his shot gun against his shoulder and prayed that no one actually expected him to shoot anything. He fidgeted in his chair, earning glares from both his mother and Jackson at every creak, every wobble.

It was cold in the marsh before dawn. Cold and gray and all the droplets of water leaking everywhere felt like bugs crawling under his coat. His toes went numb before seven. By eight, he was sure his calves were starting to go.

Then there were the ducks.

They didn’t come in the perfect V that Sam had learned to expect from cartoons and nature shows. It was a sloppy one, one side longer than the other, the wings moving clumsy and out of sync. The ducks looked tired to him. Like they were looking for a bed.

His mother pulled her gun up to her shoulder. Her face and the inky barrel moved together like they were wired – like he imagined the front guns on a helicopter would work, attached as they were to the pilot’s helmet.

“Breathe in and hold it for a second,” his mother reminded him in a low voice. “Right in between, shoot.”

She did. One of the ducks fell end over end, wings wrapping and unwrapping, to spatter like a jumping fish as it hit the water.

Jackson stood tense as a bowstring. “Dead bird,” Mom said, and Jackson was away, his black fur shiny like the back of a seal as he paddled his way out into the silver-gray muck, weaving between the reeds with his blunt, eager nose.

“That’s how it’s done,” Mom said.

Jackson brought the duck back, shook himself before trotting his way over to mom. And the duck was limp in his mouth, its shiny green head wobbling back and forth like there were no
bones in the neck anymore. It looked like the kind of duck Sam used to feed when he visited his friends at a nearby lake. He used to like the way they would come close, would eventually learn to take donuts from his hand, would talk to themselves as they scooted their boat-bodies from one hand to the next.

The rest of the day, Sam didn’t fire a single shot. His mother had nothing to say to him the whole way home. Sam sat in the back of the Buick. Jackson rode shotgun. “Who was a good boy today?” Sam’s mother asked over and over again, and Sam was pretty sure she always said that, pretty sure she didn’t mean it as a slight, but that was the first time Sam ever really hated Jackson.

The next time he went was less climactic. He developed explosive diarrhea from a gas station sausage biscuit and spent most of the morning in a McDonalds restroom. He always found an excuse after that, spent hunting mornings watching cartoons or playing Super Mario Brothers. There was nothing sad about killing a mushroom that probably had it coming. Especially not an evil mushroom, four pixels by four pixels.

The geese continued not to move. A few were audacious enough to go back to plucking grass with their beaks, and for the first time, Sam understood what would make someone want to fill one full of lead, rip its feathers off, and serve it up with cranberry sauce.

Sam killed the engine to his car. It sputtered once, then stilled. “I’ve had enough of this,” he said to Jacks.

Jacks looked up, and his coffee brown eyes were hopeful.

Sam got out of the car. “Beat it!” he bellowed at the assembled flock.
The flock – the gaggle? Sam wondered – didn’t move. They looked at him, at each other, at him again.

Sam spread his arms wide, hopped from one foot to another. “Big goose,” he said. “Big goose. My road.”

Jackson barked encouragement from the back seat. The window fogged and unfogged with each lung-deep woof.

The geese swaggered forward. Their beaks parted, tongues unrolling like new years eve noisemakers. They hissed.

Sam began to reconsider his goose-fighting strategy. He took a step back, and the geese came faster, waddling like small, feathered storm troopers.

Jackson’s barks shook the car.

“You think you can do better?” Sam asked

Jackson thought he could.

“Fine,” Sam said. He threw the door open, and the dog shot out, jostled his shin, made him catch himself against the door of the car as geese exploded in all directions. Sam leaned against the hood of his car and watched with satisfaction as Jacks ran back and forth, his slick sides picking up light like bullets as he barked his hoarse bark, front paws scooping at the air as he jumped after birds, the pink lick of his tongue meaty against the black-rubber lips.

Sam leaned back against the car and laughed. “Showoff,” he called. Because he knew Jacks wasn’t going to catch one, wouldn’t know what to do if he did, because Jacks wasn’t a flusher, he was just a retriever, and anyway, he had no bite to speak of. But the geese didn’t know that, and Jacks didn’t know it either – the lot of them cackling and yowling and making noise fit to raise the dead.
So Sam hopped up to sit on the hood of his car and waited for Jackson to finish terrorizing the geese. The dog got out rarely enough anymore, for this kind of thing. Because labs aren’t meant for apartments. And never should be.

But it did no good to think about that, so Sam focused on looking out across the lake, to the small, white strip of sand on the point that was the swimming area. On a nice day, it’d be packed with tiny umbrellas, the bright yellow and red water wings visible from across the lake. Today, there was a little rain, and it was cold even for May in Terra Alta, which is to say it was a miracle the damn lake wasn’t frozen.

Still, Sam could see the lifeguard chair and the little umbrella, the distant, gray shape of a figure huddled up between the arm rests, and he wondered if Kam was still working there. If Erin was or Logan, any of the old guards he used to sit and shoot the bull with back in high school, when this had been one of the few places worth going in the summer.

Jackson came trotting back to the car. He had downy feathers stuck to the black-rubber corners of his mouth, and he grinned like a saint, his big rudder tail swaying back and forth.

Sam opened the door for him. “You ready Jacks?” he asked.

The Labrador sailed into the car. Sam slammed the door with the most satisfaction he’d felt in a while.

It was a literal two minute drive from goose crossing to the pavilion area – a little cove right next to the swimming section. Sam gritted his teeth as he walked down toward the water; his Chuck Taylors were already squelching under his feet, and he remembered why he hated coming to the lake before the hotter months of July and August.
Jacks had no such qualms about damp paws. His graying muzzle was wide open in a dog-grin as he hopped his front legs back and forth. He knew what was coming.

Sam bent down and searched for an appropriate stick - something with some girth, some weight, but not too massive – and hurled it out into the lake. Jacks took off after it, soon just a head moving like a mouse cursor toward the soft ripples the stick was making

Sam leaned against the railing of the pavilion and thought it was sad how little it took to make Jacks happy, and how much of the time he was unhappy. How he came home from class to find his throw pillows shredded, and Jacks pushing the feathers around with his nose as if he were looking for something in them. The way he’d lie sad on the couch, nose to tail in a Labrador ball. The way he’d sit up suddenly whenever he heard a car backfire in the streets, muzzle quivering because he thought he’d heard a gunshot.

Then Sam thought about how damn unlikely he was to ever see his security deposit again. His apartment looked like the scene of a raid every day when he came home from work. It soured his mood some, but he knew it wasn’t Jackson’s fault, not really. If anything, it was his mother’s.

Jackson bounded up the bank, shaking himself every other step, to drop the stick at Sam’s feet. Sam threw it again, and Jacks almost tumbled in his hurry to get back to the water.

From so close, Sam could pretty easy see the lifeguard stand, and the spindly shape did look like Kambra Dawn. And he almost wanted to go talk to her, but he doubted she’d recognize him. When he’d moved to Morgantown, he’d felt like he’d entered a different world, a freer world. He’d dyed his hair black, grown it out, put rings in his ears, turned himself into a different person. Before his mother called to ask if he could take Jackson, he’d even convinced himself
that he might move further north, try his luck in Pittsburgh. He didn’t feel like the same kid who
had sat across from Kambra at lunch and launched paper footballs at the front of her shirt.

And then if she did recognize him, he knew how that’d go. They’d be awkward. She’d
ask about his mother, with her rheumatoid arthritis. How she was doing after she’d sold the
house, moved into an apartment in town that was easier to keep up. If that was her dog and how
was he doing.

Sam never knew what to say when someone asked those questions. He would usually
answer with “fine” – but it just wasn’t true. Her right shoulder was weak, no longer a perfect cup
for the gun. It swelled outward, puffed, purpured, left her thin-lipped and listless as she sat on her
couch for hours at a time reading *Field and Stream*.

And Sam would ask about Kambra’s family. Which always came to careful ways not to
ask about her pregnant sister or her dead father. Why she was still hopping tables and watching
beaches. When she was going to get her feet under her.

Sam wondered how it was, that with as many times as they’d all left, they kept coming
back. How no one ever really seemed to stay gone, no matter which city they moved to, how it
always ended in the geographical version of a rebound fuck. How they were always leaving, but
never actually going anywhere.

