

FEEL BETTER SOON: COLLECTED SHORT STORIES

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
CALEB OLSEN

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Caleb Olsen, Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2021

ABSTRACT

The stories in this collection were written from 2018-2021. They are fictional works designed to explore what happens when the mundane meets the extraordinary. Though the characters and their situations are works of the imagination, I attempted to create them as realistically as possible. By writing this way, these stories show the human behavior behind the choices we make and the limitations of our control.

This theory is evident in “Feel Better Soon,” in which the narrator is a child with a failing body. No adult present takes her problem seriously, and her powerlessness becomes evident. Similarly, “The Neighbor” portrays a man who is harassed by a woman in the apartment next door. The harassments escalate, his control wanes, and he, too, is confronted with his lack of control. Finally, “Being” presents the clearest picture of helplessness, in which a man considers his life as he falls from a balcony at a baseball game.

These themes and others permeate this collection and are intended to be explored in novel and engaging ways. Through these stories, I found that the control we have over any situation often ends at our own fingertips, and sometimes earlier.

The choices made when a typically uneventful life becomes challenged by an extraordinary situation is what makes a story worth telling.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Collected Short Stories,” presented by Caleb Olsen, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Christie Hodgen, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of English

Michael Pritchett, M.F.A.
Department of English

Laurie Ellinghausen, Ph.D.
Department of English

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This book is dedicated to my family.

Feel Better Soon

When I woke up in the morning my right arm wasn't working.

I could still feel acute pains—when I pinched my skin or poked it with a pencil, sharp flashes poured up and down my arm—but they were followed by a dull, vibrating numbness that radiated to my wrist and shoulder. Lifting or moving the arm was impossible.

The arm dangled lifelessly from my body as I took a shower and washed my body with a bar of soap in my left hand. When the soap slipped onto the bathtub floor, I reached down to pick it up and my limp right hand bounced against the lip of the tub. It made a thud but I didn't feel any pain, like when your foot is asleep and you stub your toe.

After I was ready for school, I went down to the kitchen to eat breakfast, but getting dressed left-handed had been easier than eating. My mom sat across from me at the island in the center of our kitchen texting on her phone and glancing at me as she watched me spoon my Frosted Shredded Wheat around the bowl. Eating them was easy when there were a lot, but when there were just a few left I couldn't get them in the spoon and I kept pushing the bowl away from me. I picked up my right arm with my left hand and laid it on the table to use as a barrier so the bowl had something to press against, and it helped and I was able to get the rest of the cereal on the spoon.

“Why don’t you want to go to school, Jennifer?” she said. It was barely a question. She leaned forward on her elbows, and her brown, earthy hair fell forward and over the grey shoulders of her suit jacket. She looked over her phone at me and then at my arm with the same face she made that time when she had put her hand down the sink to clean out our garbage disposal. “It’s slimy!” she said and laughed and wrinkled her nose and squinted her eyes and it made me laugh, too. But this time I got a heavy feeling in my chest and I looked down at my bowl.

“I do want to go to school,” I said with my mouth full. I did. I liked school.

My mom put her phone face-down on the counter. “You have a test that you don’t want to take, is that it?”

I swallowed my cereal. “I don’t have a test.”

“Well then what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “My arm won’t move.”

“Swear you’re not lying to me?”

“I swear I’m not making it up. It won’t move but I didn’t do anything to make it be that way.” I had a heavy feeling in my chest and I took a deep breath to push it away. I didn’t think I should go to school, I thought maybe I should see a doctor instead, but I was glad my mom didn’t say I couldn’t go to school because I wanted to. The reason for that, to be totally honest, is that I kind of had a mega-crush on this boy named Bobby, and today, a Thursday, I had two classes with him. One was my first class of the day and the other was right after lunch, and I really wanted to see him even though he was sixteen and I was fifteen and I knew he would probably never want to be a boyfriend to a freshman anyway.

My mom looked up at the ceiling and sighed before picking up her phone and going back upstairs to her room. “Hurry up, the bus will be here any minute,” she shouted as she walked away.

I didn’t know too much about what my mom did aside from that she had been to law school and she had to dress up for work every day. She always had a lot of meetings to go to and sometimes she didn’t come home until late at night, but I was okay with that because sometimes when she was home early she said I should be cleaning or cooking dinner, and if I wanted to tell her something that happened to me at school it was hard because she texted people on her phone a lot and when they called she went to her room to talk to them and shut her door.

When there was only milk left in my bowl I picked it up and slurped it but some of the milk had gotten on the outside of the bowl and it slipped from my hand and I dropped the whole thing into my lap. I couldn’t change my clothes in time to catch the bus, so my mom had to drop me off at school on her way to work.

“You can call me after lunchtime if it’s not better by then,” she said as I got out of the car, “but don’t call me before then because I’m in meetings all morning.” It seemed like the kind of thing that probably wasn’t going to get better but I wasn’t sure so I said okay and planned on calling her during lunch.

At school I told Margaret, my fourth best friend, that I couldn’t move my right arm, even though I was pretty embarrassed about it and didn’t really want to tell anybody, but I told her anyway because I knew she wouldn’t tell anyone. She was really good at keeping secrets. My other three best friends are Marla, because we live right next door to each other, Jodie, who moved out of town and I don’t see her that much anymore,

and Cassandra. I wanted to tell them about my arm too but I knew they would tell each other because we tell each other everything and before long someone would probably overhear them and then I would have to explain it to everyone, even people who aren't my friends.

I came up with a way to camouflage the fact that I couldn't move my arm. What I did was sling my purse with rhinestones that I got for my birthday over my left shoulder and crossed the strap across my chest, laying my limp right hand on top of the purse so it looked like I was holding it with my hand. My purse was small but big enough to have pieces of paper and pens in it, and one of the things I liked to keep in there was a little notebook that I used to take notes and use as a diary sometimes. I liked the notebook because it didn't have lines and I felt like it was okay to draw on it if I wanted.

I went to the bathroom a couple times to see if it looked natural and it did as long as my hand stayed where I put it. In order to do that I kind of had to lean to the left so my arm didn't put too much weight on the purse, and that worked and my hand didn't move.

As the morning went on, it became easier to hold onto the purse because my fingers started to get stiff and curl in, and they reminded me of some shrimps I had when I went with my mom to her boss's dinner one time. He had a lot of his workers come out to Red Lobster and said, "Order anything on the menu." I got crab legs but we had shrimp as the appetizer. Later, on the ride home I think my mom had been embarrassed because I got crab legs and they were expensive. She said, "I can't believe you got crab legs," but I said her boss said to get anything on the menu so that's what I did and I didn't think I did anything wrong there either even though she kind of made me feel like I did.

After an hour or two I went into the bathroom because I wanted to see if I could straighten my fingers out without anybody seeing. I tried using my left hand to uncurl them but they were rigid, like hooks made out of wood. I put my fingertips down on the edge of the sink and pushed the backs of them down to the counter with my other hand, but I felt a pulling feeling in my forearm and it felt like something might break, like a pencil right before it snaps or a rubber band when you pull it really tight, so I stopped doing that.

The hardest time to hide the arm problem was when I was in class at my desk because either my arm hung down the side of my chair like a long sausage you get from a butcher or it laid on my desk completely still. Laying it on my desk was the best thing to do because it looked the most normal, but I had to angle it so it was in a natural position with a little bend at the elbow. The only way to get it on my desk and look normal, without using my left hand to pick it up and put it there—which people would see and think was weird—was to lean forward as I sat down and position my arm over my desk, so when I got into my seat, my hand would touch the desk first and then the rest of my arm would come down gently and lay flat.

In my first class I hadn't really thought about that yet so when I sat at my desk my arm was dangling down the side and I felt the blood rushing to my fingertips and its dead weight pulling on my shoulder and it started to ache. I was kind of embarrassed by this since I was already late coming in from missing the bus and my seat was in the middle of the third row so I knew people were able to see. When Mrs. Fincham, who was my teacher by the way, was teaching and most of the other students were taking notes, I inched my left hand over to my right arm under my desk and grabbed the sleeve of my

sweater and leaned to the left a little bit and pulled my hand into my lap. That worked out pretty good and I don't think anyone noticed.

Writing with my left hand was hard at first, especially in the beginning of the day when I was still trying to figure out how to do it in a way that I could read what I wrote. And to make it even harder, my right hand was just sitting in my lap and I couldn't bring it to the top of my desk so I didn't have anything to keep my paper still when I was writing. I kept my left hand on the paper to try to make it stay put, but it kept rotating like a spirograph and every line I wrote had an arc like a rainbow and I could hardly read my own handwriting.

Bobby sat on the left side of me in that class. They were assigned seats so I don't know if he liked sitting by me or not but he didn't seem to mind too much. And as I already said I liked Bobby but he didn't know that. He looked at me for a couple seconds when I was writing and I don't know if he knew that I could see him looking at me but I could see him out of the corner of my eye.

"I didn't know you were left-handed," he whispered as Mrs. Fincham was turned around and writing something on the chalkboard.

"I'm not actually left-handed," I said, "I'm just seeing if I can get better at it." I felt bad lying to Bobby since I liked him so much but it felt like it wasn't the right time to tell him and that maybe I could tell him later if he really wanted to know.

He said, "I'm going to try it, too," and he did and he laughed and said it was hard but he kept doing it anyway. Then he got one of his friends to do it too and before long everyone in the class was writing with their other hand. "It was Jen's idea," Bobby said, and everyone thought it was a pretty good idea. When class was over Mrs. Fincham

looked at the quizzes we had all taken and said, “I can’t read anybody’s handwriting,” and the whole class laughed. I made sure I was the last person to leave so there was no chance that anyone would notice that anything was wrong with my arm.

By the time my second class started, at 8:55 a.m., it wasn’t any better. This class was geography and I sat in the back-right corner next to the wall which was the perfect spot for me that day on account of the arm.

This class was always boring and since I sat in the back, Mr. Schauer (the teacher) couldn’t see me too well and I got away with not paying attention. I wasn’t really friends with anybody in this class because they were all older than I was, so I pulled up the sleeve of my sweater and looked at my arm and then I started coloring on it with my pen and before too long I made a henna tattoo, the kind that you can get at the state fair. I was impressed with myself because it actually looked pretty good especially for doing it left-handed.

Then something really embarrassing happened. After class was over I kind of forgot about how I couldn’t move my arm and didn’t wait for everyone to leave before me. I folded my papers and scrunched them into my purse and as I stepped out into the aisle I put my weight on my left foot but that whole leg felt like Jell-O and couldn’t hold me up so I fell down in front of the rest of the class. Before I fell down I reached for another desk to hold onto but I guess I did it too hard because it toppled over and fell on top of me. Mr. Schauer saw it happen and asked if I was okay and I said, “Yes, thank you,” from the floor and laughed even though my face felt hot and itchy and I got a queasy feeling in my stomach like I was going to throw up from being so embarrassed.

A senior girl named Megan put her hand out to help me up, so I used my good hand to push myself up enough to put my right leg under my body and then grabbed her hand. As I stood up with the leg that was working, the other one just kind of slid into place. I think the other students could kind of tell that my other arm wasn't working too well on account of the fact that as I was getting up it swung around like a loaf of bread in a plastic bag. My purse strap had also fallen off my shoulder but luckily since my fingers were curled up and stiff as boards now the purse actually stayed in my hand. I put the strap back over my left shoulder and it looked pretty good.

Megan looked at my bad arm and then at me and didn't say anything but I knew she could tell something was wrong because the face she made at me was confused and sad at the same time. My eyes were watering a little bit but I said "Thanks," and she turned around and picked up the desk that had fallen. As she walked up the aisle I walked behind her but since I couldn't put any weight on my left leg I had to lean on each desk as I walked by which was hard because they were wobbly.

When I got to the front row of desks and there was nothing else to lean on, I didn't know what to do so I just stood there and tried to think of something but I couldn't think of any good ideas so I looked at Mr. Schauer and he looked at me kindly and smiled and said, "Are you going to make it?" and I said, "No, I think I hurt my ankle." I knew I shouldn't lie to a teacher but I didn't know what was happening and trying to explain it seemed like it would be too embarrassing, plus he would probably tell everyone.

I wondered why all this was happening to me because I don't think I've done anything wrong to deserve it. I knew my friend Mattie who you don't know about yet because I didn't usually see her until lunch when we ate together, but she cheated on her

boyfriend Adam twice and nothing like this happened to her. Another boy in my class whose name is Pat but everyone calls him “P,” he sat across from me in math one time when we were taking a test and looked at my answers and even though I saw him looking at them I didn’t try to hide them. So he cheated but I guess on the other hand so did I because I didn’t do anything about it. If he looks at my paper next time we have a test I’ll put my bad arm over the answers so he can’t see them.

Anyway, Mr. Schauer helped me sit in the desk closest to where I was and said don’t worry because next period was his open hour meaning he didn’t have a class coming in and that he would be right back. I sat there and waited until he came back and it took a couple of minutes but I was glad to be in the room by myself. It must be hard to be an actor, I thought, because you have to pretend all day. I had only been doing it for a couple hours and I was already exhausted.

When Mr. Schauer came back he had a wooden crutch. He said to go to the nurse’s office to have the nurse take a look at it and I said I was already planning on doing that. He laughed and said okay and that he needed to get to work grading papers.

As I began to crutch down the hallway I found that the rubber thing on the bottom of the crutch that makes it stick to the floor was missing and the wooden bottom kept sliding on the hallway tiles. So in order to keep myself from slipping and falling I had to go really slowly and make sure my balance was in the perfect spot on the crutch. It took a very long time to get to the nurse’s office. I stayed close to the wall so I wouldn’t knock anyone over if they walked by, but most of the students were already in their classes so the hallways were empty. I was happy about that because it was hard to keep my bad arm from swinging around even with the purse strap holding my hand in place. I tried to have

a little bit of fun and see how far I could put the crutch out and still hop to make it. It wasn't very far due to the lack of rubber but on one big step I swung my body and my hand came up and almost hit me in the face, and I stuck to regular sized steps after that.

In order to get into the nurse's office, you have to go into the main office where the secretary is and then go behind her desk and down a hallway to the right. If you go down the hallway to the left you go to the principal's office. Instead of doing all that I just decided to go into the office and ask the secretary if I could call my mom even though she had said to wait until noon, but I knew it wasn't going to get any better and in fact it only seemed to be getting worse. I was starting to get scared that I would never go back to normal and I wanted to tell her so she could take me to the hospital if she thought that was a good idea.

I asked the secretary who is usually nice (except if she sees you in the hall when you're supposed to be in class) if I could call my mom and she said why and I said because I think I might need to go to the doctor. My forehead felt hot and I was kind of exhausted from crutching all the way to the office and it made my clothes feel uncomfortable and the secretary was making me feel embarrassed by asking about it and all these things put together made me feel like I was going to cry. My chin shook a bit and my voice cracked when I said the word 'doctor' and I think that made her stop asking me questions and she gave me the phone.

She took it off the hook and pressed the number nine and set the phone on the counter so I could dial the rest.

"Hello, this is Jessica," answered my mom. "Hi, Mom," I said, and I made eye contact with the secretary who was looking at me for some reason. I turned around so she

wouldn't have such an easy time hearing what I was saying into the phone. "I think I might need to go to the doctor."

My mom sighed and said, "Are you sure?" and I said, "Yes, I can't feel my leg now and I fell down in front of the entire class and now I'm using a crutch with my one good arm and the fingers on my right hand look like shrimp."

Then she said she was in meetings all morning and that's why she asked me to wait to call her until noon. I said sorry but I think this might be serious and what should I do? She asked if I had seen the nurse yet and I said no. So she said I should see the nurse and I said okay and she said okay bye and I said bye.

I hung up the phone and asked the secretary if I could see the nurse and she said the nurse was with someone else but I could sit on one of the chairs behind me and wait so that's what I did. At this point I didn't try to hide my arm too much because no students were in there and the nurse was going to see it anyway, but I did pick it up and put it in my lap mostly because my shoulder was getting sore and it would get even more sore if it just dangled there.

I rested the back of my head on the cold glass window behind me separating the office from the hallway. I closed my eyes and tried to forget about everything for a bit and that felt really nice. I sat there for a good five minutes and it was the nicest five minutes of the day up to that point because from the very moment I woke up my day had only gotten worse.

When I woke up the nurse was coming out and I was happy to see her. She was walking with a boy I didn't recognize. He had messy brown hair and a little bit of acne and freckles on his face and his backpack slung over one shoulder. His cheeks were red

and it looked like he had been crying. The nurse quietly said something to him that sounded encouraging and walked him out, then smiled at me with a nice row of white teeth and kind eyes and I always liked to see her because she felt like a friend even though I didn't know her very well.

“Come on back, sweetie,” she said and I stuffed my purse into the claw that used to be my right hand. Even though I had to wiggle the purse to get it in there because it had become a tight fit, I got it to stay, and I put the strap around my head and onto my left shoulder and stood up on my right leg and put the crutch under my left armpit and wrapped the fingers of my left hand around the hand grip.

“What's going on today?” she asked and looked down at my legs. She put her hand on my back and walked with me down the hall to the right. She was always so nice and her voice made me feel like she was actually concerned and not just pretending and it made me feel good but at the same time it made me feel bad because it made me want to cry and I just had to cry because I couldn't hold it in any longer.

“I don't know what's happening,” I said and I felt hot tears run down each side of my face. “When I woke up today I couldn't move my right arm and it hasn't gotten any better and has actually gotten worse because now I can't move my left leg either.”

She rubbed and patted my shoulder in a comforting way and said, “Oh you poor thing, it's going to be okay.” She had on a very old-fashioned nursing outfit with a white shirt and hat with curls of sandy brown hair curling out from underneath. “We'll get this all straightened out.”

She did some tests like poking my arm with a needle and hitting my knees with that rubber-hammer thing. After she listened to my chest with a stethoscope I got the courage to ask her if she was able to tell what was going on.

“I don’t know,” she said, “but don’t worry about it at all. Just lay here and relax while I go make a phone call and I’ll be back as soon as I can.” As she left she switched off the lights and said I could lay down and that was nice because I was tired even though it wasn’t even lunchtime yet.