Jackson bolted out of the water and flew across the beach, right past the cheery blue “no
dogs allowed” sign. Sam called him, but he knew it was already too late, eighty-odd pounds of
wet dog barreling up the first step of the lifeguard chair, offering a stick like Cinderella’s slipper,
slobber or water still dripping from one end. It struck Sam that Jackson had never in his life been
afraid to go talk to a girl. Like in the seventh grade when his neighbor had been a redheaded girl
who wore Indian braids and tanned on her porch in a small blue bikini. Sam had spent the better
part of June trying to decide how to meet her. A careless wave while mowing the lawn? A pitcher of lemonade and two glasses? A single rose left on her doorstep every day until July?

Jackson had made that decision for him. He’d lost his Frisbee over the fence, and he’d made a dive for it, landing in a sprawl of paws and tail almost in her lap. The girl – Bridget – had laughed and ruffled her hands over his shoulders. Sam, righteously indignant, had come to introduce himself and to retrieve his mother’s dog. From that day forward, whenever she walked by his yard, she made it a point to wave and coo, “Hi there, Jackson.” There and then, Sam had made another mental tally in the list of things that the dog was better at than he was.

“Jackson, no,” Sam said halfheartedly, reaching for the leash he had wrapped around one of the posts. The lifeguard was already fondling his ears, tugging at the stick that Jackson growled around, refusing to give up.

Sam whistled, and Jackson came, but not before the lifeguard who may or may not have been Kambra looked over at him with a distracted sort of smile and called, “No dogs on the beach.”

Sam nodded and waved. “Sorry,” he called, which seemed to be enough for her. The girl – at least his age, Sam was sure – turned away from him and climbed back into her chair. And he didn’t go talk to her, even when Jackson looked over his shoulder and gave him an impatient look as if to say, “come on, I softened her up for you – you want me to hold your hand, too?”

“Not today, buddy,” Sam said. He opened the back door for Jackson, leash and all, and let him in. And on the long drive back to Morgantown, he told the dog about all the things he was going to do with his life. The nice house he was going to buy outside of Fairmont, two bedrooms and a big back yard. The sweet girl he was going to marry, move in with. How they
were both of them, he and Jackson, going to have kids, and play ball in the yard, and do all that
corny dad stuff.

And, as Jackson lay his head on Sam’s arm and slept, Sam could almost even believe
himself.
Coconut Pie

The parking lot never did get the potholes fixed. There’s gravel all over it, too, somehow rolled down from the trailer park up the hill, that I’m pretty sure used to be just another parking lot for the annual parade. I step careful as I walk up the slope to the door of what used to be the only inn café in Kingwood, was later a Mexican restaurant, and is now probably the final resting place of Sandy’s Café. It’s not Buckwheat Season yet, so the air’s still full of dust that somehow got to the road, and I look forward to getting inside just as fast as I can.

Sandy’s, far as I can remember, has been in three places. The first one was sandwiched between Fox’s Pizza and the Dodge dealer, then after that it was on the second floor of an old brick building the tore down later, and now it’s here, a one-story flat place all painted green and rust-red. My brother and I used to eat at Sandy’s all the time, back when it was just off Main Street, back before he went into the army and left for good. We’d hike there after school, and it was a nice place then, homemade pie and booths. I still remember my old order – grilled chicken sandwich, side of beer-battered onion rings, rubbery so I had to bite through just right or the whole onion’d come out and burn my chin. I wonder how many people thought we were just an annoying couple of kids, wished we’d go home.

I’m ordering today for me and my mother – walking my way across the floor to the one or two clumps of people sitting in there, poking at home fries and blowing on coffee. They eye me when I walk by like grandpa’s old dog used to eye people walking too close to his food dish, but they can tell I’m alright; straight jeans and cowboy boots like I haven’t worn since last time I came home, button-down shirt tied in a knot in front of me, and my hair’s only half-brushed in my face, straight and a little stringy, and I’m just like anybody here, except that I’m still pretty, and everybody knows. Hasn’t been time yet for my teeth to start falling out, for the gray to start...
working its way back from the forehead, for every part of me that can be exposed in wind and water to crinkle up like dried-out teabags. I’ve got a few years yet. Around here, that makes me look younger than I am – most girls wind up looking forty at thirty and fifty by thirty five.

I lean against the counter, and Sandy comes out – it’s hard to tell her from the other women, because they all look the same here, older and tough around the mouth and the eyes, nails painted in hard, angry colors like red and orange against their skin – but I can tell it’s her by the hair. Even now, that hair she’s got is just the exact color of a corn tassel with dust on it.

“Hey there, honey,” she says. I wonder if she remembers me really, remembers wheedling me into a slice of coconut pie, or keeping an eye out the kitchen window to recognize mom’s car when it came rattling into the parking lot, so we knew to go out and meet her instead of waiting. If she remembers all the times she didn’t say anything when we didn’t have any money, or when we both had to just buy one order of fries and share them. If she just remembers me as being from the old days, when things were maybe a little better. “What can I do you for.”

I’m ordering today for my mom and me, and the order is homemade vegetable soup and unsweetened iced tea. It’s a to-go order, to go with the walk we just took, as mom’s trying to lose weight now that “the kids” are finally out of the house, and I’m not so young I don’t need to stay in shape, either. Still, there’s nothing fun about vegetable soup – not like watching my brother Aaron gesture with a French fry while we made fun of Dad for not getting the mower started, or pooling our quarters so that he could play Pac Man on the arcade game that used to sit right inside the door.

“You go on and wait, honey,” she said. “I’ll bring it right out.”

I look around for Pac-man, but he must have stayed at the other restaurant, so I walk over to the window instead. It’s huge and streaked with dust, but I can see the intersection pretty good
– all the trucks roaring through with confederate flags waving someplace or other. I have no idea what they’re rebelling against; maybe just the speed limit, which nobody but sedan-drivers seem to care about.

Everybody who drives by is too skinny or too fat, and at least half have puffy blonde hair damaged so that it’s like a poodle’s. I wonder if it’s the air or the water, the wind or the farm dirt that turns us all into the same people as we age. Aaron would say something witty if he was here, but he’s gone.

Outside, a blazer hits the front end of a car, makes a long scrape sound, and drives away. The car follows. There wasn’t any kind of warning to it, just scrape, gone, and the little boy in the parking lot who’s bouncing a red rubber ball pauses, just a second, before he bounces it again. That’s all.

I can hear Sandy’s flip flops flipping as she comes out from behind the counter with a pair of Styrofoam boxes for the complimentary grilled cheese sandwiches, and two cups in a McDonalds-type cup holder, which is the soup. She sets them down in front of me, and another little Styrofoam box on top, and she says, “you get home while it’s hot now,” and I tip her two broken-looking dollar bills.

It’s hard balancing all the stuff while I walk out to the car – the Styrofoam boxes, the automatic entry, and my boots so damn slick on the asphalt I’m just sure somebody’s going to get an eyeful of me falling on my face from through that picture window pretty soon, and landing covered in tomato sauce. But I get there somehow, balance the soup against my hip while I get the door in, situate everything, and notice she gave me an extra box. I start to take it back in, but something makes me flip the flimsy little latch and look. Open it. And there it is, a slice of coconut cream pie, whipped cream piled up like snow.
I don’t peel tires getting out of there, but I spin gravel, which around here’s the same thing.
Vicarious

Kam pulls in to her parking lot in the dark, careful of the monster pothole that’s been expanding for months. Like the faultline in California, she imagines it will one day cause a continental split and swallow her sad little single-story apartment complex into the earth like a marshmallow dissolving into a cup of Swiss Miss. Already, it is half the width of her car, and it seems to be growing by the day, filling with water at the bottom like a miniature canyon.

She makes yet another mental note to call her landlord and complain.

She also has to swerve to avoid her neighbor’s three vehicles. Not her three neighbors’ vehicles, but rather, the three vehicles belonging to her next-door neighbors. There is one astro-van with curtains on the back window and four flat tires. She strongly suspects that this van doubled as a home for a while. There is also one boat-sized old Taurus. And there is one battered station wagon so old that she can’t tell the make or model, can only guess at what color it was before the sides melted to the color of rust and dirt. The back storage area is cleaned out save for two old down comforters that have been stitched together to make a mattress – the poor man’s RV, she thinks. Sometimes, they fight, her neighbors, and the wife sleeps in one of the cars, sweatpants and ragged t-shirts curled up in a catlike ball. She imagines the inspection sticker is stolen, but again, she isn’t sure.