So I laid down on the navy rubbery cot and put my head on the pillow wrapped in white, crinkly tissue paper and just kind of stared at the ceiling. The only light was what streamed through the open doorway. Usually I like the door closed but in this case I liked having it open because I didn’t want anyone to forget I was in there.

Sometimes when you are sick to your stomach it helps to lay down and look at the ceiling and concentrate on something like counting the tiles or looking right into the metal part of the light bulb if it’s on (called a filament), and that distracts you so you stop thinking about how bad your stomach hurts. I learned that from my dad before he left and it was one of those tricks that I remembered without even trying. I realized that sometimes it works for other things too, like when you need to distract yourself, so I did it there in the nurse’s room. The light in the room was off but I could see the ceiling just fine from the light in the hallway so I tried counting all the tiles one by one, but got lost in the numbers and had to start again, and even though it didn’t help my arm or leg it took away the feeling of needing to cry. If you do this you should know that getting lost in the numbers and starting over is part of the fun. If I actually wanted to find out the answer to how many ceiling tiles there were, I would have counted sideways and longways and

multiplied them together, but you don't waste as much time that way so I don't think that is the best way to do it. And anyway, the point isn't to find the answer, it's to stop worrying about whatever is hurting you.

* * *

I woke up a little bit later and didn't know how much time had passed but I felt that heavy feeling in your chest that you sometimes get when you have a really good sleep and are well-rested, even though I knew I couldn't have been asleep for very long.

I laid there for a second as I do sometimes when I wake up from a nap or first thing in the morning and then I decided to get up and find the nurse to see if she found out anything. I got up, leaning forward and swinging my legs off the cot so my feet were on the floor, and I remembered I needed my crutch. The nurse had leaned it against the wall by the door and the only way I could get it was to lay back down and reached over my head with my left arm and grab it, so that's what I did.

I was ready to stand up so I put my weight on my good leg but now it seemed to be just like the other one and didn't have any strength in it anymore either. I tried stomping it on the ground because I thought maybe it was just asleep but I couldn't even lift it up to do that and that's when I realized my right leg had stopped working just like my other leg and arm. I still thought it was a good idea to find the nurse but I wondered to myself, "How am I going to do that?" and I decided the only thing I could do was crawl on the ground like someone in the army.

This was difficult because I could only use my left arm to pull myself forward and wiggle from hip to hip. Luckily the hallway was carpeted and I think that made it easier than if it had been tiled because the tile would have made the floor slippery. I'm sure it

looked odd for me to be crawling with both legs and one arm dragging behind me but I couldn't think of another way to find the nurse. I didn't want to yell her name because I hate it when people yell at me; it makes me feel like I did something wrong even when I didn't.

I army-crawled out of the nurse's room and into the hallway and heard voices from farther down the hall toward the copier room, so I took a right turn to go in that direction. When I got to the copier room the door was mostly shut but not completely so I pushed it open and saw the nurse and Mr. Albright (the principal) in there hugging. The nurse's back was facing me but Mr. Albright could see the door open with me at the bottom of it and he must have gotten scared because he did a little scream and pushed the nurse away from him. Then when she saw me she jumped a little too and put her hand over her mouth. Their hair was messy and both of their lips were red which looked especially funny on Mr. Albright and he wiped his mouth with his shirt sleeve.

My voice still had sleep in it, as my mom sometimes said, so when I said to the nurse, "I can't move my other leg," it kind of sounded like a frog when it croaks. The nurse looked at Mr. Albright and rushed over to help me try and stand up. Then Mr. Albright came to help too and they picked me up by my armpits which usually is my most ticklish spot. It did tickle a little but not as much as usual, especially under my right arm, but it still made me squirm a bit and I laughed. When they got me up to my knees they carefully let me go but I started to fall backward so they held on again and Mr. Albright said, "I'll get a wheelchair," and left. Then the nurse leaned me back against the wall and put my legs out in front of me.

We sat there for a couple minutes and didn't say much until Mr. Albright returned with a wheelchair. He locked the wheels in place so they wouldn't roll. He and the nurse picked me up by my armpits which made me laugh again and they set me in the seat and unlocked the wheels.

"Everything is going to be alright," the nurse said as she wheeled me toward the door and back into the hallway.

"I think I might need to go to the doctor," I said, "especially now since my other leg stopped working when I fell asleep."

"It's almost noon," Mr. Albright said, "why don't you eat and see how you feel after getting some food in your stomach?" I didn't know how that would help because I ate breakfast and that didn't do anything but I said okay and Mr. Albright said okay and went into his office and the nurse followed him there.

The wheelchair was hard to use with only one working arm. It had pedals for my feet to rest on but when I used them and pushed with my one good arm I went in circles. That's when I had this idea to move the right pedal out of the way and drag my foot in order to keep me going straight. It worked pretty well except it just meant that I had to push harder with my arm to make up for the foot slowing me down and it made me sweaty from working so hard, but it was worth it because I really wanted to go to my class right after lunch (which was chemistry) because it's the only other class that Bobby is in and with my legs and arm not working who knows the next time I would see him again.

There were still forty minutes until chemistry started because at my school lunch goes from 11:55 a.m. to 12:25 p.m. and it was already 11:45. I was kind of hungry but I

didn't know how I was going to wait in the lunch line and carry a tray of food and push my wheelchair all with just one hand, so I decided to wait to eat until later. I decided that after chemistry I would call my mom again and hopefully she would let me go home or to the doctor.

I don't sit next to Bobby in chemistry like I do in English. In chemistry, he sits in the row one up from the back and all the way to the right, and I sit in the next row up but all the way to the left. But I can still see him and I like to look at him sometimes instead of paying attention to Mr. Rieschick (the chemistry teacher), but it still looks like I pay attention because I doodle on my paper and it looks like I'm taking notes.

To waste the next forty minutes I wheeled up the hallway about twenty feet and went through a pair of blue double doors on the right side of the hall. They were propped open but people normally don't go through them because it leads to the stage, so people only use them if they are in the drama class or to practice acting. I know this because last year I was in a play called *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, and I was Lucy and Bobby played Schroeder and it was my role to have a crush on him and that's actually how I started to like Bobby in the first place. He had to play a miniature piano and I had to be mean to him because sometimes you do that to people you like and it was really funny because even though I was mean he knew it was just my character who was being mean and not actually me. He thought it was funny and he laughed a few times even when we were performing the play and that made me laugh, too.

Since all the lights were off I knew no one was using the stage, so I sat back there in the dark near a trash can so no one could see me and wrote about my day and everything that had been happening to me in my notebook.

I didn't think I would see anyone while most of the students were eating lunch but a boy and a girl holding hands walked by. The boy needed to throw an apple away and he came to the trash can and when he saw me sitting there he jumped and said, "Oh my god."

"I'm sorry," I said, and they laughed but didn't say anything else and kept walking.

Finally it was 12:15 p.m. and I knew the first bell would ring soon so I began wheeling myself to the chemistry room while the halls were still empty. I was happy they were empty because since I was in a clunky wheelchair and I had to drag my foot to stay in a straight line I needed a lot of space and I didn't want to accidentally run over anybody's foot.

When I got to the classroom Mr. Rieschick was finishing his lunch and when he saw me come through the door he asked how I was doing and I said good, even though as you know my body wasn't really doing good but it was nice to see him anyway.

He looked at me over his glasses and asked, "Do you need help getting to your desk?" I said "No, but maybe you could move my desk out of the way so I can sit in my spot without the desk there." He said "Of course." Then he asked, "Do you have anything to write on?" I said "Yes, I have a notebook," and I took it out of my purse and showed it to him and he said "Great."

I sat there as the only student for a bit but not for too long because after the first bell rang other students trickled in and after the second bell (the final one) all the students were there except Bobby. Mr. Rieschick didn't wait for Bobby and started taking attendance and I was getting worried that Bobby wasn't coming at all but then right as

Mr. Rieschick was finished calling roll, Bobby came in and said, "Sorry I'm late, my locker jammed." Someone said "Suuuuuure," dragging out the vowels just like that and we all laughed. As Bobby walked to his seat he looked at me and made a confused face with his lips out and his eyebrows pinched in the middle and he looked kind of sad and concerned and he's so sweet for that and I smiled at him and he smiled back before sitting down in his seat.

Mr. Rieschick started teaching class and I paid some attention but looked at Bobby from time to time and twice I saw him looking at me, too. The first time I looked away because I didn't want him to see me looking at him but the second time we made eye contact he looked sad at me and it reminded me that I was in a wheelchair which I had forgotten about and it made me sad, too. Then he looked down at his notes and I looked away and didn't look back.

A little bit later I had a really good moment: Mr. Rieschick asked a question that I knew the answer to. He asked, "What is an ingredient in a fire extinguisher that is also used in baking?" And even though I knew the answer I didn't want to say it out loud for some reason, but he kept waiting and no one was answering and he said, "Anyone?" I had just read about it in the textbook so it was new and fresh in my head and finally I raised my hand and Mr. Rieschick said "Jen?" and I said "Sodium bicarbonate," and he said "Which is also known as?" and I said "Baking soda," and I was beaming and Mr. Rieschick said "That's right." I looked at Bobby again without even meaning to and I noticed that he was looking at me in a horrified way, with his eyes big and his mouth open, and it made me uncomfortable and my face felt hot again and my clothes felt itchy and I looked down into my lap and I saw that a whole lot of my hair was just sitting in a

pile there. There were some on my shoulders and on the floor around me too, and it was only by me so I knew it must have come from my head. I felt my head with my good hand and sure enough I could feel parts of my scalp. This was really the last straw for me because I couldn't hide the top of my head because even if I had a hat I am not allowed to wear hats in school and I was so embarrassed that my eyes started to tear up and I got the kind of runny nose you get when you cry even though I had barely started to cry at all yet.

I started to wheel myself out and when Mr. Rieschick saw me doing that he said, "Are you okay?" and I said, "I'm just going to go to the bathroom," but when my tongue touched my teeth when I said 'bathroom' one of my front teeth flew at least three or four feet ahead of me and skidded across the floor like when you skip a rock across a pond. Some people laughed and someone in the front row gasped and put their hands over their mouth. I covered my mouth but I also needed that hand to wheel myself out of the classroom so I just closed my mouth with my lips covering my teeth and used my hand to push the wheel ahead with my foot dragging to keep me straight and I hit someone else's desk as I was rolling out and I said "Sorry," and kind of whistled on the 's' sound and she scooted her desk out of the way to let me pass by.

I was having so much trouble getting out of there that Mr. Rieschick rushed over to help me. I started to say "It's okay," but he cut me off and said "I've got it." I was glad he had it because he could push me a lot faster than I could roll myself so I just held on to my purse and my notebook in my lap while he pushed me.

We went down to the main office where I was before lunch and he talked with the secretary about what had happened in his classroom but I wasn't listening too much because one of my molars was coming loose and I was playing with it with my tongue.

After they finished talking Mr. Rieschick said, "Everything is going to be alright" and he gave me a hug. "Your mom is sending someone to pick you up. I'll wait with you outside." I wanted to hug him back because he was one of my favorite teachers and I loved chemistry but I couldn't move my left arm now either so I just smiled and said thanks and the gap where my tooth was made another whistle on the 's'.

When we got outside we waited for about twenty minutes and Mr. Rieschick sat on a bench while I stayed in the wheelchair. He talked to me and was very nice but he didn't want me to say anything because he was afraid another tooth would fall out and I would choke on it. So I didn't say much but I went "Mhm" a lot and nodded my head if I meant yes and shook my head if I meant no.

After a while a van pulled up that looked like it was for me but I wasn't quite sure. It was a white van that needed to be washed, and someone had actually used their finger to write "wash me" in the dust. I smiled when I saw that because I always thought that was funny when people did it and had always wanted to do it myself but I was too afraid to touch someone else's car. A man came out of the driver's seat and walked around to the back doors of the van and opened them. He was smoking a cigarette and looked like how I imagined every plumber or mechanic looked, dirty and kind of chubby, except this man had a cigarette, and I didn't imagine plumbers with cigarettes because you can't smoke in other people's homes unless they say it's okay. Above the part that

said “wash me,” the van had a big yellow and orange sign that said “Withering Oaks” in cursive.

The man walked to us and said, “You Jennifer?” He needed to shave and had a scar on his lip.

“Mhm,” I said and nodded my head. I was a little worried to get in the van and thought of lying about being someone else, but I didn’t want to lie anymore because I had already lied twice today and I knew Mr. Rieschick would know the truth so it wouldn’t do any good anyway. That’s when I turned around to see what Mr. Rieschick might be thinking but to my surprise he wasn’t there at all, and one of the front doors to the high school was closing shut.

“Okay,” the man said and blew out a cloud of smoke. “Let’s get you in the van.” He began to push me toward the opened doors in the back.

“Okay,” I said, and a tooth fell out just like Mr. Rieschick thought it would, and landed in my lap. I didn’t pick it up, I just let it stay there and maybe it would fall off somewhere else if it wanted.

The Anatomy of a Live Soap Opera

Prologue

Tim (played by mute actor Daniel Loveguard, who found critical success ushering a new wave of modern silent films with his portrayal of Charlie Chaplin in the biographical on-Broadway production of *The Great Dictator: Chaplin's Hollywood*) was quiet, as usual.

The only noise from Tim's sterile hospital room were the rhythmic beeps from the machine keeping him alive and a chorus of summery sounds fluttering through the curtains hanging above the open window. Birds chirped, leaves rustled in a gentle breeze, and shrieks of laughter from children playing below made their way to Tim's room on the second floor. Branches from a nearby tree reached toward the window. (Zoom out.)

Tim lay in his bed alone and expressionless, the way he'd been for the past three-hundred and sixty-six days. His two plastic bags, one for urine and one for feces, were empty and placed somewhere out of sight, and his freshly shaved face had a healthy glow. His blue eyes were covered by resting eyelids and his hair had been trimmed and neatly parted and combed to one side. The white sheets on which he lay were clean and spotless and scented the room with bleach. The floor tiles shone and reflected daylight from outside as if they had just been waxed, so glossy and reflective they looked wet.

Live flowers in a purple glass vase sat on a small wooden corner table. They had been arranged (by the highly sought-after set director Tony Havensford, famed by his work on the blockbuster 1992 Western, *One Thorny Thursday in Cowtown, America*) to face the room with a magnificent yellow and brown sunflower shooting out of the middle surrounded by dahlias and tansies. Their scent could be lightly detected and differentiated from the smell of the sheets. (Camera pans left.)

Photographs were sprinkled around the room. On top of a full-sized mahogany chest of drawers opposite Tim's bed was a black-framed picture of Tim's mother Leslie, sitting at an outdoor picnic table beside a ten-year-old Tim and a twelve-year-old Andrew, Tim's brother. Next to that was a picture of Tim with his fiancé Corky, both in swimming suits posing beside a pool. Near that was a photograph of a black-and-white dog who had since passed away, lying on a rug beside an orange-and-white cat who still lived.

The room itself rested at a corner end of the hospital building which from an aerial view had been built as a hollow square with a courtyard in the middle. Tim's room was on the second of four floors, where nurses and doctors occasionally passed en route to other duties. Hospital sounds (programmed by esteemed sound engineer Cathy Bursowitz, who quickly shot to fame after her college-project-turned-indie-classic *Anonymous Robot Dwelling* won the Puget Sound Film Festival's first place award in Electronic & Ambient Excellence) entered from the open hall door. Beeps from other rooms with patients similar to Tim, murmurs from distant conversations, and the hum of fluorescent bulbs merged together to form an ambient drone. Altogether it was a quiet and calm section of the hospital.

A male cardinal, scarlet red with a black face and pointed crown, flew to the windowsill and landed, hopping down the black metal frame. It looked at Tim and called a song as it hopped toward the other side of the window. Its feet clenched the metal as it cocked its head from side to side, looking at Tim, before it flew away as Leslie entered the room.

Leslie Carlisle (played by the always in-demand English actress Charlotte Davenport for a salary (negotiated by the *Actors Guild of Great Britain*) of \$250,000) walked inside and saw Tim. She put her hand to her mouth and stifled a tear before continuing. This was different from when she had first begun visiting her son in the hospital—back then, she couldn't help but cry each visit. Now, over time, she had adapted to Tim's situation. Hers, as well.

She set the book she was carrying (*Donuts and Death: Dissolving Sugar from Your Diet*, by Dr. Adam Sheffield) on top of the chest of drawers and dropped her purse on the floor beside a chair. She looked at her son. She smiled and light creases appeared at the edges of her eyes before leaving soft white lines in their place. She glanced at the electrical outlet and followed the connected cords that were plugged into each socket: one trail led along the wall behind Tim's bed to a reading lamp on the bedside table next to the flowers, the other led from the outlet to the base of the machine to which Tim was connected. The one that beeped. Leslie put her hand behind the machine and pushed a button. The beeping stopped, but the machine worked on.

She walked over to the window where the cardinal had been and pulled it closed, turning the latch behind her as she walked to her son's side and ran her fingers through his hair.

“You’re getting better,” Leslie said to the nurse, Tom, as he walked in carrying a plate with food. “I think this is the best haircut he’s ever gotten.”

“I owe it to you for letting me practice on him the past few months,” Tom (played by Canadian improvisational comedian Fred Stoddart in his first on-screen acting role, which critics would later complement as “adequate”) said. “Is anyone else coming?”

“Andrew should be here any minute. And I’m sure Corky will want to be here for it, too.”

“Okay. Dr. Kleinsmith will be ready at three o’clock.”

“What time is it now?” Leslie asked. “I didn’t bring my watch.”

“Two-fifteen. I don’t want to rush you, but he does have an appointment at three-thirty that he must prepare for. Just so you know.”

“Thank you, Tom,” Leslie said. “I’m going to miss seeing you.” Her eyes began to fill. Tom walked to her and embraced her in a strong hug.

“I’m going to miss you, too,” said Tom. “And your family. I feel like I’ve gotten to know you all so well over the past year.”

“I’m sure we’ll see each other again. I really hope we do.”

“I hope we do, too.”

“Hey there,” called a voice from the door. It was Dr. Kleinsmith (played by the second choice of highly respected casting director Holly Oakley (known for her award-winning cast selections on the European educational blockbusters *Black Death’s French Kiss* and *Make a Reich at the Next Light*) Karl Vonderschmidt, after first choice Frankfurt Kinderguard abruptly quit acting to pursue a career in musical philosophy). “Is everyone doing alright today?”