“Home sweet,” she says to herself as she stumbles out the door of her old Volkswagon. It is a sad little car that coughs when it gets cold. She bought it at a used car lot when she first moved out of the house, strictly because her father had always praised the virtue of German Engineering, and that was as far as he’d ever gotten in teaching her about cars.
Her apartment door sticks when she tries to open it. She makes another note to call her landlord. She imagined that the notes were little post-it stickers on the inside of her brain, virtual wallpaper by now on the inner walls of her skull. She wonders if she’ll ever bother to call him. Probably not.

Once inside, she kicks off her old-lady shoes and drops her bags – heavy, all of them. They are full of books and cans of soup-at-hand, bags of Starburst candy to double as bribes, pencils and paper and big, pink gum erasers. Substitute teaching is a lot like being in the boy scouts; you have to be prepared for anything, carry your lunch with you, and haul roughly three times your own body weight from one location to another. But there aren’t any badges, which she thought was a shame. She could already think of several that she was well-qualified for, including “breaking up a fight with only a lot of yelling,” “bs-ing a lesson plan out of thin air when no one leaves you one,” and “mutiny management.”

It isn’t a good job. But Kam is what she’s calling “between” jobs, which is really more like “paying rent while desperately looking for jobs.” It’s better than fast food, she thinks, but not by a lot.

As she unpacks her laptop, she can hear the neighbor’s TV through the wall. They are watching some kind of movie that has a lot of shooting. Probably a war film – the kind her Dad used to watch on the History channel with the volume jacked up to 45, so loud the machine guns shook the walls and gave her nightmares when she was a kid.

“Yet another reason to move out,” she said to the empty apartment.

She wondered if any of her applications would actually lead to a real job in a real apartment complex, or if she would spend the rest of her life substitute teaching and lifeguarding on the weekends like a kid just out of college. She wondered what happened to all of the
resume’s that she’d sent out already – if they were languishing on someone’s desk, curled up like cats in hundreds of different office trash cans, or just drifting in cyberspace like so many messages in bottles, saying quietly, in size 10 Aerial font, *save me.*

Kam sits down in the computer chair and pulled up her account – weighing the notices for bills against the lack of job options, and wonders if she should apply at Walmart again, which sucks as a place of employ, but is at least steady. Subbing can be nerve-wracking, because you never know when someone’s going to get sick, and if it will manage to happen before someone shuts of her power.

Through the wall, she hears the man yell, “What the fuck is your problem” over the sound of the tv. She wants to yell back, “I’m working crap jobs and I don’t sleep enough,” but of course, he isn’t talking to her. He’s talking to the woman he lives with. Kam has seen her hundreds of times now – an older-looking lady with skinny legs and a soft basket-ball belly, who’s always wearing a pair of sweat pants loose on her hips and a t-shirt that’s loose on her shoulders, tight on her belly. She has twice knocked on Kam’s door to ask to use the phone. “Electric’s shut off,” she said to Kam as she hunched over her cell-phone like she thought someone was going to take it away from her.

Kam pulls up Youtube and looks for something loud. Something that might drown out what she knows is coming next. Already, the volume on the tv is lowering like a barometer warning of an upcoming storm, and someone is slamming dishes in the sink.

She finds a clip about Pablo and Ramsey. Pablo was a Chihuahua and Ramsey was a Doberman Pinscher of epic proportions. They were best friends; Youtube was full of their videos, playing dog games like tug o’ war and tag. She thinks that she would like to have a dog, but her landlord doesn’t allow pets.
Next door, something crashes, and Kam thinks about calling the cops, but it’s only reflex. She has called cops before. Once when she was living in the dorms and saw, swear to God, one of the frat boys from the TKE house backhand his old navy girlfriend across the face. Once when she’d seen four boys loading a girl so drunk she couldn’t hold her head up into the back of their car. Once when her best friend called her from the bathroom of her apartment saying she had locked herself in there because she was sure that her boyfriend was going to kill her, and what should she do?

The first time, they wrote an incident report. The second, she didn’t know what happened. The third, they drove the boy down to the station, but they released him when Kam’s friend didn’t press charges.

“You’re crazy,” Kam told her. “Crazy. Why would you go back to him?”

“I’m not crazy,” Elle said. “We’re living in the same apartment. We share a lease.”

“So what? You pay the whole damn thing anyway.”

“I need him. It’ll be okay.”

“It won’t be okay. It’s not okay now.”

Elle shrugged. “I need him,” she said, like that explained everything away, nice and neat.

“He’s bad for you,” Kam said. “Come on, Elle, he shouldn’t hit you and don’t you dare say he doesn’t mean it, because he does.”

“Sure he means it,” Elle said. “And I mean it when I throw cups at his head.”

“Elle,” she’d said. “He’s not worth it.”

“Neither am I,” Elle said with quiet confidence.

And Kam had accepted it, the same as she’d once accepted that her hair was going to frizz no matter what she did about it, the same as she’d accepted that her father really was gone.
There is another crash from the apartment next door, a thump that sounds like it should come clean through the wall, but it doesn’t. Kam hopes that they are only throwing things, or stomping their feet, or punching walls to make points. She knows already that they keep a shot gun. She’s seen the man standing on the porch and waving it at one of the cars, screaming at the woman about how she’d better get her head out of her fat ass, staggering sideways, smelling of beer. Kam wishes she could count offhand the number of times she’s stumbled out of her own apartment at six thirty so that she can drive to school and seen the woman sleeping in one of the cars, a ratty blanket drawn up under her tired face. On those mornings, Kam wants to tell her it’s her damn car. She wants to tell her to drive away. But she knows how little good it would do.

There’s a new video of Pablo and Ramsey up. The two of them have banded together to steal the mail, darting though the house just ahead of their hapless, video-camera-weilding owner. She notices that she never sees a wife in any of these films. She wonders if there is one, if the home she sees in the videos is really as happy a place as it looks. She wonders if Youtube user C.W Dressen secretly beats his wife, or if they just quietly hate each other. If she secretly thinks he’s a child for chasing their dogs through the house with a video camera.

Next door, there is a final crash-thump and the familiar sound of the door slamming. A minute later, a car door opens and closes, but there’s no engine rev. Next-door woman is going to sleep in the car again. Kam wonders if she should take her a blanket, a cup of coffee, a ham sandwich. She does none of those things. Instead, she starts the shut-down option on her computer. Six in the morning comes early, and she knows it will be quiet now, or at least quiet enough that she can sleep.

She hears another plunk from next door, and then she hears the familiar sound of water filing a toilet bowl. The man next door always has a full bladder for these fights, probably the
beer – she has heard them yelling at each other through the bathroom door before. That time, it was over the past-due power bill that was up to two hundred dollars. He was so angry he didn’t seem to know what to do, so he had called her a slut over and over again, had slammed the door a lot.

And yet whenever Kam passes him on the way to her door, he smiles and waves at her. He has a face like an old leather glove – it creases and settles in well-worn, comfortable ways. Sometimes he offers to carry her groceries for her.

Once, he knocked on her door. She can still remember the way her stomach twisted when she looked out the peephole and saw him standing there, one hand on the door frame, cigarette balanced on his lip like he expected someone to try to shoot the end off it any second. She thought about pretending not to be home. But her car was clearly there, not two feet from the porch, and it didn’t feel like a safe idea. Doors, she’d learned, were easy to kick down.

“Mornin’, darlin’,” he said as soon as she opened the door. “Tire’s a little low in front. Just figured I’d let you know.”

She’d looked over the parking lot and seen he was right – her car listed sideways just the slightest like a ship frozen in mid-sway. “Thanks,” she’d said, “I’ll take care of it,” and for a moment she’d felt strangely warm toward him. She wondered if she would have thought he was a good man if she didn’t actually live next to him. If other people thought so.

If, really, he is, aside from this one little fault.

Kam stands up from her desk chair and thinks that she’s ready for bed. Her computer whirrs at her quietly, her Wal-Mart candle flickers, and she thinks that this is not home. This is just somewhere she’ll stay for a while. Meantime. Like a pit stop.
Next door, the TV comes on, and she is comforted by the sound of machine guns and muted yelling. She turns out her lights and listens to it until she falls asleep.
Acceptable Losses

Jesse leaned against the snow-glazed fence that surrounded her grandfather’s old farm and watched one of the neighbor’s houses burn down. It was far away on the other side of the ridge, but she could see it clear, its bones stark black against the red fire, hollowed out like photographs she’d seen of whale carcasses on the bottom of the ocean. The way the red and orange tube worms waved back and forth like haunted house crepe paper.

The house, to her figuring, was about two miles away, but cold and clear as the air was, she felt like she could reach out and touch it, maybe throw a rock and bounce it off the cinderblock foundation. She couldn’t, of course she couldn’t, but it looked that way. She blew across the open mouth of her bottled beer, watched the frosty little cloud peel away from the lip, vanish immediately – too cold for any water in this air – and tried to decide whose house it was, whether or not she knew them. Hard to tell, as all the square-framed houses on the pike look about the same. Four straight walls, a basement made of cinderblocks, big front porch shaped like a shoebox, usually with a trellis on the side.

She hardly wondered what had caused it; probably a downstairs woodstove, a fireplace. Every year, you could count on that – people in the area laughed out loud at the idea of electric heat, of paying out a thousand a month for fuel oil. So every year, especially when it dipped down in to the single digits or lower, you could count on an old wood stove jamming, a few sparks catching a throw rug, a few houses written off as acceptable loss.

Jesse took another drink of her beer. The icy bottle stung her lower lip. And she thought about how many people had died in burning houses. She couldn’t think of many, mind, they usually made it out, but there was at least one she knew of who hadn’t. It made big news a few years ago - a girl by the name of Angela Shahan was staying at home with her father. Her
boyfriend came over for a visit. The old wood stove malfunctioned – no one knew exactly how, but how’s don’t matter anyway – and the house went up like a roman candle. The story went that Angela and her boyfriend stumbled out the basement door, and when they didn’t see the father, Angela turned around and ran back for the house. Her boyfriend grabbed her arm, but she was slick with sweat from the heat, and she slipped away.

Jesse hadn’t been friends with Angela. Hell, she’d barely known her at all except from a distance, the way everybody at that high school somehow knew everybody else no matter how different they were. Angela was an FFA girl, danced at Sally Anne’s, took Chemistry and Honors History. Jesse was from the opposite wing of the school, the art cavern, the small section that housed Mr. Mattingly’s art room, the music room, the drama department with its red velvet curtains and jellybean light covers.

She’d only met Angie once, not even met. It was when she was hanging her senior art exhibit in the arts hallway with thumb tacks; mostly black and white ink work, a few jagged looking prints, bare bony trees. The bell had just rung, the neverending stream of band kids – the one socially acceptable reason to venture into the art wing – was jostling along behind her like sheep, and someone said, “wow, is that yours?”

Jesse said, “Yep” and kept on thumbtacking.

“You’re really good,” the someone said.

“Thanks,” Jesse said, and turned a little, gave whoever was talking a halfass over-the-shoulder look.

Angela stood there in a pair of flare jeans and a polo shirt, her near-empty backpack sagging over one shoulder. She was shorter than Jesse and maybe even skinnier, neat cropped
brown hair straight like a horse’s mane. She had her head tilted back, looking at the black matted drawings that were beginning to form a display shape on the board.

The bell rang again, and Angela flinched. “Gotta go,” she said, “Can’t wait to see what it looks like when it’s done.”

That was the extent of Jesse’s interaction with Angela. A month later, she was gone, and though she hadn’t known her well, Jesse couldn’t stop thinking about it. How quick someone could go from here to gone.

Jesse heard the distinctive crunch of frozen grass and turned to look across the long stretch of farmyard of her nearest neighbors. A thick figure in boots was trudging down from the yellow-lit house with a sears coat and camel colored workboots, hands shoved deep in his pockets. Beside him was Ned, the farm dog, a gray monster that was rumored to be part German Shepherd, part elkhound, part god-knows-what. A wolf is what he looked like, though Jesse knew the dog well enough to know better; Ned was as ferocious in disposition as Eyore the Donkey.

Jesse swung one leg up onto the fence, then the other, felt the cold wood burn through her jeans as she hooked the toes of her boots against the lowest rung. She waited.

It wasn’t long before the approaching figure resolved itself into the form of Ryan, one of Jesse’s few real friends who had been away at college for at least the past year. He was taller than she remembered, but not much different to look at, same wiry farm boy with the same wheat-colored hair.

“Thought you might be out here,” he said.
Jesse swung herself far enough over the fence to sit on it. “Didn’t want to miss it,” she said, gesturing toward the still-flaming house with her beer bottle. A few scraggly pines stood up against the red like the cutout backdrops they used to make for plays.

Ryan crossed his arms on the fence, leaned against it. Ned sat down and hunched his shoulders. “You’re not 21 yet,” Ryan said, looking at the beer.

“Snitched it from grandpa,” Jesse said. “He keeps the fridge stocked. You want some?”

“Not much of a beer drinker,” Ryan said.

Jesse thought about how many boys would’ve drank it anyway, just to prove they weren’t girlier than she was. She liked that about Ryan, that he didn’t pretend to be anything. “Are you sure you’ve been to college?” she asked.

Ryan shrugged. “Doesn’t feel that way sometimes,” he said.

Jesse had known Ryan since she came to live with her grandpa when she was ten. Her mom’d been raising her by herself down in DC, working two jobs, trying to keep a boyfriend, trying to raise a little girl who learned how to forge her signature at seven and rifle through her purse at six.

“Damn it to Hell, Jesse,” her mother said over and over, “what am I supposed to do with you.”

The last straw was when she told her mother that one of her boyfriends had touched her in a way that the school instructional videos insisted was bad. Her mother had never said so one way or another, but Jesse didn’t think she’d ever believed her – and that summer she’d come to live with her grandfather, a tired man with faded red hair who wore flannel and suspenders. He had been a coal miner once upon a time, kept his fridge stocked with Budweiser, sat on the porch a lot, or slept on the couch.
How he was supposed to whip her into shape, Jesse didn’t know – but on the bright side, there was less trouble for her to get into here, out of school. No real gangs, unless you count the Future Farmers of America. Drugs, sure, but not the hard stuff, and not as easy to get.

All that combined left her with hours of nothing to do, aside from chores, which she did do, and homework, which she mostly did on the bus, balancing an Algebra book on her knees like a desk. There was barely any tv – granddad was a news-and-two-channels-of-football man – and no street ball with the neighborhood kids, no corner store to snitch cigarettes from, at least not that she could walk to.

The one saving grace to the place was the Oaks family across the road – Ryan, his older brother Malachi, his younger sister Rachel, and Ned. She’d spent most of her growing-up time with them. In the summers after the work was over, the four of them – five if you counted Ned – would play volleyball over the fence between their properties, anything goes. The boys usually split teams, Ryan playing with Jesse, Malachi playing with Rachel and Ned, neither of which were much help. Rachel would run toward the ball and then cover herself like an armadillo as the ball thunked to the ground. Ned would bark at it, throwing his great white jaws back and stomping with his front legs.

Ryan taught her how to drive a tractor one summer – leaned down to grab her wrist, hauled her up the massive wheel like a fish into a boat. He showed her how to shift gears, “same as a truck” he said, probably not realizing what kind of monster he was creating, probably not realizing that a year later, Jesse would talk him into borrowing his father’s truck to ride over to the movie theater, the both of them two years too young to drive.

“What’ve you been into,” Ryan said.
“Work, mostly,” she said. She took another drink of her beer. That was the good thing about Preston County winters. Your beer never gets warm.

“Where at,” Ryan said.

“Lowes still,” Jesse said. “Not like you, college boy.”

Ryan shifted his feet in the brittle grass, gray like a brillo pad, and said, “You can do better than Lowes.”

Jesse shrugged. “I’ll go to college,” she said. “Soon as I work a few years, you know, get a feel for what I don’t want to do.”

“Art?” Ryan asked.

“Maybe,” Jesse said. “I should be a teacher. That’d be ironic.”

Ryan smiled. Which Jesse hadn’t seen in a long time – not frequent since his sister disappeared, another one of those big stories that’s all over the county for a week, then gone. That was different, though. Jesse had known that little girl, had snuck her her first comic book, had patched up the skinned knee she got playing backyard football with them so her mom wouldn’t know. It wasn’t like Angela. She knew how the story went, knew all the parts of it that weren’t true – but still, it was far away, hard to think about, like it hadn’t ever happened at all. She thought of her time in DC that way sometimes, too, like a dream, a former life.

“Nobody’d get anything by you,” he said.

“Damn straight,” Jesse said. She finished her beer, tapped the bottle against the side of the fence. Ned, suspecting a game, poked his nose at the bottle, fogged it with his breath.

“Speaking of, you know what some people have been saying about you, since you decided to go to school for art.”

Ryan shrugged again. “So what?” he said.
“So be careful,” she said. “Jesus, Ryan.”