“Hey, Doctor,” Leslie said. She walked toward him and they greeted each other with a hug.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” Tom said and left.

“How did the funeral arrangements go?” asked Dr. Kleinsmith. “Did you get all the information you needed from us?”

“They’re going to take care of everything,” Leslie said. “Thank you so much for being here for us throughout the whole ordeal, Doctor. You’ve made things so much easier.” She took her time phrasing what she wanted to say next. “We’ve talked about it as a family and we’re ready to let him go, just like he wanted.” Leslie paused, but her thoughts moved forward. “You didn’t know Tim before this, but he was always concerned with his own mortality.” She pulled out a creased piece of paper with faint rips scattered around the edges. “When he made this will he was only fourteen years old. I can hardly believe it’s a legal document,” she laughed. She began to read from the paper. “*I ask that no one keep me alive when there are others who need parts of me to continue their own lives. Should anything happen to me, causing me to live in a vegetative state, I ask that you keep my body for one year and one year only; no more, no less.*” She covered her face with her arm and looked away, taking a deep breath. “He thought something might happen when he was older—we never knew it would happen so young.”

Dr. Kleinsmith smiled therapeutically and nodded. “Kids—they don’t realize how their choices affect the future.”

Leslie laughed and cried for a moment before Dr. Kleinsmith put his hands on her shoulders.

“He was an amazing boy,” Dr. Kleinsmith said.

“I know,” said Leslie. She pulled out a crumpled piece of tissue paper and dried her tears with it. “He really was.”

Dr. Kleinsmith began slowly. “This may seem like a pointless question, but I promise you that it’s worth consideration.” Leslie’s head was down and Dr. Kleinsmith waited for her to meet his eyes. “Have you talked about who’s going to be the one who turns off the machine?”

Leslie looked up. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“The person who physically switches off the machine—‘pulls the plug,’ as some people call it—crass, I know—that person can oftentimes feel a higher sense of guilt or remorse that other family members don’t experience. They may feel more responsibility for the death even though everyone came to the same agreement beforehand.”

“Oh,” Leslie said, “I hadn’t thought of that.” Her eyes looked at the wall socket. “I’ll do it,” she said with certainty. “I’m the mom. I should carry the responsibility.”

“Okay,” he answered. “But you don’t have to decide now. And if you’d like, someone from the hospital can do it. Me, for example, or Tom. But we want you to have the choice to make the call in the matter.”

“Thanks, Doctor.”

Dr. Kleinsmith nodded. “I’ll come back in about half an hour,” he said, patting Leslie on the shoulder again before turning to leave the room.

Leslie moved to sit in the chair, let out a deep breath, and looked at her son. Her eyes made their way to the machine to which he was attached. It was silent, but the green line of her son’s heartbeat spiked sharply and fell in an endless loop from left to right.

She got lost in the green digitized version of her son's heartbeat and imagined touching the point with her fingertip, piercing her skin and causing it to bleed. She watched as the drop of red blood rolled down the green line like snow descending the side of a steep mountain; an avalanche of thick, red liquid engulfing all the white at the mountain's base, where it angled upward briefly then back to flat. That mountain was quickly erased and replaced by another mountain. Beat, flat, gone. Beat, flat, gone.

"Hey, Leslie," came a voice at the door. Leslie turned around. It was Corky (performed by the world-renowned childhood star Beverly Thompkins, whose meteoric rise to fame led her to leading roles in two of the highest-grossing films of 1994: the horror film *I Think Principal Newman is the Devil*, and the religious drama, *Grunts from Above: An Abrahamic Love Story*.)

(Camera zooms in on Corky. Audience applauds.)

"Hey sweetie," Leslie said and stood up. "I wasn't sure if you were coming." They embraced each other and Corky's eyes welled up with tears. "Don't cry," Leslie said, "you're going to make me cry," and they laughed. "We don't need to cry today. Today is a good day. It's Tim's day—we should be celebrating him. We're doing what he wanted."

"I know," Corky said. (Beverly's on-screen performance was additionally highly-anticipated due to her recent break-up with cameraman and frequent collaborator Paul Rodriguez—1995 Cinematographer of the Year (COTY) award winner through his bald eagle documentary, *Going Bald: America's Favorite Bird*—who had coincidentally been scheduled to work on this program since before the split. "I'm a professional," Rodriguez had said in an interview with TMZ outside of a Hollywood nightclub. "My history with

Beverly is personal, but I am a professional. We remain friends. The show will go on.”)
“I’m just going to miss Tim so much,” Corky continued, “even though he is the way he is. Can’t we let him live a little longer? Why do we have to listen to a will he wrote when he was fourteen?”

Leslie loved Corky as if she were her own daughter. She cupped Corky’s cheeks and looked into her eyes. She thought that she would have made a great daughter-in-law. “All the doctors agree, it’s almost certain Tim will never wake up. And this way Tim will actually save lives. All his body parts will go to people who need them. His heart will go to someone who will die without it. They’ll do so much more for them than they’re doing for Tim right now.”

Corky sighed. “It’s just hard to say goodbye for good.” She looked at the shining diamond ring on her finger.

“I know, baby. Me too. Me too.”

A rap came from the door. “Anybody in here?”

Leslie laughed. “Andy.”

“Mom,” said Andrew (played by the multi-talented actor and pop musician, Italian heartthrob Benjamin Esposito in his highly publicized post-rehab comeback). Andrew approached his mother and gave her a hug, then he moved to Corky. “Corky,” he said, smiling, and hugged her too. (Camera zooms out.)

“Hey, Andrew,” Corky said.

“I’m so glad you’re both here,” Leslie said.

“When is it happening?” Andrew asked.

“In just a few minutes,” Leslie said. “But there is something the doctor mentioned that I hadn’t thought about.”

Leslie looked at Corky and Andrew, who, all of a sudden, looked so young to her. Andrew’s black hair was combed up and to the side and Corky’s gold-and-brown locks fell past her shoulders. She was twenty-four (in reality, Beverly was twenty), the same age as Tim (actually nineteen), and Andrew was twenty-seven (no one knew Esposito’s actual birthdate as the pre-computerized hospital in which he was born had burned down in a fire and he never knew his parents, but he claimed to be twenty-five). Leslie could find no wrinkles on any of them. Corky’s skin was pale and smooth, and Andrew’s a soft, glowing olive. He held a Yankees baseball cap in his hands.

“Dr. Kleinsmith asked me who is going to—you know—switch off the machine,” Leslie said. “He said whoever does it may feel more guilty or responsible, but that we should all agree on who does it before we do it. It should be unanimous.” She watched their faces as she told them. “I told him that I should be the one who does it. I’m the mom, I’ve been here almost every single day in the past year. Right?”

“Wait, Mom,” Andrew said and put his hand on one of her shoulders. “You shouldn’t have to do that. He’s your son—that’s too much. I can do it. Tim is my brother, he would do it for me, too.”

Leslie considered what he was saying.

“Maybe it’s a sibling thing,” he added and looked around the room to Corky, nodding and agreeing with his own statement.

“Guys,” said Corky. “You both are in his family—neither of you should have to bear that weight. I am—was—*am*,” she corrected herself, “his fiancé. For one more day.

Let me do it, that way you'll never have to feel like you've taken something away from your own family member.”

Dr. Kleinsmith came in.

“Hey everyone,” he started. “Andrew, Corky, good to have you here. Have we made a decision?”

(Camera zooms out; characters hold their places; cut to commercial.)

Episode One: Corky's Case

“Yes, we have,” said Leslie. “I'm going to do it.”

“Actually,” Corky piped with her hand in the air, “no we haven't. We were just discussing it.”

Leslie turned and glared at Corky. Corky looked at Andrew and urged him to agree with her but he stayed silent and put his baseball cap on his head. (Camera zooms out to a wide angle, capturing all four characters. Cameraman stays on Beverly a second too long, jealous of the look she gives to Esposito.)

“Well, you still have some time to figure it out,” Dr. Kleinsmith said. “I've got another patient I have to see. I'll be back to check on you three in a little bit.” He exited the room without shutting the door.

Corky turned to Leslie. “I was with Tim when the accident happened. We had been dating for six years—since high school and throughout college. He proposed to me two-and-a-half years ago, and we were *supposed* to be married almost a year ago. I'm the person he would have wanted to do this.”

“No, you’re not,” Leslie said. “Tim loved you, of course, and you loved him, but I’m his *mother*. You have no idea the type of love a mother has for her sons.” She looked at Andrew. “Both of them. You will understand when you have children of your own, and, god forbid, if anything like this happened to them, you would be saying the same thing I’m saying right now.”

Leslie walked over to the window and looked outside, crossing her arms. Andrew leaned against the wall next to the window and crossed his arms as well. Corky looked at them both from the other side of the bed and took her time before beginning again calmly. (Camera close-ups on Corky.)

“When you kicked Tim out of your house,” Corky said, “he moved in with me. Do you remember that?”

Leslie’s head turned halfway toward Corky but stayed silent.

“That was almost four years ago,” Corky continued, “after he finished with college and didn’t have anywhere else to go. He was hesitant about us moving in together so he decided to live with you.” Corky waited for Leslie’s face to register what she was saying. “But you two couldn’t live in the same house because you couldn’t stop arguing. Tim told me he would get so mad some nights that he couldn’t sleep. So, Tim moved into my apartment, and once he did, we realized we should have been doing that the whole time. After a little while, we knew that we wanted to live together for the rest of our lives.”

“Yeah?” Leslie said. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that you’re right,” Corky said. “The love between you and Tim is different than the love between Tim and me. Our relationship is based on a choice: we

chose to be with each other. We *chose* to commit our entire lives to each other. He didn't choose you to be his mother any more than you chose to have him as your son. And when I have a child, once he—or she—leaves my house and becomes an adult, they will choose someone, just like I did, and that person will be the one who takes over and holds their lives in each other's hands. They will take care of each other. Love gets passed on, from parent to spouse." The room was quiet, then Corky added, "You don't have it anymore. I do."

Andrew looked at his mom, then at the floor in thought. Leslie's eyes averted Corky and looked at Andrew, then stopped on Tim. Corky held her gaze on Leslie and was impressed at her handling of the situation and the way she had expressed herself.

The doctor knocked on the door, holding a clipboard in his right hand, its pen dangling toward the floor, attached by a piece of white string.

"How are we doing?" he asked.

"We're not ready," said Corky without breaking her eyes from Leslie.

"Okay, I'm running a little behind, so that's—"

"Give us some more time," Leslie snapped. Dr. Kleinsmith humbly nodded and left.

The room filled with a deafening substance the way a night thick with snow is quieter than any other. ("The tension was palpable," former actress and soap opera aficionado Caroline Goff wrote in her monthly soap review column called "Wash This," for the *Chicago Herald*, April 1996.)

Leslie crossed the room to Corky. "Do you remember Halloween night two years ago?" she asked.

Corky looked away.

“Tim was looking for you all night,” Leslie said. “You went to a costume party without him, without even inviting him but knowing he would want to go, but you turned your phone off. No one could find you until the next day. Remember that?”

Andrew’s ears perked. He looked up.

“Tim moved back into my house for a month after that, and you two were all but broken up.” Leslie inched closer to Corky. “What I’m wondering is, did he ever find out where you were?”

Corky said nothing. She glanced at Andrew, fast enough that a blink would miss it (one of the subtle moments praised by Icelandic film critic Amy Stoltenberg in her performance review, “Beverly is Back,” in *The New Yorker*, May 1996).

Leslie inched toward Corky. “Did anybody ever know where you were?” she asked.

“I had to help a friend,” Corky said quietly.

“What happened that night?” Leslie asked again. She motioned to Andrew. “Tell us!”

Andrew remained motionless. After a long silence, Corky spoke.

“I can’t,” Corky said. “I promised I wouldn’t. But you have to believe me, I would never do anything to hurt Tim.”

Leslie scoffed and looked at Andrew. “See? She can’t even be honest with us, or Tim, for that matter. She can’t do this.”

Andrew shifted his weight from one leg to the other but kept leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

“All I want you to do is say where you were and what you were doing,” said Leslie. “If you do that, then—*and only then*—will I consider what you’re saying. Otherwise, there’s no way I can trust you.”

Corky hesitated as if about to say something, then slumped her head and shoulders down. “I can’t,” she said. “I promised.”

“Exactly,” Leslie said, satisfied. “So I’ll do it.” She looked toward the door. “Where’s the doctor?”

“Not so fast,” Andrew said, looking up from under his cap’s bill. “Aren’t you forgetting someone?”

(Zoom out; commercial break.)

Episode Two: Andrew’s Argument

“I don’t know,” Leslie said. “Are we?”

“You didn’t consider that maybe Tim’s own brother is the right man for the job?” Andrew laughed. “I think that’s a mistake. No one knew Tim better than I did. I know things about Tim that he’d never tell you, Mom, or you, Corky. No offense, but it’s true. That’s how brothers operate.”

“Andrew,” Corky began, refreshed, “no offense to *you*, but Tim *has* told me a lot about you, and not all of it was good. In fact, most of it was bad. I’m not saying he didn’t love you like a brother, but I was going to be his *wife*. There’s a big difference there.”

Andrew pushed himself from the wall and walked around the end of the bed, past his mother and Corky, to finally stop and stand between the machine and his brother.

(Rodriguez held his breath as Esposito passed Beverly, accidentally stalling the camera.)
He bent his head down and put his ear next to Tim's mouth.

"It's funny, that phrase," Andrew said, straightening back up. "We throw it around like it's nothing, but when we were kids, it meant everything."

"What phrase?" Leslie asked.

"*Love you like a brother*. L-Y-L-A-B. We used to say it to each other—our best friends—around the schoolyard. If someone told you they loved you like a brother, that was the ultimate friendship that two boys could achieve. It meant you were in. That you were accepted. It meant you had a family, but not just any family—a family you played with, learned with, fought with, got into trouble with, discovered life with."

"L-Y-L-A-S," Corky said softly, remembering.

"Yeah, kind of like that," Andrew said. "But with boys, loving a friend like a brother is different." Andrew glanced at the two. "Women are encouraged to love each other. Girls are taught showing emotions is not a crime—quite the opposite, in fact. When a girl cries, it's not unusual, it's expected. And rather than demonizing it, it's accepted. People ask, 'What's wrong?' And you talk it out. But for boys, it's not like that. If a boy cries, they're told to 'Suck it up,' or to 'Be a man.' Or what about the phrase 'Big boys don't cry'? Mom, I think you've used that phrase a time or two."

Andrew paused to look at his mother who was looking out the window. Then he turned to look at Corky, who was looking square at him. (Rodriguez's forehead began to sweat and he wiped it with the sleeve of his sweater.)

"That's what they say when a boy shows emotions," Andrew continued.

"Emotions aren't allowed for boys. And you know what they say if two boys say they

love each other? It's even worse. They're called names. Gay. Queer. Pussy. And once they call you that, they don't stop. That shit follows you until you're an adult. Saying 'I love you like a brother' is risking *all* of that out of your love for a male friend. But Tim was my actual brother, and he was also my best friend. We loved each other like that, and we weren't embarrassed about it."

The room was silent. Outside, the cardinal called.

"I should be the one to do it," Andrew finished.

Corky looked at Andrew, Andrew looked at his mom. His mom looked at him then over at Corky. Andrew looked to Corky, (and seemed, to Rodriguez, to be flirting with her,) who looked back at him then switched her gaze to Leslie. Corky's face changed, but Andrew couldn't tell what the look meant.

"Do you want to tell him, or should I?" Leslie asked Corky.

Corky didn't answer immediately. "You should do it," she finally said. "You're his mom. Well, kind of."

Andrew tilted his head like the cardinal. "What?" he asked.

"Andrew," Leslie hesitated, then continued slowly. "Tim wasn't your brother. Well, not by blood, anyway."

Andrew pinched his eyebrows. "What do you mean?" he asked, concerned. No one spoke, and the room fell silent. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Andrew," Leslie began, proceeding softly, "you were adopted. But not *just* you—both of you. You and Tim. Both of you were adopted. From different families."

Andrew put his hands together and rubbed them (a move Esposito later credited to the influential Italian New Wave actor Filipe Regio, whose handwork had spawned a cult

following of hand-centric movies and a subgenre of films called “hand-core”). “What do you mean? Are you telling me you’re not my real mother?” he asked. “Are you saying Tim isn’t—wasn’t—*whatever*—my real brother?”

“Yes,” Leslie said quietly. She tilted her head and looked toward her son. “I’m sorry.”

Andrew squinted at his mother, then turned to Corky and pointed at her. “And you knew?”

She nodded.

“How?” he asked.

“Your brother,” Leslie said. “Tim.”

Andrew spun around again to face his mother with his finger still out.

Leslie continued. “He found out a few years ago.”

“And he told me,” Corky added.

Andrew put his hands up and took a step back as if he had been physically pushed. “This whole time, everybody knew about it but me?” His voice raised. “Why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“I’m sorry,” Leslie said, “I didn’t want either of you to ever know. It’s a hard question when you’re an adoptive parent—whether to tell your kids they’re adopted or not. Some parents choose to tell them, but some don’t. We—your dad and I—we thought there was no need to tell either of you. We thought it would only lead to problems.”

Andrew walked over to the wall and slid down it, landing in a crumpled heap on the floor. (Rodriguez reluctantly zoomed in for a close-up on Esposito.) Corky walked over to him and knelt by him with a hand on his shoulder. (Rodriguez flipped through the

script he had on-hand. “What the,” he muttered, quietly fuming. “That blocking isn’t in the script.”)

“Tim was rifling through some old documents when he was applying for a passport,” Leslie continued. “He somehow found an old copy of his birth certificate—which I thought I had gotten rid of—and it had his first name but a different last name.”

“That was three years ago, before his trip to Europe,” Andrew said with his head in his lap. Then he looked up. “So he knew this whole time and never told me?”

“It’s not his fault,” Leslie said. “I asked him not to.”

Andrew stood up. “What?” he asked.

“Even after she asked him,” Corky said, “he was still going to tell you. Because he thought it was the right thing to do. He told me he was going to. I think he just didn’t know how to bring it up. It would be an irreversible conversation and he knew that.”