“Not everybody who does art is that way,” he said. “You know that.”

“I do, but I’m not some people.” Jesse buried one of her gloveless hands in Ned’s big collie-esque ruff, remembered for a minute the way the old dog had plodded around the house after Rachel disappeared. The way he stuck his quiet nose into all the corners, snuffed under the bed, perked his satellite ears up every time he heard the rickety tires of the bus. She wondered if he’d ever forgotten that one of his charges had managed to slip away from him, like the sheep sometimes slip out the fence. She’d heard that dogs forgot such things, things they couldn’t change.

Ryan kicked the fence again, just a light tap with the toe of his boot. “Got a show up next week,” he said.

“Might come see it,” Jesse said.

“You should let me draw you again,” Ryan said.

“You sure know how to show a girl a good time,” she said.

Ryan chuckled. “You used to punch me,” he said, “when I called you a girl.”

“Yeah, well,” she said. “Try it.”

“You’re a girl,” he said.

Jesse didn’t mean to, but she thought about it anyway, the one time she’d tried kissing him. It was, of course, back stage and during lunch, one of the dressing rooms no one ever came to except during dress rehearsals and productions. It was awkward and not-good, like kissing friends usually is, but there was something about it anyway – maybe the way his hands slid down her arms like he was taking her coat off, maybe the gentle way he put her at arm’s length to say that’s far enough – that stuck in her mind, made her think about it even a few years later.
“Okay,” she said. “So what.”

The fire was getting into the insulation. White specks flew into the air like someone was shaking a snowglobe. They watched it for a while.

“Thought I saw her the other day,” Ryan said. He was still looking at the far away house. Jesse didn’t have to ask to know who he meant. “Where?” she said.

“Metro,” Ryan said. “I wonder, you know, what she’d look like now. Drew her a few times, painted even, like I think she’d look.”

Not ‘she would have looked’ Jesse thought. “Yeah?” she said.

“And then there she was. Just like in the painting. I mean, the same jaw, same hair, everything.”

Jesse patted her leg, and Ned put his paws up on the fence, settled his massive head into her lap. “What happened?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “I tried to talk to her, but she got on the train. Didn’t see her there again.”

And Jesse knew without asking that he’d sat in those benches for hours after that, sketchbook in hand, knowing it wasn’t her, but waiting anyway. She scratched Ned’s ears, noticed his muzzle was grayer than it had been even that fall.

“I’ll come see your show,” Jesse said.

Ryan pulled his reddening hands out of his pockets, used them to turn up the green and black checks of his collar. “I could drive you,” he said.

Jesse said, “Sure. How long you in for?” Like they were in prison.

“Two weeks,” Ryan said. “Could drive you up, spend a day, come back.”

“Okay,” Jesse said.
They stood by the fence until the house across the ridge cumbled in on itself, the matchstick support beams folding like candle wicks. Then Ryan trudged his way back up to the house, Ned slumping along beside him, looking back at her sometimes with his yellow wolf eyes.

Jesse tapped her beer bottle against the fence, and wondered if it was true all those years ago, what she told her mother. She’d told the story so many times – three times to her, once to her counselor, over and over in her head, but the images were blurry. She remembered for sure that he had a beard, a short white-trash beard, and she remembered that he smelled like mint and aftershave, and she remembered that she didn’t like him. The rest, who knows, school videos and hours by herself watching tv that was too old for her, and the lie started to feel right. It wouldn’t have been the first time she’d rehearsed lies into truth inside her own head. That was the real secret to lying. You had to believe yourself.

But maybe it was true, maybe her mother even believed her, and she’d sent her out to the country where it was safe. Where there weren’t as many bad people, good wholesome living. Jesse hoped that was true, liked the irony of it, the notion that this was somehow safer. It was like the old farmers said when they stood around outside Brown’s Mill, the same, she figured, as teenagers back home hanging around the corner store. How many lambs do you lose before you decide it’s worth paying feed for a guard dog? Like an old joke about a Rabbi, the one people just keep on telling you, even if you warn them that you’ve heard it before.

The house on the hill was down to its embers, a red thumb smear on film. Jesse wished she had another beer, wanted to sit outside and watch the oranges cool to apple color, then to warm browns, and gray. Watch for the fire trucks to finally roar up the road, bells clanging like children banging pots together.
Instead, she hopped off the fence and started walking back toward the house. Her grandfather, she knew, would already be asleep, nodding to himself on the couch like a drunk. She would pluck the remote from his hand and set it on the coffee table before she went to bed.
Bryan’s Ford Explorer teetered on the edge of the bank like a matchbox car on a set of stacked books. The front tires sat useless on the rim of the parking lot; the rear wheels sank uncertainly into the pitted-out snow that made up the hill down past the lower lot. A strong wind, I suspected, would send the vehicle backwards down the bank, maybe end over end, possibly into one of the tiny, badly-made houses that crouched along the side of Falling Run Road.

The three of us, me and Aaron and Bryan, stood in a line together with our hands shoved deep in our pockets, lips jutted out like mechanics or bums. I was scooting the tread of my boots over the iced-up surface of the lot. It felt like my driveway back home in between meltings, when Dad would send me and my brother out with buckets full of ash from the coal furnace. We’d shovel it onto the steep parts of the driveway, darken the snow with clumps of burned out rock that looked like they’d been shot from a volcano.

Right at that second I would’ve given ten years off my life for a bucket full of ash and a shovel.

“Fuck,” Aaron said, after a minute. He scuffed his steel-toed work boot against the ice, skidded half a foot, nearly fell. “Why the Hell did you back it over the bank?”

I’d been wondering that same thing myself. If I’d been a different girl, I might even have asked. But I’d grown up with my father, who was a world class champ at doing insane things for perfectly logical reasons, so I didn’t say a word.

Bryan folded his arms, defensive. “Had to get around the car,” he said. He pointed to a badly-parked sedan that all but blocked the way out of the parking lot.
Aaron stared in turn at the car, the bank, the explorer, Bryan, the bank, the car. He shook his head as if trying to dry his hair after a swim. “How goddamned drunk are you, anyway?”

It was a valid question. Aaron and Bryan had been chugging down Seagram’s 7 for the past three hours during one of their band practices, putting just enough Coke in the glasses to turn the liquid to the color of rich mud.

Bryan dragged both his hands through his boy-band blonde hair. I felt bad for the kid, really. Just 21, rocker pale in the light from the street lamps, all freaked out over his first real car accident. I could still remember mine. The look on my father’s face when he pulled his truck up alongside my little Subaru, which balanced like a paperweight on one of the decorative walls people so often put next to their driveways. The look said, clear as day, “What were you thinking.”

“Can we just get the damn thing back into the parking lot?” Bryan asked.


Aaron reached across Bryan and clicked my flip-phone shut. “No way,” he said, “we can get this.”

Another girl would probably have said no. Would probably have told Aaron point-blank he was crazy. But I had grown up with Ralph Jenkins, my father, lord of the costly and stupid home repair, and I knew that the more I recommended, nay, begged for a professional, the more determined Aaron would be that we could resolve our own sad little vehicle situation. “I’m adding an I-told-you-so,” I told Aaron, “to the big list of I-told-you-so’s.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. Just like my mother.
The last time I went home, it was Christmas, and a sassafras tree had grown into the sewer pipes like worms, I’m told, can grow into intestines – just a little tendril at first, then a presence, then a clog. Our pipes sat useless, our sinks full, and my mother and father sat on opposite sides of the kitchen table. The phone book sat between them like a yard marker.

They were not the parents I’d known growing up. My mother’s frame had softened over many years of late nights at the school, and her mouse-colored hair had faint white streaks through it like the white coming in to our dogs’ muzzles, and my father had shrunk. Cancer hollowed him out like a sun-dried apple, sank his navel in toward his spine, gave him cheek bones like knives. He still balanced a cigarette on his lower lip as he hunched over his coffee. His bifocals looked too big for his face. The house had aged with them; the kitchen linoleum was cracked, grayed around the edges. The ceiling was weak with spider-web cracks over the sink.

My brother was not at the table. I could see him through the window, his hands shoved down into his pockets in the unfathomable gray of a snowless December day in Preston. He was scuffing around in the yard in leaky rubber boots, pacing the line of the sewer pipe like a man who was auguring for water. He was wearing a brown coat, and when he turned his back to the house, he looked so much like my uncle Chip that I almost wanted him to reach into his pocket for a chew, take a pull from mom’s beer.

“Pipe snake’s seventy dollars a day,” Dad said.