“So I was never going to know?” asked Andrew.

“If you applied for a passport, you would,” said Corky (garnering light laughter from the audience). “Maybe.”

Leslie ignored Corky. “I was going to tell you, I promise,” she said. “After Tim found out, I knew I couldn’t keep it from you forever. I was waiting for the right time.”

There was a long pause in the conversation before anybody spoke again, when Andrew finally broke the silence.

“Well, if this makes anything clear, it’s that you, ‘*Mom*,’” Andrew said, using air quotes emphatically, “should not be the one to make this decision. You lied to us our whole lives. We can’t trust you.”

“Well hold on a minute,” Leslie said. “That’s not fair or accurate.”

A rap came on the thick wooden hospital door.

“How are we doing in here?” Dr. Kleinsmith asked.

“Not yet, Doctor!” Andrew shouted. “Jesus Christ.”

“I do have an appointment at three-thirty that I must prepare for, so I kind of need—”

“I do have an appointment at three-thirty,” Leslie said, mocking him. Andrew and Corky looked at each other and laughed, and the studio audience (limited to a small crowd of about one hundred people due to a last-minute scheduling conflict that forced a move from the larger Studio 5 to the smaller Studio 17) chuckled. “We need more time, obviously,” Leslie said. “Can you do that?” she added sweetly.

Dr. Kleinsmith was confused. “Listen, I’m sorry if I said something to offend anyone here. I know today is a tough day, and—”

“Just get the hell out of here,” Corky said. “We’re almost done.”

The doctor sighed and checked his watch. “Alright, it’s three-fifteen. I’ll come back in five minutes. If there is no consensus, perhaps one of the hospital staff—Tom or I—can do it for you.” He looked at his clipboard as he waited for a response but didn’t get one. “Hello?”

The three family members stood like points of a triangle and looked at each other. (“The first Mexican standoff worth its weight since pioneer of Latin American film Paco Guerrero’s action-packed short, *Take me to Zihuantanejo*,” commended *Playboy* movie contributor Edward Black.) No one acknowledged the doctor, who sighed and backed out of the room slowly with his clipboard at his side.

“I haven’t made my case yet,” Leslie added softly.

(Cut to commercial.)

During the Commercial Break

(The audience chatted amongst themselves as the crew walked up and down the stands and handed out miniature bottles of water and chocolate candy bars. Rodriguez lowered the camera to its resting position and walked onto the set, where Beverly stood and chatted with Esposito who was still sitting on the floor.

“Bev,” Rodriguez called as he stepped from the cement of the studio to the tile of the set hospital floor. “Can I talk to you for a second?” He looked at Esposito who was looking at him. He nodded his head. “Hey Benjamin.”

“Hey,” Esposito said. Rodriguez became aware of the fact that although he knew who Esposito was, Esposito probably didn’t know him.

Rodriguez pulled Beverly by the elbow toward the other side of the set.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“What am I doing?” Rodriguez said, “What are *you* doing?”

“What do you mean?” she answered.

“Are you two seeing each other?”

“Who?” Beverly asked.

“You and Benjamin.”

“Paul, that’s none of your business. We’re—” Beverly motioned to the two of them, “—not seeing each other anymore.”

“I’m sitting over there, watching you two—”

“Thirty seconds,” called the set manager.

“—looking at each other all lovey-dovey.”

“Paul, we’re acting. That’s what this is. It’s a TV show.”

“Don’t mess with me, I know something is going on.”

“Twenty seconds,” the set manager called.

“I’ve got to get back to my spot,” Beverly said.

“Just tell me the truth,” Rodriguez said.

“You want the truth?” asked Beverly.

“Yes!”

“The truth is—we love each other!”

“I knew it.”

“Ten seconds!”

“I have to get back to my spot.”

“Beverly, wait—”

“Places!”

Beverly ran back to her spot and Rodriguez grunted and jogged back behind his camera.)

Episode Three: Leslie’s Appeal

The three glanced back and forth at each other and waited for Leslie to begin. All of their knees were bent slightly, as if prepared to either attack or elude an attack coming from one of the other two.

Tim laid calmly and expressionless in his bed as he had every day for the past year. (“I haven’t seen an actor so committed to his role since the daring performance by

Iranian art-house favorite Farhad Ahmadi in his reimagined version of Danny Zuko in the slasher remake *Evil Grease: Sandra's Revenge*,” wrote typically impossible-to-please film critic Leedrick O’Fallon.)

The door to the hallway was open but no sound made its way inside. The room seemed muzzled; nothing entered or escaped. Tension gripped. The cardinal sang. Leslie spoke.

“I’m not a perfect person,” she began. “No one would argue that I am—you two know I make mistakes. Tim and Andrew’s father—adoptive father—Terry, I mean—before we were divorced and long before he died, he was not happy with the way I treated him, and he was right to feel that way. I didn’t like the way he treated me either. I made mistakes then and I continue to make mistakes now. I am not perfect,” she repeated. (Camera zooms in on her face.) “I am, however, one hell of a mother.” Leslie looked at Andrew who offered no dispute, then to Corky. Both stayed quiet and listened.

“When Terry found out he couldn’t have kids of his own, we made the choice to adopt both of you. First you, Andrew, you were just over one year old. Then when you were four, we adopted Tim who was also just over one himself. You probably don’t remember this Andrew, but you did not take kindly to another baby boy in the house. The number of times you ‘accidentally’ bonked your brother on the head with your wiffle ball bat was ungodly. I honestly thought you might accidentally kill the kid. It took until you were almost seven to treat Tim like a loved one—that was when you two became close, like real brothers.”

“Just because it took me some time to warm up to him doesn’t mean I loved him less,” Andrew said from the floor.

Leslie put her hand up. “I’m not finished,” she said calmly. “You once asked me why Tim had light hair, blue eyes, and lighter skin. You said ‘I don’t think he’s actually my brother. He looks too different.’”

“So what, I was a kid,” Andrew said and stood up. “Plus, I ended up being right about that.”

Leslie walked slowly across the room toward Corky, though she still spoke to Andrew. “You’ve been talking about loving your brother like a brother, and the guts it takes to say that, but I loved two young boys, who weren’t even my biological children, as if they came from my own flesh and blood. I knew I would never have biological children with Terry, but I raised you as if you were. I worked hard to put you both through college. I bought you each a car. They were used, sure. But cars nonetheless. You gave me a reason to work harder—to want more out of life. You gave me a reason to live, and not just to live, but to love. I could never love any child, biological or not, more than I love both of you. You talk about ‘love you like a brother,’ or ‘love you like a sister’? What about ‘love you like a child’? ‘Love you like a son’?”

Leslie turned to look at the two. All three remained still.

“A mother’s love is something that can’t be explained, rationalized, or put into words,” Leslie said. “I would have done anything for either of you. I would have taken a bullet without even thinking about it. I’d do whatever it took to make sure you were safe.”

Andrew looked at Corky, then at his adoptive mom.

“Now, tell me that’s not the infinite love you both think you know so much about,” Leslie said.

Corky looked at Leslie, then at Andrew. (Rodriguez's stomach twisted.) Leslie first looked at Andrew, then shifted to look at Corky.

"I'll see Tim off into the next life," Leslie added. "As any mother should."

A rap came on the door. Dr. Kleinsmith entered cautiously. "Hey," he began slowly, "so, it's three-thirty. Is there, perhaps, any reconciliation? Have we come to an agreement?"

"Yes," said Corky, looking at Leslie. "We have."

He sighed. "Thank god." His shoulders relaxed and he cleaned his glasses on his shirt. "I thought I was going to have to—"

"We have?" Andrew interrupted, looking at Corky.

"Yes, we have," Corky said to Andrew. "We all loved Tim. That much is clear. We can't try to out-do each other. Obviously, we all want to be the one to end his life, and we all feel like we should each be the one to do it. But this debate is not the right way to go about it."

"Okay," Leslie said. "So, what are you saying?"

"Oh, god," Dr. Kleinsmith whispered under his breath and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"We clearly can't let this stupid doctor do it," Corky said, "no offense, Doctor."

"Did I say something to offend you three?" Dr. Kleinsmith asked.

"What is it?" Leslie asked Corky, ignoring the doctor.

"What I'm saying is," Corky said and paused briefly, "is that we all should do it. Together."

Andrew looked at his adoptive mom, who looked at Corky. Corky confidently met Leslie's eyes, who lowered them down in thought. Leslie then looked back up and checked Andrew's face before nodding in agreement. Andrew nodded and turned his eyes to meet Corky's before swiveling to check the doctor's. Leslie also looked at the doctor, followed by Corky. The doctor, unsure of what was going on, nodded at nothing in particular, as his eyes looked from side to side.

"What do you think, Doctor?" Leslie asked. "Can we do that?"

Dr. Kleinsmith came to. "You came to a decision? Yes, whatever it is, let's do it," he said and checked his watch. He then called out to the hallway, "Tom? We're ready."

Tom came in with a smile. "Okay, everyone, I'll be here with you guys the whole time," he said. "The condition of Tim's body leads us to believe that his body will stop operating relatively quickly, anywhere from half an hour to an hour or two."

The three family members nodded but said nothing. Leslie crossed the room, around Tim's bed, where Corky and Andrew were. Andrew, who was nearest to the machine, rolled it into the middle of the three of them and turned it around so they could see the power switch. They turned it to face outward, so they were positioned in between it and Tim's bed.

Leslie put a hand on Tim's leg. Andrew, seeing this, put his hand on Tim's arm, and Corky followed suit, holding onto Tim's hand. All three looked at each other and raised their other hand to the power switch.

About an inch long, the black switch was pushed in the "on" position. Andrew put the tip of his index finger on the upper right corner, Leslie placed hers along the side edge, and Corky put hers on the lower corner. All three looked at each other again.

“Three,” Leslie said.

“Two,” Andrew said.

“One,” Corky said.

“Wait,” Andrew interrupted and swatted Corky’s and Leslie’s hands away from the machine. “Why are we doing this?”

“We have to, sweetie,” Leslie said. “It’s been a year and a day. It’s time.”

“No, I mean, why are we going to kill Tim? We love him. We shouldn’t be the ones to do it. Let the dumb doctor do it. He can deal with the emotions if he wants to.”

Leslie and Corky looked at each other and considered Andrew’s proposal.

“He’s got a point,” said Corky. “We just proved that we love Tim. I don’t want to kill him. Do you?”

“No, of course not,” Leslie answered. She looked at the doctor, then down at Tim. (“Danny Loveguard is absolutely superb. Three thumbs way up!” wrote polydactylic British television critic Saul Pemberton in *The Toronto Times*.) She kissed Tim on the forehead and stood up. “I love you, Tim,” she said.

Andrew put his arms around Tim in a tight embrace. “I love you too, buddy.” He stood up and joined his mother. (“Aww,” the audience said.)

Corky put her hands on Tim’s face and investigated it. The camera zoomed in and she kissed him on the lips. “I love you most,” she whispered. She kissed him again and stood up, joining Andrew and Leslie.

“He’s yours now,” Leslie said to Dr. Kleinsmith and walked out of the room.

“Don’t screw it up,” Andrew said, following his mother.

Corky said nothing but looked at the doctor and shook her head and rolled her eyes. He watched them as they walked down the hall. Tom came over from behind the nurse's station.

“What was that all about?” he asked.

“I don't know,” Dr. Kleinsmith said. “Turn off his machine. Let's get out of here. I'm late for surgery.”

Tom nodded and walked over to the machine. He put his hand around the back and felt for the switch.

Click.

(Cut to black.)

(Applause.)

Out Riding

“I didn’t think she was going to give you the keys,” Harvey said.

“I fuckin’ knew she would,” Douglas said. He was eating something, probably a sandwich. He always ate his lunch in the morning, right when he got to the shop and before he started to work. “It’s just as much my car as it is hers, since we’re married.”

Douglas was about forty. He smiled a lot and had a tattoo on the inside of his left forearm of a bald eagle with a shield on its breast that contained two lightning bolts. Underneath it was a banner held by the eagle’s claws in blackletter font with the letters “A.B.” He was a recent hire and had just finished a ten-year prison sentence at the Leavenworth Penitentiary after beating a police officer on the side of a highway.

“Even though I ain’t supposed to drive it,” he added.

“How come?” Harvey asked. Harvey was only twenty and was enamored with the idea of working with a felon.

“License is suspended from too many DUIs, I got four of them now. But, shit, I’m tired of her dropping me off at work like I’m a kid. I’m already packing a lunch box and shit.” His mouth was full. “Plus, she bitches at me the whole way here. It’s too long of a drive for me to listen to that shit.”

Across the shop, Turner lay down on the creeper and rolled under a car from the driver's side. The front of the car was raised and resting on two jacks, one behind each wheel. The tires dangled off the axle and Turner used one to push himself back to the center, where the engine and oil pan were. Behind the car one of the garage doors was open and as Turner moved farther backwards the sharp morning light went dim. The top two buttons of his work shirt were undone and the last thing he saw before looking up into the machinery of the car was his own hairy gut.

He was the most senior member of the crew and had arrived to work early to make coffee, and was now changing the oil on a rusty 1997 Chevy Corsica. The car's grey paint peeled off the hood and he could tell by its condition that it got no attention. It was close to being a pile of scrap metal, but with Turner's help it could last another couple years.

Turner had performed so many oil changes over the past two decades that he did not need to think about what he was doing anymore; his hands simply did the work for him. His wrists and forearms were thick with muscle and hair just like his shoulders and the rest of his upper half. He was strong, built like a football lineman, but to folks who didn't know better he looked top-heavy and fat.

Turner picked up his ratchet with a fifteen-millimeter socket and slid it onto the drain plug of the oil pan. Clicks purred as he let the arm of the wrench swing to the left side of the bolt, then he tugged on it gently. The plug was tight, and rust had conjoined the pan and the plug together. Black and copper flakes chipped off the bolt and fell into Turner's eyes as he pulled on the wrench's arm a little harder. The plug still didn't give. With the socket wrench still on the plug, he removed an adjustable wrench from his

pocket and tapped it against the metal arm of the socket wrench. After a few taps Turner felt the plug bolt loosen. He unscrewed the bolt with the ratchet and listened to Douglas begin a new story on the other side of the shop. This story seemed to be about his daughter.

“This little bitch, I’m telling you, she’s something else. She’s making a sandwich and leaving crumbs all over the counter. I tell her to clean that shit up, but she’s texting on her phone, you know, so she hits me back and says, ‘Hold on, I’m doing something!’” Douglas laughed. “I said, ‘Oh, you mutherfucker.’”

The group laughed. Turner heard a third person there now, Ellsworth. A lighter flicked.

“I go to the living room and come back in the kitchen about fifteen minutes later and there’s shit still all over the counter. I says, ‘Didn’t I tell you to clean this shit up?’ She’s just sitting at the kitchen table texting and doesn’t even look at me.” Douglas scoffed, Harvey laughed, excited, the third person grunted.

Turner tried to tune Douglas out—he had heard enough of his stories to last a lifetime and Douglas had only worked there a month. Instead, Turner watched his hands work in the dark. They were filthy, but there was nothing he could do about it. Dirt, oil, and soot lined the creases in his palms and black half-moons rested under his fingernails. They had looked this way for ages. No amount of soap had been able to remove the residue, a branding from decades of gloveless mechanic work. His palms were calloused and rough, the kind that other people found trustworthy.

“Are these your kids you’re talking about?” Ellsworth asked.

“This one ain’t, her and her little brother are from my wife’s first marriage.”

Turner thought about his own son, Hector. Hector was sixteen and a sophomore in high school, a football player and built like Turner though Turner wasn't his biological dad, but he had raised the boy since he was three. Turner had been nineteen and Bee, the boy's mother, had been twenty. Back then they were still living in the same town where they grew up, a small forgotten village in the Nevada desert.

Now Bee and Turner were in their thirties and lived not far from there, a couple towns down the highway. Hector remained the only child between them. Bee had named Hector after her late father who had died when she was three. Turner and Bee raised Hector together as much as they could. The longest streak was in the beginning and had lasted three and a half years. But lately, Turner would be the only parent around as Bee was the running away type.

Bee left Hector and Turner once a year, sometimes more. She would be gone for two weeks or a month, but she always came back. When she came back it was one of two ways: defeated and disheveled or successful and happy. When she was defeated, she looked worn-out and dirty. Her dark hair was a mopy mess; drunk or high, not necessarily on pot, with her purse strap dangling on the edge of her shoulder; the look on her face like her return was temporary. Like she hadn't done it right. When she was successful, she glowed and looked healthy; brand new, with a smile that was contagious, like she was back to stay.

Turner tried not to be bothered by Bee's absences. To do this he thought about how they were when the three of them were together. He missed her when she was gone but he let her have a break if that was what she needed. So, she left, and he waited for her

to come back because she always did. This was her home; he believed that and so did she.

Turner was a good father, he knew. He was a good husband and a good mechanic, and he enjoyed these roles. He was happy to provide for the three of them, especially Hector who would often eat more than his parents combined. The two men didn't talk about Bee much when she was gone, only briefly, and only if it was necessary. If it was, they didn't say she had run away, they said that she was *out riding*. They called it that because she never took Hector's Chevy S10 or Turner's F150, her only vehicle was the Yamaha 750 parked in the shed. Last time she had brought it back—in the back of someone's pickup truck—it was beat up and looked like it may never run again.

“So I says to her, ‘Give me that fucking phone, you’re done with it for the rest of the night,’” Douglas said, “and she just straight up tells me ‘No!’” He laughed. “Can you believe that shit?”

Hector's life was all about football in a town where football was more important than school and nobody pretended it wasn't. He was an exceptional linebacker and led the team in tackles, resting most of the time on offense except when they ran an I formation and played Hector at halfback. This happened in goal-line and fourth-and-inches situations, and Hector scored a fair number of touchdowns for this reason. He was usually gone from sunup to sundown, at school or lifting weights or running drills with the team, and these days hardly noticed when his mother was gone. Like his dad, he tried not to let her absence affect him too much. When she came back, he greeted her like she had never left.

But this time it was different. This time the Yamaha was gone but Bee was at home and Hector was the one who was out riding.

“Kids,” Ellsworth responded.

Hector had been gone for seven days. The boy must have fixed up the bike himself because the last Turner knew, the spark plugs didn’t work and it needed a new front tire, new brake pads, a headlight, brake lights, a battery, its carburetors cleaned, and the chain tightened, and probably some electrical work, too. If it was running, the boy had done all that work by himself, which made Turner proud. What concerned him more was Hector’s money, which must have been running low. He didn’t know how much cash the boy had but it couldn’t have been much; he had never had a job and Turner had never been able to afford giving him more than a five dollar bill every now and then.

When the drain plug was almost out Turner removed the wrench and finished the remaining turns with his hand. Warm black oil streaked down his forearm to his elbow in charcoal lines. He positioned a tin basin where it looked like the oil would stream and pulled the plug out of the hole. The stream missed the basin by a few inches and shot onto the concrete floor in a black puddle. He swore under his breath and moved the pan over to catch the stream, then pushed himself out from under the car and grabbed a nearby bag of sawdust to spread on the spill. He looked toward the group listening to Douglas’s story.

“So I says to this little shit, ‘Give me the phone or I’m going to keep it for a week,’” Douglas said.

“Douglas,” Turner said, “would you shut the fuck up?”

“You shut the fuck up, old man,” Douglas laughed, thinking Turner was kidding. He continued with his story. “So I says, ‘Give me the phone or I’m keeping it for a week,’ and she says ‘No!’ again. Then her mom says to me, ‘Don’t take the phone, I’ll clean up the mess,’ and starts to clean it up. I says, ‘That’s not the point, I’m the man of the house and she needs to listen to me. Plus, she needs to learn to clean up after herself.’ I’m not going to be following around this little shit with a garbage bag the rest of my life.”

Turner laid back down on the creeper and dragged the bag of sawdust behind him to the spill and spread it over the mess he’d made. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d misjudged the jet of oil on an oil change.

“How old is she?” Ellsworth asked.

“Eight,” said Douglas.

“That’s pretty young to have her own cell phone,” Harvey said.

“They’re getting them younger and younger these days,” Ellsworth said.

“Right?” Douglas said. “And she don’t need it, anyway. She ain’t got no friends.”

Turner watched the rest of the oil flow out of the car’s oil pan and into the tin basin on the ground and waited for the stream to slow. The basin he was using to catch the liquid was about five inches deep and eighteen inches wide and could hold over two gallons of liquid. As he waited under the car, he pulled a red rag from his pocket and wiped his hands with it, smearing oil into the edges of his fingernails.

“Everyone ignores me, as usual,” Douglas said. “My wife starts to clean up the mess and the girl keeps at it on her phone, so I say ‘Fuck this’ and walk out of the kitchen. I go into the living room, then I come *back* around—we have one of those

divider walls with two doorways into the kitchen—and sneak up behind this little shit and yank the phone right out of her hand!” He laughed maniacally.

Hector didn’t have a phone. Neither did Turner. Bee had one but only when she was *out riding*, and no one knew her number because she only bought burners from Wal-Mart and threw them away when she was done. They were just for if she was in trouble, and she had never used it.

Bee was at home watching television and holding out that Hector was staying at a friend's house, but Turner knew the boy was very far from them. Turner thought he had gone south toward Vegas because that’s where his biological father was rumored to be. It was a long way to go on a bike, but Hector had ridden motorbikes since he was ten.

Turner understood why Hector would want to find his biological dad, but he didn’t want him to do it alone. He knew it would happen at some point but he didn’t think it would be like this. He would have taken the boy if he had asked. Hector didn’t know, but he had met his father once already, at the same time Turner had first met him, in an aisle at Wal-Mart as they shopped with Bee. Hector had been four. His dad’s name was Vince. They talked for five minutes in the frozen food section before Vince left. Turner had only seen Vince once after that, passing him on the sidewalk, but he hadn’t even been completely sure it had been him. He drove a Dodge Ram.

“Oh, they got so mad. I was howling,” Douglas continued. “I put it on top of the refrigerator where the girl can’t get it. Then I grabbed a beer and went to my room and watched that show, what’s it called, where they’re selling meth.”

“Breaking Bad?” Ellsworth asked.

“Yeah, that one. That’s a good show, ain’t it?” Douglas asked. Everyone agreed that it was.

Turner had never seen the show; he never had cable. What he did have was a thirty-two-inch TV/VCR combination with a bunny ear antenna and a stack of VHS tapes. *Armageddon* and *Die Hard* were at the top of the pile. When Bee would go *out riding* and the two boys were home alone, they watched those movies with the volume all the way up. They wanted the noise to shake the house, but the TV’s speakers only hurt their ears. Last time Bee had left, Hector hadn’t spent much time watching movies with Turner, instead spending most of the time in his room.

Now Bee played *Armageddon* on repeat while Turner was at work. When the movie got old, she lengthened the antennas with tin foil and wiggled them until she could pick up a signal from a local station. A fuzzy picture of *Wheel of Fortune* or *The Price is Right* worked fine but if those weren’t on, she would leave it on a soap opera. When Turner got home, he would sit by her while she watched the television, but he couldn’t follow a story while Hector was gone.

“This is all my fucking fault,” Bee said that morning on her way out to find their boy. “I’m so sorry. I’m going to bring him back.” She hadn’t slept well that week and neither had Turner. They both looked dirty and disheveled. She took the keys to the F150 off the counter and walked out the front door. “I’ll be back with him,” she said. Turner thought the boy would come back on his own, just like his wife had always done. If he had learned it from her—which he did, Turner knew, though he didn’t say it—he would do it the same way she did.

“So, I come back out twenty minutes later to get a beer,” Douglas said, “and there she is, sitting back in her chair at the kitchen table with that fucking goddamn mutherfucking phone back in her hand.”

“She climbed up on the fridge to get it?” Harvey asked.

“No, her mom gave it back to her!”

The oil slowed to a drip and Turner threaded his arm up through the parts of the car and searched for the filter. He wished Douglas would shut the fuck up.

Once his hand found the filter, he tried to twist counterclockwise but his fingers were too slippery to get a firm grip. He picked up his rag from the ground and draped it over his hand and tried again to unscrew the filter but it wouldn't budge, just as stubborn as the drain plug had been. Turner guessed it had been at least three years since the car had last had its oil changed. He was surprised there was enough oil in it to even make a spill. He would have to get out and do it from the top.

He rolled out from under the car and walked to the front where the hood was propped open. He saw there was a fourth person in the circle now—Kris, a boy just a couple years older than Hector and had been in high school with him. The four men turned to see Turner.

“Hey old man,” Douglas said. “You want some coffee? Kris, get Turner some coffee.”

“I'm not the coffee bitch,” Kris responded.

“I'm fine,” Turner mumbled. He wiped his hands on the red rag and laid it on the lip of the car and looked under the hood for the filter.

“Man, you’d better learn to respect your elders,” Douglas said to Kris. “You’re just like my daughter. How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Kris said.

“How old were you when you got a cell phone?”

“Fifteen.”

“That’s a little better. How old is your kid, Turner?”

“Sixteen,” Turner said.

“Does he have a phone?”

“No.”

“Just you?”

“I don’t have one, either.”

“What?” Douglas asked. “You don’t?”

“No.”

Douglas nodded. “I respect that,” he said. He turned back to his circle. “So, this time,” he started, “I walk straight up to that little shit and grab the phone out of her hand and walk down the hallway. She starts screaming and chasing after me and her mom is right behind her. They’re both yelling at me, ‘Stop! What are you doing! Don’t!’ I go into the bathroom and I’m keeping these bitches back with one hand as I open up the toilet and drop the phone right into that sonofabitch.” He howled with laughter.

“Oh my God,” Harvey scoffed. Ellsworth left the circle and walked over to Turner.

“Did you have insurance on it?” Kris asked.

“Hell no, I’m not paying for that shit.”

“You’re going to have to buy a new phone, aren’t you?”

“I don’t care. Maybe I won’t! She don’t need it, her mom just wants her to have one.”

Turner leaned over the hood and reached his left hand down to find the filter. When he found it, he took the rag from the side of the car and put it over the filter to get a solid grip on the top.

“Is your boy still crushing heads?” Ellsworth asked Turner as he walked toward him.

“Not right now,” Turner said. He put his weight into the filter and grunted as he turned as hard as he could, but the damn thing wouldn’t budge. He walked to a towering red tool chest and opened the top drawer where the oil filter wrench was kept.

“You’re using a filter wrench, old man?” Douglas called. Turner said nothing and walked back to the car. He put the wrench around the filter and began to turn. Ellsworth meandered back to the circle.

“So now the girls are screaming at me, ‘You broke it, you have to buy a new one!’ I just ignore them and go back to the kitchen and open the drawer and pull out a pair of tongs. Remember it’s nighttime and dark as fuck outside.” Douglas was animated now. Turner wondered how much story there was left. He was sick of listening to Douglas talk. “Plus, what was the temperature last night, twenty-some degrees?”

Turner leaned into the filter wrench and applied all his weight into the handle. He pushed and pushed but the filter was stuck. Turner leaned down and pressed as hard as he could, heaving and dipping his shoulder like a running back. The filter creaked and suddenly gave and Turner’s upper body lurched forward into the gap between the

perched hood and the body of the car. As his weight landed on the car, his momentum pushed it backward and it fell off the jacks on either side.

There was a loud crunch as the car crushed the metal jacks against the cement garage floor, then inched backward slowly with the sound of scraping metal coming from the oil tub underneath and the two jacks on either side. Turner realized he had forgotten to apply the emergency brake. Oil spread outward from beneath the car like blood.

“Fuck.” He ran behind the car and pressed his boots down into the cement and leaned his weight into the bumper to keep it from rolling outside the garage door where the cement ended and gravel began. Once the gravel began, there was a slight decline that gave way to a steep hill where there would be no stopping the car until it rolled to the bottom, about forty yards away, where a barbed-wire fence denoted the property line. After the fence the earth sloped back upward into farmland.

Turner was able to slow the roll of the car, but it was still inching backwards, sliding Turner’s boots toward the open garage door. He looked back and saw Douglas run to the driver’s seat, get inside and yank on the emergency brake lever. The car stopped.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Douglas said to Turner as he got out of the car. “You didn’t have the emergency brake on this whole time?”

Turner looked at the garage and saw how large the oil spill had become. It was almost ten feet wide with tire tracks following the car’s movement. The rest of the crew were dumping sawdust on the spill and had stopped its growth with shop brooms.

“Jesus Christ, you could have been killed,” Douglas said. “What were you thinking?” He looked back to the rest of the mechanics. “Could you imagine that, getting

killed by a fucking Chevy Corsica? I'd be so embarrassed for you I wouldn't even go to your funeral."

Turner leaned his back against the bumper and looked straight ahead out to the frosty yellow grass, past the barbed wire fence and through an empty cornfield, filled only with dirt and brownish-yellow foot-long stalks broken jaggedly at the top. To Turner, they looked like spears. It was mid-November and things were dying and looking bare. Turner felt like it would be okay if he died with the plants this year.

"I'm going to take a break," Turner said as he looked forward. He leaned up from the car and started to walk toward the fence.

Douglas looked at the crew behind him who were watching Turner walk away. "We'll be here when you get back," Douglas called to Turner and shook his head. Ellsworth and Kris chuckled.

"The old man is losing it," Douglas said. "Where was I?"

"You pulled your daughter's phone out of the toilet with a pair of tongs," Ellsworth said.

"Oh yeah. I grabbed the phone with a pair of tongs and took it to the back porch. We live out in the country, you know, and there's a huge field just ten yards from my house with tall grass, at least three feet high because my landlord doesn't mow the shit. And it's ten o'clock, pitch black outside. I took that piece of shit fucking phone and chucked it as far as the eye can see into that field, it must have gone forty yards. Meanwhile these two bitches are yelling at me, saying, 'Why did you do that?' I says, 'There you go, go get it.'" The mechanics laughed, and Douglas waited for them to finish. "They were out there looking for that thing for two hours in the freezing cold."

“Did they find it?” Ellsworth asked.

“No,” he said, “that’s the best part. They came back with nothing. Then they went out again this morning and finally found it—*frozen solid*.” He paused. “Like a fucking brick!” With that, he slapped Kris’s shoulder and burst out laughing. “Can you believe that shit?”

Turner heard the laughter in the background and kept walking until he couldn’t hear it anymore. He didn’t stop until he reached the barbed-wire fence and when he did, he grasped the cold wire in between barbs and leaned his weight onto his hands and looked out onto the lifeless field in front of him. Somehow, Turner knew that if Hector had been able to repair the bike, he would be okay. Turner loved his boy. And he loved Bee. And when they returned, he would change things.

Gus Rudgemick
in
“The Colgate Account”

Gus Rudgemick was a sad sack.

He was, to put it plainly, but through no fault of his own, boring. He was the most boring marketing associate anyone who met him said they had ever met. They never said it to his face, of course, but they felt it all the same.

Gus wasn't an extroverted man. He didn't chat over drinks at five o'clock happy hours, nor did he enjoy mingling with coworkers around the water cooler. Neither was he completely introverted, rather, he fell somewhere in the middle, between introversion and extroversion, in a place that left him dissatisfied nearly all the time.

This evening, Gus's sack was sadder than usual. This was because a prospective client, Colgate, the international toothpaste brand, was scheduled to meet with him the next morning. Gus had spent the last eight weeks preparing a small advertising campaign—specifically, three thirty-second television commercials—for Colgate, and at ten a.m., he would meet with their creative board to unveil the trio, which he referred to as his “babies.” It was a big day for Gus and his babies—the biggest of their career.

Gus had never expected to land a client like Colgate, nor should he have been able to—the fact that he met with them at all was one of the world’s largest mysteries. Gus hadn’t been a creative child and had impressively failed to meet even the lowest standards of creativity set forth for him. When he was five, he had drawn pictures of his favorite things, but the artwork was plebian at best. When he was eight, he had written informational pamphlets, which he mistakenly labeled “books,” about his favorite topics—dinosaurs, tornadoes, and the like—that were full of misinformation, not to mention an abundance of grammatical errors. When he was ten, he learned the basics of the piano and the guitar, but never made it past simple one-four-five chord progressions.

It was clear that Gus was not a child prodigy, but erroneous praise from his parents made Gus delusional. In fact, Gus was under the impression that creativity was his strongest suit. With that misguided belief, Gus pursued a career in which he could let his imagination fly, and perhaps make some money in the meantime. He became a marketer.

Things hadn’t gone terribly so far. Gus was enjoying minor success leading average companies to moderate growth during his first seven years as a professional. But his work was becoming stagnant and dull, and Steel Fence Creative—the dinky advertising agency at which Gus worked—had begun a steady trimming of the fat, letting go of six out of thirty employees in the past ten months alone. Gus took this as a challenge to set himself apart from the pack and prove his worthiness of being kept “on the Fence.” So, when Colgate reached out to Steel Fence and asked for Gus by name, Gus saw an opportunity to dazzle, and if he nailed this pitch, to leap forward in his career.

According to sources present, Colgate's Creative Director, Keith Greenlander, a dusty relic from Colgate's formative years, slammed his weathered fists on his desk and demanded to see the person responsible for a commercial he'd seen the night before.

"It was magical," Greenlander described between puffs on a pipe. "I found it to be both curious and whimsical. Traditional yet inventive. Financially constrained, yet priceless."

"Do you remember anything that can help me search for it, sir?" his assistant asked.

"Yes, I do," Greenlander wheezed between wet coughs into a handkerchief. "It possessed the indefinably silly qualities reminiscent of a middle-English court jester. Find it, posthaste!" He pounded his fists on the desk.

The commercial to which Greenlander was referring was made by Gus for a regional Rocky Mountain beer brand called Bears on Boards Brewing and had been a low-budget stop-motion animation short in which bottles of beers snowboarded down a mountain. Suddenly the beers were attacked by a pack of bears who grabbed the bottles in their paws used nearby evergreens to pop their tops off. The bears then drank from the bottles until they were empty, and the commercial ended with the bottles joining the bears around a campfire, dancing on the snowy mountain until the screen cut to black.

Two days later, Greenlander, with both hands wrapped in white casts, met with Gus and told him that he wanted a commercial for Colgate just like it. Additionally, he wanted two supporting commercials, making three total. He also added that the audio would be used on the radio.

“And, if the campaign has legs,” Greenlander added, “they will be used in print, digital, and billboards as well.” Gus accepted the project and left the meeting, leather padfolio in-hand, thrilled as he had never been before.

After conversing with his boss, Travis Gragghaven, Gus was given command of two full-time employees and a promising college intern. Travis was a sixty-five-year-old man with salt-and-pepper hair, black-rimmed glasses, and never wore a shirt that wasn’t plaid. He was also Founding Partner and Creative Director at Steel Fence Creative and had employed Gus for the past three years. During this time, Travis had developed mixed feelings about Gus. He liked the man, but hardly. He trusted him, but barely. He wanted Gus to sit in on meetings, but only via speakerphone.

The first employee Travis entrusted to Gus’s aid was a no-funny-business copywriter named Emily, known for backing up ideas with percentages and statistics. Second came Sam, a designer who Travis had poached from a competing local marketing firm, and finally, the intern, Jay. Jay was a well-meaning twenty-four-year-old master’s student in marketing with an unfortunate, scribbly mustache. He was a positive person and a well-liked figure around the office, and was the first person Gus kicked off the team.

In an effort to start the project on the right foot, Jay entered the meeting room with a coffee each for Gus, Emily, Sam, and himself, with their names written on the appropriate paper cups in sprawling, gorgeous roundhand. (Jay’s flowery penmanship was adored around the office, and when buying coffees, he always asked if he could be the one to write the names.)

Jay's only real error in this situation was his silent approach. Due to a hip discomfort from a teenage tennis injury, Jay wore a pair of orthopedic shoes that made no noise whatsoever when he walked. So, when he entered the room through the open doorway and extended a hand to deliver a coffee to Gus, and Gus motioned out and upward with his arm, Gus knocked the cup right out of Jay's hand and onto the table, sending coffee all over the papers before them.

Jay rushed to the kitchen and came back with handfuls of paper towels and made a heartfelt attempt at cleaning the mess, but rather than absorbing the spill, the cheap paper towels only pushed the liquid across the table, spreading it to the edges where it dripped onto the hardwood floor.

Gus laid a hand on Jay's outstretched arm and said, "It's fine, Jay. I'll call you if I need you."