Mom said, “Ralph. Damnit, Ralph.”

I knew what was coming. Another one of their long arguments. A cost benefit analysis that on the surface covered overall cost of a plumber versus time and daily rental, but underneath was more about masculinity and independence versus safety and insurance. It always got ugly.
I excused myself down to the basement – a place where I once spent a year of my life when Dad insisted on remodeling my bedroom. It seemed less stark when I was nine, the bare cement floors broken by the careless rugs, the exposed drywall.

I made my way over to the cat bed where Mr. Blacks – the cat I’d had all my life – was stretched out and still. His fur was ragged and worn through in places I could see as his sides expanded and contracted like balloons. He looked like one of my old stuffed animals, worn out with too much time, too many tight squeezes, and too many brushes.

“Hi, Blacks,” I said as I sat down beside his bed. I dipped my fingers in the Dixie plate of lukewarm milk we’d been keeping there for him after he’d refused even soft food, hot dogs, ground up meat. I held my fingers in front of his nose and waited for the familiar rasp of his tongue as he cleaned each finger. I took this as a sign that he was not ready to die yet, and I smoothed my hand down the too-skinny line of his back. Each knob of spine felt like a marble covered in felt.

“You’re just feeling bad for now,” I told him. “It’ll be like that cold you had last winter – you’ll wake up in two days feeling fine.”

Mr. Blacks meowed his creaky meow – we’ve never been sure what was wrong with his voice, but he sounded more like the attic door than a cat.

“You’ll let me know when you’re done,” I said.

Mr. Blacks put his paw on the back of my hand. I traced the velvet fingers and thought that he felt like a loose glove.

Aaron’s plan for getting Brian’s explorer back up into the parking lot was a simple one. He would bring his jeep right up to the nose of the near-capsized vehicle, fasten the tow straps, and
gun it for all it was worth. I would sit in the driver’s seat and give her all the juice I had, and
Bryan would push from behind the vehicle, just perfectly in the way in case the bank should
collapse, in case both vehicles should roll backward.

“Maybe I should drive,” Bryan said.

“Ashley’s a better driver,” Aaron said.

Bryan shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at me in the same way that all young

That seemed to appease Bryan. He shuffled to the bank, slid down it with a hand on the Explorer for support.

“This is a terrible idea,” I said to Aaron. He offered me the keys and I took them.

“It’ll be fine, darlin,” he said, and he grinned at me, a little boy grin.

I got in the damned Explorer, fastened the seatbelt. Aaron slid into his Jeep.

“Ready?” he asked. Snow fell through the open windows.

I pulled off my left glove so I could grip the steering wheel with my bare skin. Felt the familiar bite of it, a little bit like Whiskey, and thought for a minute about what could happen. About what I’d seen happen time and again when Mom or Dad got a vehicle hung up in the driveway. How they can slide sideways, backwards, how it felt to sit in a car and feel the world tilt sideways.

I heard my mother’s voice from once upon a time, during a shopping trip where my seven-year-old-self had decided to play with a sword meant for a mantel decoration. When she’d thrown both hands up in the air, told me I was just like my father.
I stomped my left foot on the brake, revved the engine with my right foot. It felt strong, like a good fish on the end of a line, and I said, “On three.”

The sassafras tree was strong – unusual for a junk tree. My brother and I stood knee deep in the creek, where we’d been for nearly four hours, chunks of ice milling around our rubber boots like minnows at the lake in the spring. He held a shovel. I held a hatchet.

Between us was a hole, full of water and bedrock and roots. Thick, powerful roots that spaced themselves to every four inches, stood between us and the clogged sewer pipe. The pipe snake, all seventy dollars of it, lay coiled inside the pipes, stuck and sad and useless. Any normal man would have looked at the situation and realized that it was getting worse. Dad, too old now for this kind of work, too thinned-out from the cancer, handed us each a tool and told us to start digging. That he’d be out in a couple of hours to see what could be done.

“Shit,” Alex said, and I thought again about uncle Chip. About how hard he would have laughed at us, hacking away at the bank ourselves when you could as easy pay a plumber.

“Shit indeed,” I said.

“No, literally,” Alex said. “Think about it. That pipe is clogged. We’re st…”

I hefted the ax from one shoulder to the other. “I’ll kill you,” I said.

Alex looked at me sideways. He had a heavy brow, a block-shaped head, looked like Dad used to. He visibly weighed the worth of my threat.

“I will,” I said. “I already have a hole where I can put the body.”

Alex said, “Fine.”

We’d been going on like that the past four hours. Him hollowing out the dirt, shifting the monster rocks, and me hacking through the sassafras tree one root at a time. We’d tried it the
other way at first, because Alex was stronger, should have been better able to hack through the tough wood. His aim, though, was horrible. In my hand, the ax was less powerful, but more accurate, hacking out perfect wedges in the solid roots. I wondered sometimes if it was this kind of activity growing up that made me the way I am. Gave me big shoulders, legs like trees, a square face that looks stubborn instead of soft.

For all that, I felt the work more than Alex. Felt each impact through my shoulders and back and hips as if I was striking concrete with a baseball bat. My hands were bruised under the gloves, no doubt a perfect, quarter-sized mark on the ridge of either palm.

Alex kicked one of the giant rocks we’d recently rolled out. That was a fine chore; we had to break the suction with a poke-bar as a lever, then roll them out. It was slow going.

“Don’t figure there’s any way in Hell we’re making the Christmas program tonight,” Alex said.

“No,” I agreed. “We’ll be lucky if we’re out of here by New Years.”

Alex planted his tool in the mud, leaned on it. “You know, Ash,” he said, “you should write a story about this.”

That’s the trouble with being a writer in a family full of storytellers. Whether you mean to or not, you become a historian for everyone you know. Because everybody has one story that he thinks is worth remembering. Everybody wants to leave something behind.

I thought about telling my brother that I only write sad stories about loss and disassociation. That he’s got the wrong idea if he thinks the two of us will emerge as shining protagonists in any kind of story I write. That I wasn’t sure if I could, in fact, write a story about a sassafras tree, a hatchet, and a brother who’s back from his stint in the army on medical discharge, dreams of officer-hood stripped away by a four inch cut and some germs.
I leaned my head back. I could just see the yellow window of the kitchen. The shadows of Mom and Dad, so different from the shadows I remember, probably still arguing about plumbers and past wrongs. The time Dad had rewired the living room and caught the curtains on fire. The time he’d blown up the yard. The time he trapped himself on the roof while trying to fix our gutters.

“I should,” I agreed. Then I eyed a root that looked promising. I lifted the axe above my head like I’d once lifted the sword I thought would turn me into a super hero. This time I was not surprised when nothing happened.

When I stomped my foot down on the gas pedal, the Explorer didn’t jump forward. The wheels spun, and the square front end of the car jittered. I could feel the wheels through my ass and my hand – they were cagey, first pulling one way, then the other. Like compressing a spring until you’ve compressed it too far, all that energy pushing for a way out.

The tires on Aaron’s jeep screamed against the ice. The big red back end started to move away from me sideways.

I felt what to do, more than I meant to do it. I turned the wheel to the right, a little uphill, felt the Explorer lurch, heard a startled yell from Bryan, a sound like he’d seen a snake. Then I jerked the wheel left, gunned it harder, and the Explorer popped out like a cork. It came too fast, toward the back end of Aaron’s Jeep.

“Stop!” Bryan near to screamed from over the bank, both hands no doubt outstretched.

But the first rule of driving on ice is that your breaks are a waste of time. I turned the wheel to point the Explorer down the parking lot, gave her a little gas. Felt the Explorer slide sideways for a second before pulling forward, coasting to a stop at a 45 to Aaron’s Jeep.
Aaron threw open the red door, arms outstretched like Rocky’s after he’d finally run up the steps. “Woo! Who told you?” he said.

I stumbled out of the Explorer. Caught myself on the ice as Aaron slid his way to me, pounded me a good one on the back like I was a man.

“Pretty fancy,” Bryan said. He knelt beside his Explorer, started unhooking the tow cables from his undercarriage. He lay flat on his back like a mechanic, the ice up against his shoulders.

“Told you she was good,” Aaron said.

“More like your jeep’s good,” I said.

“Damn straight she is,” Aaron said. He looked over at the squat red vehicle and added, “My baby could climb a tree blindfolded.”

I realized in that moment that Aaron was never going to talk about me the way he talked about his jeep.