Emily and Sam were cut in similar fashion by the end of the week, and within five days, Gus had rid himself of his pesky helpers and had claimed complete control of the project. He got to work, writing draft after draft until he settled on three thirty-second scripts that made him proud, and spent the next two weeks tweaking them until each word was just right. Gus then searched Steel Fence Creative's talent pool for the perfect voice-actors and chose the same stop-motion artist he'd employed for the Bears on Boards Brewing commercial. Together, they arranged the set, filmed the ads, and sent them to post-production, with everything finished a week ahead of schedule.

Gus felt like his single-handed trip through the creative process couldn't have gone much better, but still, the night before the meeting, he rolled around uncontrollably

on his bed. When he finally managed to sleep, it was a light, nonrestorative slumber in which he encountered scenarios involving himself running from giant insects—a terrifying red fire ant, in particular—that stomped its huge, chitin legs toward him, closing in on him as he ran until his chest ached with pain.

Gus rolled over, over and over, waking from one nightmare only to be replaced by the next. At five-thirty a.m., Gus admitted defeat, both to the ant and to his desire to control sleep in general. He remade his bed, put on a pot of coffee, and ironed his favorite pair of navy slacks and touched up his wingtip shoes, put on a matching pair of dress socks, shaved, and, even without much sleep, left his apartment with an optimistic smile and his head held high. He walked into work that morning at seven fifty-five dressed in his best-fitting button-down shirt and tie covered by a grey blazer with brown elbow patches.

At nine fifty-three, the creative team from Colgate was buzzed into the office by Jan. Jan was the office manager and had recently installed an electric lock on the front door after an uninvited shabby man had walked inside, poured himself a mug of coffee, and sat in the dining area as if it was his own home. No one had seen the man before, and once he left, no one had seen him since.

Jan had spent years fixing Steel Fence's problems, but many of them were too expensive to resolve. The brick walls of the building crumbled little by little throughout the day and chunky brick dust often became lodged under the keys of the copywriters' keyboards. The power frequently went out due to a faulty fuse in the fuse box, but Jan had saved the cost of an electrician by wrangling a device made from a paperclip and a piece of gum. "An old trick I learned from my grandpa," she said. And though the office

had a kitchen, it had no running water—when a new batch of coffee needed to be made, Jan walked next door to refill an empty one-gallon jug for seventy-five cents.

“Hello,” Jan said to the group of Colgate employees, which consisted of three men and two women, each sporting a shining set of impeccably white teeth. One of the men had braces. Keith Greenlander led the pack. “Gus and Travis are in the conference room,” Jan said. “Let me show you the way.”

Jan ushered the group down a hallway to their left and into a large room, naturally lit by light streaming in from windows along a wall that faced the street.

In the room Travis and Gus waited.

“You know I can handle this on my own,” Gus said.

“I know,” Travis lied. Colgate would make such an enormous client for Steel Fence, Travis had decided to make himself a part of the meeting. He wasn’t sure if he’d simply be a fly on the wall or an emergency backup if Gus started tanking, but getting Colgate as a client would save Steel Fence from additional layoffs. “I’m just here for moral support.”

The Colgate team entered the room and found their seats among sixteen rolling chairs at a long wooden table. A sixty-five-inch television screen was mounted on the wall at one end of the room and at the other hung an unlit vintage neon sign for a diner, from which paint silently peeled away revealing the metal frame underneath.

“Hola!” Gus said as his guests entered the room, and he quietly frowned and wondered why he was speaking Spanish. He looked from side to side, and, when no one responded, said, “I’ll be conducting the meeting ‘*en Español*.’ Does anyone need a translator?” Gus laughed right away, and for a moment was the sole person laughing,

then Travis chuckled, and eventually Mr. Greenlander joined in. Once the Colgate team saw Greenlander laugh, they followed suit, and for a moment, everyone was laughing an inexplicable amount.

The room exchanged pleasantries and made small talk as they made themselves comfortable.

“Can I get anyone a drink?” Jan asked.

“I’ll have a coffee,” Greenlander said.

“Dammit,” Jan said quietly.

“Pardon?” Greenlander asked.

“Coming right up,” Jan said. She crossed the doorway to the left, then seconds later passed by to the right with an empty water jug. The front door opened and shut.

Rather than sitting, Gus stood and leaned over the seat at the head of the table. In front of him was the remote and behind him was the television. He waited for the group to quiet down before beginning.

“Hello everyone, I’m happy to see you again,” Gus began. “Two months ago, we met here in this conference room, and when we left, I embarked on a mission. A mission to create three commercials for Colgate that would empower your brand with personality, style, and trust.”

Gus surveyed the room; all eyes were focused on him. He picked up the remote.

“Today, I present to you, the result of our meeting, my interpretation of your vision, and the next step in Colgate’s legacy. Three commercials that will become the beacon for your company, to be talked about around water coolers across the globe. Any questions before we begin?”

For a moment no one spoke, until finally Mr. Greenlander said, "I'm excited to see what you have for us, Gus."

"Very well," Gus said. "First up: 'The Lump of Christmas Coal!'" Gus pressed play on the remote and the television behind him lit up.

The screen faded in from black and the street view of a wintery house appeared. Bells jingled and snowflakes fell heavily, covering the home, yard, and everything around it. The camera zoomed in toward the window of the home's living room at a slow, steady pace, passing into the interior which was full of warmth, coziness, and Christmas cheer. The fireplace crackled and popped with a healthy flame, a cat purred, snoozing on an upright recliner, and a young boy wrapped in a blanket slept on a sofa.

A thudding noise came from the roof, and the camera pointed up to follow the sound. It traveled from the roof to the top of the chimney, and down until from the bottom of the brick smokestack came a Claymation Santa Claus, burning his backside on the flames and kicking ash around the room.

"Ho, ho, ho," he said, laughing, and leapt out of the fireplace, patting his bottom until all the fire on his suit was extinguished. With his sack of toys draped over his shoulder, Santa looked around the living room and noticed the boy on the couch, who roused from his sleep. He rubbed his eyes and looked at the big, bearded man in the red suit in front of him.

"Santa?" he asked.

"Ho, ho, yes boy," Santa replied, "Merry Christmas." He pulled a long piece of parchment and a quill from one of his long sleeves. "You must be Johnny!"

"Yes sir, Jonathan Bixby, sir."

“Ah, I see,” Santa said, scanning the document. “Aha! It says here you get the best gift of all: a lump of coal!”

“But—but—haven’t I been good?” Johnny asked.

“Ho, ho, this isn’t your *average* lump of coal, good fellow,” Santa said, rustling the boy’s blonde hair with his gloved hand. “This is a lump of Col-*gate*!” He reached into his sack and pulled from it a softball-sized lump of lopsided, bright, white goo. Santa tossed it up in the air and caught it in his hands. “Go long!” he yelled and threw the lump into the arms of the boy, who, fumbling it before gaining control over the uneven sphere, stared at it with love and an enormous smile.

“I love it!” the boy said and laughed with glee. “Thanks, Santa!”

Santa then turned to the camera and said, “This year, every little boy and girl wants a lump of coal—Col-*gate*, that is! Ho, ho, ho!” The two laughed as Santa patted Jonathan Bixby on the shoulder and the camera zoomed out, back from the way it came: through the window, toward the street, while Christmas bells chimed, snow fell, and the scene faded to black.

The room was quiet. Gus turned away from the television to see the reactions on the group’s faces. He looked at Keith in particular, as did everyone else around the table.

Greenlander frowned and furrowed his brow. His hands were cast-free, though on each arm was a metal splint that extended from under the cuffs of his shirt sleeves through the tip of each finger. Travis watched him and Gus glanced at Travis. The room stayed silent. Someone’s chair squeaked.

“Isn’t it a bit...messy? The ball of toothpaste?” he asked.

The room turned to Gus.

“Yes, the messiness is part of the comedic aspect of it. It’s funny because it’s so unrealistic.” Gus laughed. “I mean, it’s a lump of toothpaste!”

The room turned back to Greenlander, who pensively nodded and looked upward as if deciding what he would pull from his thought bubble. He touched the metal tips of his fingers together and rested his pointers on the tip of his nose.

“Why is it set in the winter?” Keith asked. “We want this commercial to air soon—in the summer.”

“Oh,” Gus said and looked at Travis, “Emily was supposed to have let me know about the time schedule.” He ruffled through some papers on the table.

Greenlander’s face remained expressionless.

“Or,” Gus said, “perhaps having a Christmas commercial in the summertime will be so jarring that it will stick out from the pack.” He emphasized his point by sticking one finger pointed up toward the ceiling.

Greenlander turned to look at his employee with the braces and raised his eyebrows, but no one spoke.

“Okay, forget Santa Claus,” Gus said. “He’s overdone anyway, and statistics show he alienates a section of our Jewish audience. But it’s okay, I’ve got another ad queued up and ready to go, and I really think you’re going to like this one.” Gus pushed play on the remote and each head swiveled in unison to face the television.

The sounds of rock guitars and pounding drums faded up in a rock-and-roll ballad, and as the lights brightened, it showed a Claymation concert from a back row view with hundreds of screaming fans facing the stage. The band was dressed mainly in black leather and silver buttons with long, grungy hair and headbanged as they played

their instruments. The lead singer held the microphone stand as the guitarist, bassist, and drummer let their hair fall in front of their faces.

Bottles, drinks, and beach balls were tossed around the crowd, and just at the right moment, the camera zoomed in on the hand of a concertgoer, who launched a ball of white goo—the same white goo as the Santa Claus commercial—straight toward the lead singer. The camera stayed with the ball of goo as it traveled toward the singer’s face, when just at the right moment, he turned, and the ball of goo struck him in the mouth.

The music stopped. The camera panned out as the singer’s bandmates looked at him with concern and the audience murmured. The camera snapped back to the singer’s face, when suddenly, he looked toward the camera and smiled, showing a row of bright white teeth. One of them sparkled, and the music began again.

“Colgate,” the narrator said. “It rocks...and rolls.”

The screen faded to black. Gus turned around again to face his client and waited for their response.

“Again with the goo?” Greenlander said, striking a match and lighting his pipe.

“I don’t think you can smoke in here,” one of the Colgaters whispered.

“Ah,” Greenlander said and waved his hand.

The rest of the team continued.

“I feel like this encourages the throwing of items,” another Colgater said.

“Don’t people only throw items when they *don’t* like the band?” asked the Colgater with braces.

“Tomatoes, isn’t it?” another offered.

“Not all the time,” Gus explained. “Sometimes at concerts, people throw objects and they aren’t too concerned with where they go. It’s just for fun, they’re going crazy. Sometimes they throw objects at the stage, but it doesn’t mean they don’t like the band.”

Gus looked at Greenlander, who now rested his pointers on his two front teeth. He sucked air in and looked upward, but remained silent, until finally he said, “Let’s see the third one.”

“Okay, here we go,” Gus replied, and before starting the commercial, glanced sideways at Travis, who looked gravely pale and a little ill. Gus pushed play.

The screen faded into a scene that looked to be at the gates of heaven. There was a long line to get in, and the camera focused on a short, old, Claymation man at the end of the line who had grey hair and a cane. Mr. Greenlander leaned forward when he saw the character.

“Where am I?” the old man asked cantankerously. No one answered, so he poked the man in front of him with his cane. “You, sir. Can you tell me where I am?”

The man turned around and smiled. “You’re in line for heaven. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“What?” the old man said. “I’m not dead, that taxi driver dropped me off here.” The old man pointed to a taxi parked on a nearby cloud made of cotton balls. “Hey!” he shouted and waved his cane. He hobbled over to the cab and quickly got in the backseat. “Wrong place.”

“You didn’t want ‘Pearly Gates’?” the taxi driver asked.

“No, I said I wanted pearly *whites*, with Col-*gate*,” said the old man. “Let’s go!” He smacked his cane on the empty passenger seat in front of him and the taxi sped off. The screen faded to black.

Gus turned around. “So,” he began cautiously, “what do we think?”

The room, again, was silent, before Mr. Greenlander spoke.

“So,” he began, “I get the pearly gate pun, but I don’t understand why the scene takes place in heaven.”

Gus flipped through a few pages on his clipboard. “Heaven, according to our research, has a set of pearly gates you have to walk through to get in.”

Travis could wait no longer. He shot up from his seat and walked toward the front of the room.

“Correct me if I’m wrong Gus,” Travis said before opening up to the rest of the room, “but these are the offbeat qualities Gus inserts into his ads. I thought, like you, that they might not make sense to the average person. But I think they’ll be so different from everything else they’ll see on television, they’ll actually be quite memorable.”

The room paused again, then Gus spoke up.

“Have you seen the Old Spice commercials?” Gus asked Mr. Greenlander.

“Of course I have,” Greenlander answered, coughing into a handkerchief held by the man with the braces.

“Well, those don’t make sense—that’s why they’re so memorable. Sense, in a sense, is overrated. Especially in the advertising business. We want to stand out—to distract the viewer from whatever they’re doing, and to stick in their mind. A big ball of gooey toothpaste, tossed around by Santa Claus and a boy—that’s memorable. A rock

concert with a ball of goo thrown at the lead singer? I'd watch that! I think—we think,” Gus said, gesturing to Travis, “that these ads will do just that.”

Greenlander proved to be a hard sell, and although Travis came to Gus's aid multiple times in attempts to explain away the problems Greenlander and his team found in each commercial, over time, Travis spoke less and less, and near the end, stopped speaking entirely, as if accepting an inevitable outcome.

Gus had reserved the conference room for two hours, so when noon hit and Steel Fence's social media coordinators entered the room unaware the meeting was still taking place, Gus admitted defeat. Neither Travis nor Gus could convince Keith to concede.

“I love your enthusiasm, Gus,” Greenlander said, coughing, “but I simply cannot pull the trigger on this.” He coughed again and the man with the braces held up the handkerchief to Greenlander's mouth, but Greenlander batted it away. “You understand,” he continued.

Gus looked at Travis. Travis looked at Gus with raised eyebrows and pursed lips. Travis gestured to Keith with a nod of the head.

“I understand,” Gus said. “I apologize Mr.—” but Greenlander put his hand in front of Gus's face as he continued to cough and bat away the man with the braces' hand who was continuing to put the handkerchief in Mr. Greenlander's face.

“Thank you,” Greenlander coughed, “but I don't think—”

“Can I get you some help?” Travis asked, but it was hard to hear him over the coughing and commotion from Greenlander.

Greenlander shook his head and put his hand up as the braced man held him steady under his armpits, before Greenlander lost strength in his legs, fell to his knees, and died.

A week later, Gus met with Travis in his office.

“How are you, Gus?” Travis asked.

“I’m alright,” Gus answered.

“Would you mind shutting the door behind you?” Travis asked.

“Sure,” Gus said, shutting the door, then sat down in a chair opposite Travis’s desk and hung his head down.

“Well, Colgate passed on the commercials.” Travis said and nodded his head slowly.

“I figured,” Gus said. The room was quiet before Travis continued.

“Not only that, but they’re filing a wrongful death suit alleging that your commercials...” Travis’s voice trailed off as he searched for the best words to say next.

“That my commercials what?” Gus asked.

“That they...may have played a role in Greenlander’s death.”

Gus looked up. “What?” he asked. “That’s impossible.”

“I know, it seems crazy. But I just got the call this morning. They’re asking for a manslaughter charge.”

“Manslaughter?” Gus put his head in his hands.

“Second degree,” Travis added.

“I didn’t kill Mr. Greenlander with my commercials.” He paused as he gathered his thoughts. “They weren’t *that* bad.”

“No,” Travis laughed, “of course not. Greenlander was ninety-four years old and smoked his pipe every day. He was going to die sooner or later.” He paused before continuing. “But I can’t say that there’s *no* chance that your commercials didn’t play a role.”

“You think my commercials were so bad that they killed that old man?”

Travis stood up and walked around his desk and put his hand on Gus’s shoulder. “No, I’m not saying that. I’m not saying they killed him, I’m just saying that their premise holds water. That the commercials may have played a role. In killing him,” he added quietly.

Gus looked up. “Well, we have to fight this.”

Travis patted Gus on the back. “Yes, absolutely you should fight it.”

“What do you mean *I* should fight it?”

Travis sighed and looked down. “Colgate is a billion-dollar company. They’ve got a team of lawyers and Greenlander was the oldest employee they had. They’re taking this very seriously.”

“But you have to help with this. I can’t do it on my own. They’ll crush me.”

“I’m sorry Gus, but we’re putting out a press release today that we’re cutting ties with you. It’s what I must do to save my company. If I don’t do this, Steel Fence will be gone, and all these employees will be out of their jobs.”

Gus sat pensively for a long time. Finally, he got up and walked out without another word to Travis, who said something about remaining friends if he wasn’t in jail.

Gus went to his desk and packed up his mugs and pictures into a little box and toward the front door.

“Goodbye, Jan,” Gus said as he passed the reception desk.

“Goodbye, Gus,” she said, and as he went through the front door, locked the door behind him.

The Walk

It was midday and it was humid and hot. The downtown sun was high enough in the sky that it shone directly on the tops of the buildings and they cast no shadow and offered no shade to anyone on the sidewalks. Steam billowed from manhole coverings and sewer grates and exhaust from the public buses polluted the air with smog and added to its thickness. There was no breeze; the air hung, still and damp, and the sounds and smells and smog swirled together until it was hard to tell where one sensation began and another ended.

The sun also shone directly on Charlie who cast no shadow onto the ants below him. He squinted and put on his sunglasses as he left his building and walked toward the public library to check out a book. He wore a ballcap and a t-shirt with shorts and shoes.

The book had been recommended by a columnist at the *New York Times* and Charlie thought it sounded like it might produce an emotion in him the way only a book could do. An emotion that felt organic, like it was of his own creation. Charlie couldn't remember the last time he felt a strong emotion; there was something in the way. So, he sought a book to help initiate the process for him.

The walk from Charlie's apartment to the library was six blocks. He wished there were more shade on the route, especially on the bridge that crossed the highway. Cars sped underneath him and honked at each other as exhaust rose upward and the white

concrete reflected the midday sun onto his bare arms and legs. The bridge was uphill the first half before coming to a crest then sloped down as it went back to land and spanned a full block.

After the bridge, the rest of the route was on an incline, and as the sidewalk returned to ground, sweat beads grew on Charlie's temples and his shirt stuck to his back. He took off his hat and used it to fan his face.

He put the hat back on his head and saw three homeless people sitting in the grass off the sidewalk, two men and a woman. The two men wore cut up jeans and one's hair was long and the other's was short. The man with long hair lay with no shirt or shoes and looked to be asleep, or dead. The other man wore two shirts, a t-shirt underneath a long-sleeve button-down, and rubber combat boots. He had grey hair on his face and his eyes were aged and wrinkled. The woman wore shorts and a white t-shirt with sleeves rolled up to her shoulders. She sat in the grass with her knees tucked into her chest and her arms wrapped around them. Bags and backpacks were sprinkled around them. Charlie was about twenty feet away when the woman called to him.

"Any money?" the woman asked and held out her palm. It was covered in dirt.

"Nothing." Charlie grabbed the outsides of his pockets. "Sorry."

The woman returned her arm to her legs and watched Charlie walk. He saw that her knees and shoulders were freckled, burnt and peeling from the sun. Her hair was dark and nearly black with ribbons of purple running through it. She kicked over a cup sitting on the grass as he passed them and suddenly broke out in song, happily as if she was in a church choir. "The rich ones, the poor ones, we're all going to *die*," she rasped as she

watched Charlie pass. She emphasized “die,” and held the note long after it should have ended.

Charlie looked away. He had offended the woman and it was clear that she was angry. He sweat under his hat and fanned his face with it again. If he was sweating in shorts, the man in boots and two shirts must be incredibly hot. Charlie’s back was now covered in sweat and the circle was creeping around his sides and down his legs. He had only been walking for seven minutes but saw sweat had formed under his armpits and was beginning to seep through the neck of his shirt. He stopped at a red light and pressed the walk button.

“Wait,” said the machine on the pole. Charlie leaned against it. He should have given the homeless woman a dollar, he thought. He heard a mechanical whirr approach from behind and turned around.

“Chris,” Charlie said to the man in the wheelchair.

“Hey, Charlie,” Chris said. He was holding a light brown chihuahua in his lap with his right hand and his left hand rested on the black joystick he used to control the chair. “How are you?” They shook hands.

“Walk,” the machine on the pole said. Charlie stepped onto the crosswalk and Chris and his chihuahua followed behind.

“Not too bad,” Charlie answered.

“Where are you going?”

“The library,” Charlie said. “I’m getting a book.”

“It’s hot today,” Chris said and looked up. “My wheels are going to catch fire.”

Charlie laughed. “My shoes are going to burn, too.”

Chris laughed. He had a tattoo on his neck that said “503” and others on his forearm that were old and fuzzy and which Charlie couldn’t make out. Chris's face was grizzled with acne scars and needed to be shaved. He looked from side to side as he often did.

“Where are you going?” Charlie asked.

“The store. I need some candy.” Chris’s wheelchair clacked as it rolled over cracks in the cement. The dog stayed still except for his head which looked side to side like Chris did, and shivered the way chihuahuas do, even in the summer. It wore a blue collar from which a silver name tag read “B.J.” and reflected sunlight as it jangled from side to side.

“Ever since I quit doing dope, I started eating a lot of candy,” he added.

“It’s the next best thing, I guess,” Charlie said.

“That’s no shit,” said Chris. “I never liked cigarettes. They taste like shit. What do you think?”

“That’s true, and they stain your teeth.”

“And your fingers,” Chris added. “After my accident, they gave me a lot of painkillers. Opiates. I was on them all day, every day, all the time. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Charlie lied.

“Then they released me, and my prescriptions ran out and I started doing dope. Like, I *had* to. You know? But I couldn’t live like that. I quit pretty fast. And now I eat candy.” Chris chuckled. “Isn’t that some shit, B.J.?” He scratched B.J. on his neck and

B.J. looked up to Chris's face. His eyes darted around and looked frightened by the sounds of the city. "We like the sour stuff, don't we B.J.?"

Charlie noticed the chihuahua look at Chris each time he said his name. He couldn't believe how worried it looked. Its eyes were wide and each time the wheelchair clacked on the cement the dog looked as if it was certain it would soon be dead. Chris's hand was underneath B.J.'s nametag, holding the dog's chest.

"What's your favorite candy?" Chris asked.

"Sour Patch Kids," Charlie answered.

"A sour man, too, huh?" Chris laughed. "A man cut from the same cloth. I'm going to get you some."

"You don't have to do that," Charlie said.

"No, I want to," Chris said as they approached the next intersection. The grocery store was across the street on the left. "This is me," he said and moved his joystick to the left and the wheelchair turned to face the other side of the street. "Can you hit that button for me?" he asked.

Charlie pushed the button. "Wait," the pole said. The lights on Charlie's path turned from green to red and the lights for Chris turned red to green. The walk signal lit up white.

"See you later," Chris said. His wheelchair clattered across cracks in the crosswalk as B.J. shivered in his lap.

"See you," Charlie said. He watched them cross and pressed the walk button to change the light for him.

“Wait,” the machine said. Charlie put his hand on the black pole and leaned his weight on it, but the pole was hot just like everything else and Charlie quickly took his hat off and fanned his face. His hair stuck to his forehead and he ran a hand through it to pull it back. He felt sweat drip down his thighs and under his arms and across his chest. The sun beamed onto his shoulders and upper back. The light to move forward changed and the white man on the screen ushered Charlie forward. “Walk,” the machine said.

The incline up the street continued and Charlie put his hat back on his head and entered the crosswalk. A belt of steam from a manhole struck Charlie as he crossed, hitting his uncovered legs and arms and face. The air was thick and hot and the smell was nauseating.

Charlie walked behind a glass bus stop where a woman sat on a shaded metal bench next to a purple purse. A man stood leaning against the outer glass side of the stop. Charlie passed them and at the end of the block saw four young men with skateboards standing in front of a handful of concrete slabs each at different heights. Two were hunched, leaning over their skateboards and holding them vertically with their hands on the tops with the wheels facing out. The bottoms of their boards had designs that were chipped and scuffed so the graphics were illegible.

They were watching a third and fourth skater attempt something. The third skater had a bulky video camera with a grey microphone attached to it. He was hunched over and holding the camera low, filming the fourth skater’s skateboard and the lower half of his legs.

Charlie slowed his pace to see what they were trying to do. As he got closer, he saw that they were in front of a glass building with groups of blooming foliage

surrounding six tabletop slabs of white cement that were fifteen feet long by fifteen feet wide and pieced together to resemble unconnected steps, but artfully disconnected and raised at heights independent of each other. The skateboarder who was filming knelt on his board while it rolled backward on the third slab as the other skater started from the bottom and jumped to each raised plateau, passing the cameraman on the third who kept his camera at ground level, and made his way up to the sixth. When he made it to the sixth slab the two skateboarders on the side flipped their boards around so their black grip tape faced outward, picked them up by the sides, and slapped the ends repeatedly on the concrete. The resulting sound was like applause from woodblocks.

The skateboarder who was being filmed attempted another trick but failed and fell on the cement, and the skateboard slipped out from under him and shot into the plants nearby. He laid on the ground and laughed, and the cameraman recorded his reaction and went to the sixth slab to help him up. Charlie watched as they both then looked at the screen on the camera and analyzed the footage, while the other two skateboarders began attempting tricks of their own.

Charlie turned his head back to the direction in which he was going and walked to the end of the block where the light was red. He wasn't far from the library now. He remembered the homeless lady. Now, he was glad he didn't give her a dollar. *The rich ones, the poor ones, we're all going to die.* She had emphasized "die" so heavily that Charlie was sure it was meant personally for him, even though she had sung the words as if it were a well-known song. If it was a well-known song Charlie had never heard it, though it almost sounded as if they were an old church hymn. However, if it had been a

church song, they probably wouldn't emphasize the word "die." Charlie was certain the word "die" was meant directly for him.

"Walk," the machine said. Charlie had forgotten to push the walk button but that didn't seem to matter.

Charlie walked across the street and was now one block from the library. From the corner of his eye, he saw something move. He looked to his right, where about twenty feet away, a rat came out from behind a sliver of shade in a corner where two corners of the building jutted out slightly to make a small right angle. The rat entered the sunlight and paused before continuing forward with its right side touching the wall of the building. It crept slowly and unsteadily as if it was drunk, stumbling from left to right. It wobbled and left the wall before counterbalancing to the right where it found the building again.

The rat had rabies. Charlie could tell by its unmeasured steps and because it was out in the heat and the daylight. Charlie had seen rats downtown, but it had always been at night and they ran to cover, never staying out in the open like this. There was a dumpster behind Charlie's building where he had seen rats scour for food and sometimes cross the parking lot to find bushes with trash underneath their leaves. Sometimes they went from the bushes across the street into a storm drain. But every time Charlie had seen them, they did not want to be out in the open for too long.

This rat walked slowly in the sun. Its grey hair was oily and matted and its tail was cut short from an altercation of some sort. As it walked along the side of the building it paused and stayed very still three times before continuing. Charlie could see its sides rising and falling with each breath. The animal was near death and hallucinating.

Charlie felt an obligation to keep an eye on the rat so it wouldn't bite anybody. He slowed his pace and let the rat get ahead of him and followed it from a distance. It moved forward, paused, moved again, and approached the end of the block where Charlie's route turned right and uphill to the library's front door.

But as the rat neared the end of the block, Charlie saw a group of people waiting for the walk signal to allow them to cross the street. They weren't paying attention to anything behind them. Charlie put his hands to his mouth to warn them but as the rat reached the corner of the building it turned right and disappeared.

Charlie jogged up to the corner to regain sight of the rat but before he reached it, he heard a woman scream. Charlie put some space between him and the building as he made his way to the edge and turned the corner at a wide angle.

The same two men and woman from the bridge had formed a semicircle and watched as the rat plodded along the edge of the library building. Charlie stopped walking and looked at the woman who had so forcefully reminded him earlier that would die, rich or poor. Her shoulders were maroon. Charlie wondered how they got there before he had.

The rat was now in full daylight as the sun baked the bright white wall. It made high squeaks and low growls and opened and closed its mouth. It was thirsty but was afraid of water, one of the final symptoms of the disease.

Here, the sidewalk split in two. On the left it continued up a slope to the front entrance of the library, and on the right, it declined to a side door for employees. A three-foot-thick cement wall split the two paths and formed a short, shaded hallway for the

employees' entrance. At the top of the cement divider was a plant bed filled with soil and a row of thorny bushes blooming with red flowers.

"I think it has rabies," Charlie said to any of the three as he approached them.

The woman looked at him and smiled, showing a surprisingly white row of teeth. Her lips curled in the corners and Charlie interpreted her smile with malice behind it. "We're all going to die," she said.

The rat began to move down the decline and toward the dark dead-ended hallway, but the man with two shirts blocked its way. "Oh no you don't," he said. "Watch out," he announced and put his arms out, before picking up his leg and stomping on the rat's upper body and head with his rubber combat boots.

Charlie heard a crunch and immediately felt nauseous. The rat made a noise and Charlie ran away, up the street. The woman laughed and her laugh followed Charlie up the block. He felt bad for the rat; it had to be killed, but this seemed unfair. He continued to the front steps of the library. It was a grand, white building that took up most of the block. It used to be a bank and still had "First National Bank" carved into the parapet.

"Hello," the security guard said to him.

Charlie said nothing as he passed the security guard and walked inside.

Shelby

My name is Emily, and I am driving from my home in eastern Kentucky to the Outer Banks of North Carolina because I have a problem. There is a shoe growing inside my body. I don't know how it got there, who put it there, or anything else about it, I just know that there is a shoe between my abdominal muscles and my belly skin.

I am writing this with a pen and paper on my steering wheel as I drive because I don't know what is going to happen to me. It is likely that the time is coming when I am going to die. If I do not die from the road—it is December and I am driving through ice and snow that radio weathermen are calling “the snowstorm of the decade”—then it will be from the shoe. That is okay. I just want to see the beach one last time before I go.

When the shoe first came to me it grew slowly, but in the past two months it has grown fast, and I don't see any way out of this situation; my body can only get so big. The shoe presses against my skin and makes a clear outline of its shape: it is a hi-top Converse that I imagine is red-and-white. Though I have never seen the shoe (no x-rays, no ultrasounds), we have spent enough time together—every day for the past three years—for me to know everything about it. The brand is easy to tell by the Converse style: there is a rubber toe and a thin layer of canvas, eyelets that run up each side, and two ventilation holes near the bottom. It is currently a size eleven and a half in women's.

I used to measure it once a week and track its size in a chart I kept in my desk drawer at home. Now I measure it every hour or two, but I don't write it down.

When I first noticed the shoe three years ago, it was in the morning before work. I was thirty-one years old. I remember it clearly: I had slept naked because it was the summer and my air conditioner was broken. I went to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror, and there it was: a couple inches long, pressing against my skin, made for the smallest baby foot.

"Have you had sex with any shoes, or people who look like shoes?" the doctor asked. This was the next day.

The two of us sat in a white box of a room with a pain chart tacked on the wall. I sat on the crinkly paper of the medical bed; he sat on a short black swiveling stool facing a desk with a form on it and wore a white lab coat and black glasses.

"People who *look* like shoes?" I repeated. I was irritated. Well, I was scared, which was making me irritated.

"Yes," the doctor answered calmly, unaware or indifferent to how this question sounded. He looked at the form in front of him and waited for me to respond.

"What would that be, exactly?" I asked.

"I can't say. It's up to you to define it."

I looked at the back of the doctor and thought about how great it would feel to pull out the few remaining hairs on his head. "I'm having a hard time imagining what a person who looks like a shoe would be," I said, "considering people don't look anything like shoes."

“Okay,” he said punchably, “I’ll give you some ideas to jog your memory. How about a person with a handlebar mustache that resembles a pair of laces? Does that ring any bells?”

“No,” I said.

“Okay, what about a person with a tongue that sticks out of his mouth. Maybe a tongue that needs to be straightened every now and then and the person wiggles it into place.” He pinched both sides of his tongue with his index fingers and thumbs, then pulled it side-to-side.

“No.”

He grunted and put his hands down. “Tell me if you remember seeing a person whose nose was big and round and could have been made out of rubber or suede? It could have been from a botched surgery or something. Or maybe he had beady eyes, like the eyelet holes. Does any of that sound familiar?”

“No,” I said, and determined to end this line of questioning, I added, “I haven’t had sex with anyone who looked like a shoe, or anyone who had any shoe-like...” I paused as I searched for the right word. “Characteristics.”

The doctor looked at me and moved his glasses toward the end of his nose like a librarian. He looked me up and down as if assessing whether or not I was lying. He turned back around and made a note on his paper. “Okay. Good. Stay away from those people, if they exist, and stay away from shoes in general.”

“Okay.”

“In fact, I’d like you to leave your shoes here so I can study them.”

“Okay.”

“However, if you see any of these—we’ll call them “shoe-people,” for lack of a better term—follow them and find out anything you can. Perhaps there is some sort of colony nearby.”

“You want me to follow them and hope they will lead me toward a colony of other shoe-people?” I asked.

“Yes. Or stay away from them, they could be dangerous. It’s hard to say.” He paused and took a deep breath, then asked, “What would you like me to do?”

“What are my options?”

“Would you like me to remove it?”

Finally, he was getting to the point. “Yes,” I said. I didn’t have to think about it. “I want it out.”

“I thought you might,” he answered and laughed. “But we can’t take it out. It’s too risky. It has adhered itself to your abdominal muscles, and surgery may result in long-lasting health problems. Also, to tell you the truth, I’m not very good at surgery and if I made a false move, we could have a serious problem on our hands.”

“Can another doctor do it?”

“I’m afraid not. Not around here anyway. This isn’t something they teach you in medical school.”

“Then what’s going to happen?” I asked.

“It is possible that you will pass the shoe like a baby, although it isn’t in your uterus, so that won’t happen. But if it does, it could happen soon. It could also not happen for a long time. Of course, it could never happen at all. And, like I said, it won’t. But if you start to experience labor pains, I want you to call me immediately.”

“Okay,” I said, and left. I never experienced labor pains, and never went to see another doctor again.

Back then I hated the shoe. I believed that it was ruining my life and I wanted it gone. I wanted to be normal again, but it was attached to me and there was nothing I could do, except learn to live with it.

I cannot tell you how much has changed. Now, I love the shoe and I would never give it up. I can't imagine a life without it.

This shift was not easy. In order to change my outlook, I had to employ a few mind tricks. I forced myself to think happy thoughts about the shoe, to see it in a positive light. I thought about how cute shoes like mine look on babies' feet, and it reminded me of when I used to babysit my neighbors' baby Jacob when he was just a year old. I gave the shoe a name: *Shelby*. Shelby the shoe. I know Shelby is red and white—I don't know how I know this, but I do—but I often imagine it as pink, as a girl: my daughter, or my baby sister.

I thought about worse things Shelby could have been. An army boot made of heavy leather, with a thick, rubber outsole. A high heel that would have caused real damage to my insides. Shelby was so small and discreet—especially when I wore an elastic cummerbund I bought online—that she gave me a sense of power; I had a secret no one else knew. I told no one around me, not my friends, and for a long time, not even my parents. I became confident and powerful. Shelby made me a better version of myself.

I rub Shelby as I drive. I do this often. She is my magic lamp that I will rub until my belly skin dries up and flakes away. I pass Kentucky's southern border into Tennessee and I think to myself that I will keep Shelby for as long as Shelby will keep me.

Shelby, I don't need a reason to keep you but there was a time when I wanted one. You weren't the sort of thing a doctor could figure out, so I went somewhere that would offer me more clarity. I found a non-denominational church and met with a pastor to hear their thoughts on my situation.

The church was in Hopkinsville, and one Sunday, after the sermon was over and most of the congregation had left, I followed the pastor back to her office and asked to speak with her privately.

"Satan comes in all different forms," she said a few minutes later. Her left hand was on my stomach and her other hand drew a picture of my shoe in a notebook. "For you, it looks like it is in shoe-form." She wore big, black-rimmed glasses and curly black hair. Her eyes were closed. I was amazed at how this woman, who called herself Pastor Pam, seemed unphased by what she was touching in my body. She was both excited and calm, like she had seen something like this before.