It was seven o’clock at night by the time Alex and I finally lifted the clogging root over our heads, shiny and covered in grime like a newly-delivered baby. It shone in the lights of the truck, which Dad had driven halfway down the bank to give us light.

The pipes sprang to life as soon as the root wrenched free; my brother stood covered in sewage, arms outstretched to either side, face uplifted to the clouds as if to ask why. “The worst that could ever happen has happened,” he said. I gave him the first shower out of sympathy. By then, it was snowing hard and the mud was starting to freeze.
My feet were dead as I stomped into the basement to wait for my own chance at a cleaning, and my fingers burned like they once had when, as a child, I stumbled and pressed my hands against the side of a kerosene heater. The skin had bubbled, been wrapped.

Mr. Blacks had not moved. His tired body still coiled in the cat bed. His head looked too big for his shrunken body.

“Hey Blacks,” I said. I sat down beside him, dipped my fingers in the milk bowl. The milk felt like fire, clung like napalm.

Mr. Blacks opened his milky eyes, attempted a meow, but did not lift his head. I put my milk-soaked fingers against his whiskers. He did not open his mouth.

I felt my eyes sting, the same sting they got from the coal smoke. “You sure, Blacks?” I asked him. “Are you sure?”

Mr. Blacks was sure. He would not twitch his tail when I touched it, would not curl his paw around my fingers.

“Okay Blacks,” I said. “Okay.” I smoothed my hands over his fur, felt patches come out, and thought how strange it was that of all the cats I’d owned, only this one had chosen to die in the basement instead of in the yard.

When I heard the shower stop, I climbed the steps. My mother stood in the kitchen, drying dish after dish that she lifted from the sink. She moved, I realized, more slowly now.

“He’s not going to get better,” I told her back.

Mom nodded. “We’ve been expecting this for a long time,” she said.

I conceded that maybe she had. And I stumbled into the shower. The water hurt.
Aaron and I stood side by side as we watched Bryan drive away. He skidded almost sideways down Aaron’s long driveway, barely missed the telephone pole when he pulled out, the heavy back end of his vehicle a stronger pull than the spinning front wheels. He fishtailed a fraction and drove away.

Aaron shook his head slowly. “That kid,” he said, “is a terrible driver.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Aaron said, “You’re not chancing it in your Neon, are you?”

I looked at my front-wheel-drive car. The small, egg-shaped body of it, the lightness. Remembered the many times I’d fishtailed, spun, swerved. “No way,” I said.

We stumbled together to the frozen, unsalted walkway. Stray flecks of snow came down like sanded-off glass will hang in the air for days, light enough to ride even such cold updrafts. “You know what?” Aaron said. “You should write a story about this.”

That’s the trouble with being a writer in a group of reckless twenty-something’s. Everybody thinks that he’s trying something brand new. I almost asked Aaron if he’d ever read a single one of my stories. How if I write about the cars, I have to explain why the cars matter. Explain that I’d let him slide his hand from my hip to my shoulder in the back seat of that Jeep once while we parked along the river and watched the lights. How I’d slept against his side when neither one of us felt like driving home. How we’d driven out to Cooper’s Rock on half a tank of gas, clung to the rocks like geckos, pushed and pulled each other up the sun-warmed stones without ever a thought of what would happen if we fell, and how for all that, we were still friends.

“Sure thing,” I said.
When we got into the apartment, Aaron found me an oversized shirt to sleep in and a pair of pajama pants that hung loose enough that even I felt skinny. “You can have the bed,” he said.

I thought about inviting him to share it with me – lord knows we’d done it often enough – but there’s a montage picture of his girlfriend on the wall, smiling at the camera with scruffy bob-cut hair. She looked like a model with the way the camera flash is hitting her face, one of those girls who’s at her best in black and white.

I told him good night, and climbed into his bed that smelled like old spice and something indefinable. Like, I decided, aspiring-rock-musician-with-drinking-problems-and-northern-girlfriends.

The room was very dark, just the red lights of the alarm clock on the wall. I stared at the ceiling, and I willed myself to hear the door open, see his body outlined in the blue light from the hallway. But of course, that didn’t happen.

I was still drying my hair when my brother poked his head into my room. “Hey, Ash,” he said. “The church Christmas program – you still wanna go?”

I looked out the window at the truck, still balanced halfway over the bank. The two-wheel-drive cars. The six inches of snow, unbroken in the driveway. “How are we gonna get there?” I asked.

“We could walk.” Alex suggested. He was already tucking his jeans into the tops of his snow boots.

“The program starts at nine,” I said. “No way are we walking it in twenty minutes.”

“It’s only about two miles,” Alex said. “We can run that no problem.”
“Maybe you can, Army boy,” I said. But I was already looking for a t-shirt to change into.

The two of us started jogging when we hit the driveway. The road felt slick and hard under our feet, and the air whistled in and out of my lungs as I tried to breathe through my scarf, tried to keep my strides long enough to match my taller brother’s steps.

The trees had white stuck to every line, painted on and frosted, and the lights of the church were yellow-gold in the night blue. I suspected that we were really running to this program because Sarah would be there, because my brother only saw Sarah at church. But I didn’t say that.

That night, Alex and I would sit side by side in the red-carpeted Methodist church – him on the end of a pew, me on the piano bench. I would force my swollen fingers through the chords of the familiar hymns, relish the stiffness in the joints.

And, before I got home that night, my father would have taken my old cat out to the old apple tree wrapped in a towel. He would have put him down in the cold that he probably could not feel, set the .45 against the side of his head, and pulled the trigger. I try not to imagine how that must have looked, the fur on the snow, spatters of red, spatters of gray. Dad would bury him in the towel, chipping at the frozen ground with the haddock to lay the body between the roots of the old tree. When I came through the door, his fingertips were cracked and bleeding, and I knew.
All the Wicker Reindeer

Nate’s basement was a graveyard for Christmas decorations. He thought about it off and on all year, the thick black humps of lawn and garbage body bags stacked against his back wall like a mausoleum, the way the wicker reindeer were still visible through the stretched plastic. Thought about the day when, finally, he’d have a wall again instead of the mangled bodies of Christmas decorations.

But it wasn’t any off-and-on thought that brought him down the steps. No, December was here, and his neighbors were already at it – inflating their staypuff Frosties and life-sized snowglobes that blew plastic flecks in a constant imitation of snow while their kids pelted each other with snowballs or stomped their feet and whined about cold hands.

Halfway down the steps, Nate gave up. He sat down and opened his beer. Budweiser, the Holiday Edition – which was the same as any other edition, except for the Clydesdales. Sort of how he felt about Christmas, anyway.

He reached his bare hand out to find the dangley cord of the step light, half expecting to pull the chain and find a family of rats staring back at him, or a big slow black snake in for the winter. He was almost disappointed when the jangling, shifting light just showed the same old concrete floor, the same old boxes, and of course, the mass grave on the far side of the basement, nearest the outside door.

Nate took another long pull from his beer and eyed the lumpy lawn and garden bags that contained what had once been a lighted wicker reindeer sled team. The bags were dull and dusty. They looked more like the body bags he’d seen on the news than Nate was comfortable with.

There wasn’t much heat in the basement. His ass was cold from sitting so long on the steps – the cold burned right up through the seat of his jeans.
“Should’ve thrown you guys away long time ago,” he said to the broken reindeer. “Stead of letting you take up space in here.”

The deer stayed silent in their bags. Nate finished his beer, set it down on the steps. His lip felt numb from staying too long against the cold glass. It reminded him of how he and his sisters used to press their lips to the big picture window when it snowed outside, just to feel the tingle, leave fish-months on the frost crystals.

But there were no real windows in the basement. Just thin bands of light up near the ceiling, dusty and milk-colored that turned even non-winter light to gray, cinderblock walls, coiled Christmas lights, and damaged reindeer. Ugly things even before they were broken, squat and bowlegged like pit bulls. He’d always hated them in other people’s yards, which was probably why his sisters decided he needed his own set one Christmas. They were, as he told his sisters that very Christmas morning, even stupider-looking up close, but he knew better than to leave them in their boxes, knew he’d never hear the end of it.

He didn’t know why it was so hard to get rid of the damn things. Especially now that he finally had a good excuse.

Nate clumped down the stairs. Closer, he could make them out under the age-thinned plastic. The horseshoe bow curves of their legs. For no reason at all, Nate thought about Sarah, about a bony little girl in her pajamas, standing in the upstairs hallway with her hand flat against the wall. The way her bony shoulders looked under the too-big sleep shirt, like something picked-dry and sick, like fawns look when they’re born too close to the first snow.
Amy Lynn left Sarah at his house when she didn’t have anywhere else to put her. When shit came up at work, or when she needed to drive up to the airport in Pittsburgh to pick up some old college friend to spend a weekend with, or when someone died.

“That’s what I like about you, Nate,” Amy Lynn said the last time she dropped the girl off, bundled in a gum-colored coat that bunched every few inches like it was constricted with rubber bands, face hidden behind a pair of steamed-up glasses. Sharp contrast to her mother with the crisp auburn dye job, the dangly earrings, the sharp boots with the three inch heels, the tattoo that sometimes showed over the back of her jeans. “I can always count on you,” she said.

By then Nate knew they were over. He’d seen the shoebox she kept of all the postcards and Christmas cards and bad letters the ex sent her – no need to ask which, only one ex mattered. He’d seen the way she twisted them up like old tissues, read them over and over again. He never got around to asking if that ex was Sarah’s daddy, never felt like they were even close enough to ask that question, especially not with Sarah standing in front of him, fogged up and stiff from too many clothes.

“I’ll be late getting back,” Amy said. “Is it okay if she spends the night?”

Nate crossed his arms, shoved his bare hands under his arm pits. “Won’t be the first time,” he said. And didn’t say what he thought, either. About what people would say if they knew a little girl that wasn’t his stayed the night with him so often.

Sarah wandered away to look at the front of the house. Neither of them stopped her.

Amy leaned herself up, all the way up, on her toes and slipped her arms around his neck, kissed him on the scratchy part of his cheek and said, “Thanks for everything.”
And, like that, Nate felt ridiculous. Standing there in his ratty blue pajamas and workboots, a hunting coat thrown on overtop, patting an awkward hand against the back of a woman who was a good ten years too young for him, anyway.

“You be good now,” she said. She slid herself into her car, pulled the door shut like it was an effort. The tires spun for a minute in the slush, and then she was gone, tiny two wheel drive car spinning and grinding its way back toward the real road.

“Amy Lynn, ain’t nobody worth this kind of shit,” he said, but she was gone already.

He made his way over to where Sarah was standing, head back, in front of the lit part of his house. She touched the upturned face of one of the deer and said, “What’re their names?”

“Never asked them,” Nate said.

Sarah leaned her muffled, hooded head down to the upturned deer’s mouth. The lights looked cheap and tacked on so far before dark. Sarah didn’t seem to notice. She bobbed her head as if listening. “He says his name is Snowy,” she said. “The one lying down is Glowy. And this one,” she gestured to the last reindeer, its clumsy, blunt legs drawn up in what was meant to be a leap, “is Lightning.”

Nate brought her in after that. Let her have the table for her how-to-draw-horses book and her colored pencils while he poured himself a lukewarm cup of coffee. He looked through his kitchen window at the empty spot the car left – always easy to see, in winter, where something had been. You just spot the hole, the place where snow isn’t.

That night, the wind came up the hollow like a train, howling and beating old branches against each other. Nate lay awake in bed, felt the old house creak and move around him. His grandfather built that house right after he left the mines, decided to farm instead of shovel for his living.
Down the hall, he could hear footsteps, Sarah moving like a ghost, three steps forward, three steps back. Starting down the hall, changing her mind.

Nate sat up and opened the door. She was in the hallway, hand on the wall, my little ponies running from her shoulder to her hip. Her eyes were big behind her glasses. She came in, sat on the edge of his bed, and said that the wind was too loud for her to sleep.

“The wind won’t hurt you,” Nate told her, same as his grandpa told him. “It’s just God breathing out.”

“I don’t believe in God,” Sarah said. “Nobody does anymore.”

Nate thought he should have something to say to that. Something important and meaningful about things like those goddamned terrible church Christmas programs he’d had to go to as a child every year. How kids hooted and honked their way through songs on instruments too big for them, tried to sing songs too high, tried to memorize the too-big words for their advent verses. How girls like Sarah stumbled around in pipe cleaner halos and oversized white shirts. Whether or not it really helped.

“Then it’s just a whole lot of air chasing the moon,” he said.

“The moon is on a fixed orbit,” Sarah said. Nate could feel, through the mattress, where she was, feel her shifting ever-so-slightly back and forth.

“Well,” Nate said. “That doesn’t mean you can’t chase it.”

“But can air?”

“That’s the thing about air,” Nate said. “It does whatever it feels like.”

Sarah squinted at him. Drew her very white legs – still, he couldn’t help but notice, with thin hairs over the shinbones – up to her chest and said, “I don’t think air feels anything.”

“That’s because you never met it,” Nate said.
Sarah brushed her hair back with a hand. Her white arms were bumpy with the cold.

“Have you?” she asked.

“Sure have,” Nate said.

“Can I meet it?” Sarah asked. She smiled like her mother.

“Yeah,” Nate said. “First thing in the morning.”

“For real?”

“For real. So the sooner you go to sleep, the sooner you can meet the air.”

“I can’t sleep,” Sarah said again.

“Well then,” Nate said. “You can keep me company while I do.” He reached up and took a pillow – Amy’s pillow, he always thought of it, though she hadn’t stayed at his place in weeks already, and he knew what that meant – and he set it down between them like a wall.

“What’s that for?” Sarah said.

Nate said “Because” and drew the covers up. And Sarah must have decided she might as well lie down, because like that, the two of them were in bed together. It was not beautiful. It reminded Nate of the boy scouts, the last time he’d slept in a tent with another boy. How the other boy’s name was Jerry, a shaggy-headed kid with a limp in one leg and a big grin too white for his face. Word was he was a fag, though Nate didn’t hear that until his last night at the campfire, when red-faced Timmy told it like a ghost story.

That night, the tent was different. It was a small two-man, the bunks nearly touching, lantern light olive-colored through the thin canvass sides. Nate lay very still, still like a corpse, and listened to his tentmate’s even breathing. And the pictures came whether he wanted them or not – how being a fag worked exactly, how you were supposed to touch, how he would touch
Jerry, even though he didn’t want to, how he would do it if he did. Trying to understand the mindset that would devise something so terrible, and then do it.

It was like that with Sarah, that night. Nate lay awake and still, and he thought of all the men in the world he’d seen on the news. The things they did to children. He did not allow himself pictures. He didn’t think about how it felt. Only what the difference was between him and them – what small change in person made someone reach over the pillow, made someone do such a thing. If anyone ever thought about it like he did.

He stopped thinking of it when he heard a sound against the side of the house – soft scratch and thud, the sound a bird makes when it flies into a window. Slow and careful, he crawled out of bed like a spider and pressed his face to the shock of cold glass that was the window.

The wicker reindeer lay against the side of the house – and just like the birds, they lay in circles, their necks twisted in unnatural angles, one or two of their legs bent, severed, spinning in an eerily accurate replica of a compound fracture, fine skeletons sharp and bent.

Nate shuffled his feet into a pair of socks, not for the cold as much as for the quiet, and stumbled down the stairs. He didn’t want Sarah seeing the wrecked bodies under her window, threw a robe on, the sleeves bunched awkwardly over his flannel pajamas as he shoved into his boots and stumbled out into the light.

Later that morning, when Sarah got up, she asked what had happened to the reindeer.

“Must have flown away,” Nate said. And thought of the way he’d picked them up rough, shoved them in the bag with awkward, hurried jerks, like he’d once seen his father handle a cat he’d run over.
Sarah sat at the table with him that morning – drew reindeer in a notepad, their doglike faces lifted up toward the moon. Together, they waited in the kitchen for Amy Lynn to come for her daughter.

The light that came through the barely-there windows was getting thinner and grayer. Nate slit a bag with his pocket knife to take a last look at the upturned muzzle, the dusty lights studded on the splintering wood. And Nate thought of the way his father had yelled when he caught his sisters naming the chickens. The way that a name made a chicken or a bad lawn ornament that much harder to cook up or throw away.

Nate took the cut ends of the plastic bag and slowly tied them back together. He could sill see the fat brontosaurus curve of the reindeer’s neck though a gap in the bag, imagined mice nesting against the separate bones of the deer’s skeleton. Thought of soft mouse-nest fluff poking out through the wicker ribs.

He picked up his empty beer bottle and a few strings of lights that he slung over his shoulder like firemen carry rope. He had a fence to staple-gun, a bush out front to wrap around in cheap lights, and an empty spot in the front yard that all needed his attention. The deer could wait.