"Have you seen anything like this before?" I asked.

"Never, but the devil is always cooking up new ways to gather followers. It doesn't surprise me that this time he went with a shoe. Shoes separate us from the earth that God created, always keeping a layer between us and the holy ground, just as this

shoe is between your abdomen and skin.” She patted her temple with her forefinger and looked at me. “To understand the devil, you have to think like the devil.”

“Oh,” I said. I noticed Pastor Pam was wearing black shoes, ugly ones. “But you’re wearing shoes.”

She waved me off. “Yes, well, my arches are flat and I need orthotics. Tell me, do your feet ever burn as if you’re walking on coals?”

“No.” Pastor Pam recorded my answer in her notebook.

“Jesus washed his followers’ feet. Do you wash yours?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.” Again, she wrote in her book, then paused. “But you are not Jesus, are you aware of that?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she said, relieved. She touched my stomach again and threw her head back. Then she squinted in deep concentration. “I want to get this out of you immediately. As shoes are barriers between us and God’s earth, this shoe is a barrier between you and God. Do you understand?”

I hesitated. “Do you mean, surgically?”

“Whatever it takes.”

This was my turning point—the time when it became me and Shelby versus everyone else. Before this moment, I wanted Shelby gone and my life back to normal, but now we were on the same team. I would keep her, I decided. She was mine and I was hers.

“I understand,” I said. I turned toward Pastor Pam’s office door and looked for an exit.

Pastor Pam removed her hand from my belly. “I am going to get everything in place as fast as possible. Are you free this evening?”

“Well, I’ll have to—”

“Write down your number and I will contact you when everything is in place,” she ordered. I wrote a fictitious number on a piece of paper and shook Pastor Pam’s hand before walking out the church’s front doors.

As I drive, I measure Shelby with a tailor’s measuring tape I swiped from JoAnn Fabrics. Shelby is 27.45 centimeters long, a women’s size twelve-and-a-half and a centimeter longer than she was a few hours ago. Her heel starts directly under the far-right side of my ribcage and she extends all the way to my left side, where the toe is nestled under the tips of my lower ribs.

I measure her in centimeters because that was how slight the growth had been when she first appeared, but now I could do it in eighths of inches. One of the laces has fallen from the bow and is pressed between the outsole and my skin; I gently massage it back up and away, toward the rest of the bow.

Shelby, why do you want to leave me? Where will you go? You are a parasite—you need me to survive. You can’t make it in the world alone. It is dangerous out there for people like us who are different than everyone else.

But that is a lie, you can see right through me; you can see that it is I who need you, and so what if I do? I cannot face the world without you. Is that what you want me

to say? If I admit that, will you stay? Fine, I admit it: I cannot live without you, Shelby. There is nothing for me out there. There is nothing for me anywhere.

I think about how many women in the world have a foot big enough to wear Shelby. A lot, probably—size twelve isn't too uncommon. I had a friend in high school who wore a ten and a half and she was only sixteen. Surely by now she must wear a twelve. According to my research, the largest female foot in the world is attached to the body of a woman named Julie Felton, whose feet are almost 32 centimeters long—a size fifteen-and-a-half. I hope Shelby will never be as big as Julie Felton's foot. But if that is what you want to do, Shelby, I will support you.

It is difficult to breathe and I know Shelby is pressing against the bottom of my lungs. I must take quick, shallow breaths. My body is too small for you, Shelby. If only I had been a better home for you, maybe then you would want to stay. I could have fattened myself up, become as big as a house, something with enough room for the both of us. We could have been roommates. We would have gotten along, not like my time in college with that roommate I hated. I could have given you the space you needed, away from me. I never gave you privacy; no wonder you are sick of me. I am the parasite, Shelby. I am sorry.

I write Shelby a poem, but it is no good so I crumple it up and throw it out the window as I pass the border from eastern Tennessee into western North Carolina. It is dark and wet and late or early and the winter storm has followed me all the way here. Snowflakes fall and cover the curvy roads of the western side of the Smoky Mountains, and I must drive slowly on the descending slopes. They have views I cannot see because

it is black outside, the only color is the white snow pummeling my windshield. It is 2:15 a.m. according to the clock in my car, but I am not tired and could not sleep even if I was.

A couple of hours pass, and I pull over to put gas in the car. When I go inside to pay, the man behind the counter asks if I am pregnant. I forgot to put my cummerbund on, which is sitting in the passenger's seat of my car. Oh well; I say yes because this is easier than saying no and watching the man chastise himself for asking a question he should not have asked. Anyway, he would not be entirely wrong, I do have something growing inside me, it's just not what he thinks. But I would not explain this to him.

"Yes, it's a baby bump," I say, and he says congratulations and I get in my car and leave.

Shelby adjusts herself and growls and I think about our destination. North Carolina is the last place I want to see before I die because it contains the only beach I have ever seen. I vacationed here when I was fourteen years old, when Mom and Dad took me to the Outer Banks. The ocean became my favorite place in the world, and every day for the past two decades I thought that someday I would return, but I never have. Never, until yesterday, when I understood Shelby was going to kill me, and I got in the car and started to drive.

I feel as if I am going to hyperventilate from the hundreds of breaths I have to take each minute, and I become woozy. My chest pumps in and out and I become lightheaded, so I take long, slow blinks and try to control my breath and regain my composure. My head dips low and my chin almost touches my chest before I jerk my head up again. Seconds later, my eyes close and my head falls toward one shoulder, and I fall asleep.

I dream about yesterday, when I left my home in Kentucky. I knew I was going to the beach and that I may never come back and I decided to show Shelby to my parents. I drove an hour and a half out to the country where they live in a ranch-style home on five acres of rolling land. The property line is made up of trees that connect to form a boundary fence. The house rests on the top of a hill with a long, gravel driveway ascending up to it.

“She’s here,” my dad said at the door. “We missed you,” said my mom. They hugged me.

“Here I am,” I answered. I followed them inside and we went into the living room. I motioned for them to sit on the couch while I stood in the middle of the room. Nothing I could say would prepare them for what they were about to see, so rather than give a speech, I said, “I have to show you something,” and pulled up my shirt.

My mom gasped and tucked her head into my father’s chest, and he put his hand over her eyes. They waved me away.

I wake up and my car engine is dead. Smoke plumes from under the hood, which is crunched and bent in the middle like a pyramid. It blocks the view from the bottom third of my windshield. The right-side mirror dangles from two wires and the passenger window is cracked. I have hit a guardrail and am lucky to be alive.

I sit with my head on the top of the steering wheel and remove my seatbelt. “We have to get to the beach,” I say. I adjust my seat higher to see over the bent hood and turn the key in the ignition, but it clicks. The lights on the dashboard flash, but no sound

comes from the motor. I turn the key back toward me and then forward again and the car clicks a hundred times.

I get out of the car and stick out my thumb even though no one is coming, just to see what it feels like. I do not like it and drop my hand to my side, but when a car drives by I put it up again. They do not stop, but the third car that drives by slows down and pulls over to the shoulder. The snow has turned to rain and I am wet. I run to the car and open the door.

“Was that your car back there?” the man asks.

I nod. “Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Alright,” the man says and clears junk from his passenger seat. “Hop in.” He notices the bump on my belly. “Are you expecting?”

The man is about fifty, wears glasses and a sweater over a collared shirt, and drives a maroon Volvo. He does not have a ring on his finger, and he is not going to the Outer Banks, but he is going to the airport in Raleigh which is three hours from there. He intuits that I am not talkative and turns up the radio to provide us with comfortable ambient sounds. He drives and I pretend to be asleep which turns into real sleep. Not long after, we descend the mountains for the last time and the rain changes back into a slushy downpour. The horizon gets brighter, and I know that soon the sun will rise. *There, there, Shelby*, I think between dreams. *Everything will be all right*. I rub her.

I awake to a cloudy morning sky. I shift my body and try to fall back asleep but fail to get comfortable, and eventually open my eyes to look at the man who is driving.

“Oh, you’re awake,” the man says. He has a soft voice I did not notice last night, and kind, squinting eyes behind glasses.

“Where are we?” I ask as I adjust myself in my seat.

“We are a couple hours from the Banks,” he says. “You looked so peaceful that I couldn’t bring myself to wake you up.”

“Thank you,” I say. I realize I haven’t asked his name. “What’s your name?”

“Theo,” he says. “Theodore Beeker.” He puts his hand out to shake and I grasp it firmly. His palms are soft but steady and it is nice to touch another person; I had forgotten this feeling. It has been years, now. I do not want to let go of his hand but after holding it a few seconds I return my hand to my lap.

“It’s nice to meet you, Theo,” I say. I do not tell him about Shelby.

I thank him for offering to drive me the whole way to the beach and we chat. I believe I do a decent job at appearing calm and rational. Theo tells me he has two children and an ex-wife in Wisconsin, and he was on his way to visit them. I apologize for ruining his plans, but he waves me off and tells me not to worry, that he can afford a replacement ticket.

Two hours later we pull off the road and into a sandy parking lot covered in rain puddles. Our car is the only one in the lot. It has stopped raining on land, but far out to the east the sun is obscured by clouds that continue to dump rain over the ocean in sheets.

We are in a town on the Outer Banks called Nags Head. Theo turns off the car and we stay seated. He turns to me very seriously and asks slowly, “Why did you need to come here so fast?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, though it is very clear what he means.

He blinks. “I don’t want to pry, but why were you racing to the beach? You seemed like you were in an awful hurry, driving all night and leaving your car there on the side of the road.”

I look ahead and see sand dunes in varying heights with tall, yellow grass growing out from them and waving in the breeze. While we are quiet, I hear saltwater splashing on the sand. I want to see the water. Shelby does, too.

“I came here when I was a kid,” I say, “and it is really important that I see it one last time.”

He laughs. “Don’t worry, the beach isn’t going anywhere.”

I smile at Theo and exit the car with my pen and notebook. I hope I come back but I am not sure of anything anymore. I am barefoot, and as I walk over the dunes the grass tickles my toes and ankles. I step on a rock but hardly notice it. I reach the top of a dune and see the sea laid out in front of me. It curls over itself all the way to the north and the south, with dozens of tubes that crash and deflate against the shore.

I look back and Theo is standing outside his car, leaning against his door smoking a cigarette. I face the ocean and descend the dune, leaving the grasses behind and walking toward the water. Hundreds of small crabs, thousands even, skitter across the sand. Though the rain clouds have kept it dark, I see the translucency of the crab shells—a light-yellow-beige that, if there were more daylight, I would be able to see through. The

crabs move sideways, never forward, and as I walk straight they part ways, half to the left and half to the right, disappearing into hidden holes. I worry I am going to step on one but that does not happen; they seem to know my steps before I take them.

I reach the water and it is warmer than I expect. I am no longer wet but I am damp which makes me shiver, and the ocean feels warmer than everything around me. I put my toes into the sand and dig them down deep enough for heat to enter my feet and for a minute, I close my eyes and stand there.

I thank Shelby for bringing me to see the beach again, for not killing me before I made it. I remember the poem I wrote for her. I should not have thrown it away; it was not good but I could have made it better. Shelby growls again and before I can remember the poem, I heave. I fall to my knees and heave on all fours, turning away from the water and vomiting into the sand. My eyes are shut and they cry from the pressure, but as it lets up I open my eyes to see what came out of my body: it is a pile of forty red Converse shoes, each barely larger than a thimble.

They are exact replicas of Shelby as I imagined her—red, white, and beautiful. I pick up one of the little Shelbys and run my fingers along the eyelets, the laces, the rubber nose, the sole. The bows are perfectly centered, each loop crosses perpendicularly from left to right, like a cross. They are spotless, as if they have just been made.

Theo rushes up behind me and kneels down and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Are you alright?” he asks. He looks at the pile of shoes but does not mention them.

I touch my belly and am surprised when I no longer feel anything under my skin. I cannot remember the last time it was flat like this. I move my hand around and still, nothing. No rubber, no canvas, no laces, no shoe.

“No,” I say. I do not want her to go; Shelby belongs with me. “No!” I gather as many of the thimble-sized shoes as I can, but a wave hits my feet and scatters the pile around, taking some out to sea and dragging others toward it. “Wait!” I scream.

“Leave them,” Theo says.

“You don’t understand!” I say. I use my shirt as a basket and grab a handful of shoes, but the ocean is too strong and the waves come too fast. “I need her.”

Crabs swirl around my legs and pick up the shoes and take them to their dens in the sand. They come to me and wave their claws around, asking for the shoes in my shirt.

I am deflated, I cannot keep them. I must let them go. I must let go of Shelby. I release my shirt and the shoes drop to the sand and the crabs make frantic dashes and each secure one of their own.

When the shoes are gone and the crabs have gone back to their homes, I find a log to sit on and I face the ocean. Theo sits next to me. The clouds have dispersed, and the sun has begun to shine. It is 8:00 a.m. My hand is on my belly. I rub the skin, it is dry and flat, such a strange feeling.

Shelby, I miss you. But I am glad I am here at the same beach I was on twenty years ago. You brought me here. I don’t think I will ever go back to Kentucky. I think I will stay here. Thank you, Shelby. Thank you.

Being

Bud was in the air, upside-down, midway through an end-over-end tumble, in which his head and feet rotated around his torso like a Ferris wheel free from restraints. Bud had leaned too far over a railing at the third tier of Busch Stadium, hoping to catch a foul ball in his glove.

From Bud's point of view, his descent was happening both too slowly and too quickly. He knew where he was going to end—he could see it clearly each time he faced the ground—and wanted to get there already. But if anyone had asked him, he knew he would not say that. He knew he would say what he was supposed to say: that he would savor every waking moment, because soon he would have no moment to savor.

As he fell, he wondered if he should be more upset about his situation. He was not looking forward to his death on the concrete below—it was going to be painful; he was certain of that. Yes, he was unhappy with his circumstances, but he relented. There was nothing he could do. He only had about three seconds left to live, and he did not want to spend it bemoaning this stroke of bad luck.

Bud took in a rotating sequence of views that were not lost on him. Most people—perhaps no one—would ever see the views he was seeing here in this moment, so he gave them his full attention. When he was right-side-up (the angle of choice for most people, he thought), he saw Busch Stadium at full capacity, and the field with the

dirt, diamond, and grass where it was supposed to be. When he faced downward, he saw the concrete path with red plastic folding chairs bolted into the cement, and the heads of thousands of people. Next, upside-down with his feet above him, as he was at this moment, he faced the people under the balcony from which he had just fallen. Some had looks of shock, some of judgement, but everyone looked in his direction because that was where the foul ball had been hit. Bud could see each person's face, and more—he was certain that in these moments between life and death, he could see what they had been thinking and what they were about to think.

Finally, Bud would be in the most peaceful of the four positions: on his back with a view of the cloudy sky, and a breeze from below drying the sweat on his back. He liked this position best because he could see his son, Devon, looking down at him from where he had just been standing. In this position Bud felt like he was floating, and he nearly forgot about his situation.

Time, to Bud, had lost all meaning. Each second stretched into minutes, and seconds became hours that felt like days. All he knew was that he didn't feel dead yet. He wondered if he would feel dead when he was.

His sense of direction had also departed—once he toppled over the ledge, his equilibrium became useless. This was normal. Bud's balance had always been poor, and he needed his feet to be firmly on the ground at all times. When he was a child and his mother had tried to make him comfortable somersaulting underwater at the pool, he never made a full circle, always breaching the surface halfway through, splashing and flailing and gasping for air. Bud's lack of balance made the current situation especially uncomfortable, and he mourned the fact that he would never feel solid ground again, but

Bud resigned to this fact as well—that the fall was so long and the concrete path below so uncompromising, he was certain he would never feel anything again.

He still had most of the way to go. Bud had begun falling only a second ago and he guessed that there were seventy feet or so left. Maybe his outlook on his future would change by the time he landed. Maybe a breeze would pick up and lay him gently in the lap of a plump, cushiony woman, or push him toward an obese man with a sense of humor. Bud would bounce off his belly like a trampoline and land on his feet, brush the wrinkles out of his shirt and say, “Sorry for the trouble, let me buy you a hotdog.” Or maybe a child would be eating a bag of kettle corn three times his size—where did they put it all?—and Bud would land on it like a beanbag chair, before hopping up, eating a handful, patting the kid on the head and returning to his own boy up on the balcony. Bud searched for these people below but found none.

Barefoot, Bud stepped out of his empty house onto the porch, wearing checkered pajama bottoms and a white t-shirt. He cupped both hands around a steaming mug of coffee and saw the spiraled pattern of a spider’s web outlined in pearly dew, hanging where the left pillar met the porch ceiling, just above the steps that led to his front yard. Hundreds of clear spheres, each with an upside-down view of the world, hung from the web like pearls. A black-and-white spider the size of a fifty-cent piece waited in the middle.

Bud moved closer to the web, partly urging the creature to pounce so he could crush it, and another part wishing to cup it in his palms and keep it. He inched forward and invaded its space, but the spider remained still. Bud reached for a broom leaning

against the house, next to the window of the room that used to be Devon's, and used the handle to wrap the web in circles as if it was a stick of cotton candy. Briefly the spider darted, but stopped and resigned control to Bud. He did his best to keep the spider on the outside of the web to prevent its body from becoming devoured within its own trap.

Bud held the broom at a distance as he walked toward the single tree in his yard, an old oak, and paused to look at the clouds suppressing the sunlight. He passed the tire swing and rested the broom handle against the trunk, hoping the spider would crawl up the bark and create a new home there, and he went back inside.

Bud sat in his dusty Chevy in an empty parking lot near Busch Stadium and compared the winding bridge system of downtown St. Louis to the spider's web. It was a quarter past noon. He shifted in his seat and scanned the radio for talk. Through his passenger window he saw Maria drive into the parking lot in their once-shared car, with Devon peeking out from the back seat.

"Here he is," Maria said to both boys as Devon let himself out of the car and hugged his father. Speeding cars on the interstate above echoed off the asphalt and for a moment they all looked at each other.

Bud broke the silence. "Did you bring your glove?" he asked.

"Yes," Devon held out his worn baseball mitt. *Devon* was printed along the side of the index finger slot.

"Perfect," Bud said. He held up a glove of his own. "I've got mine, too." His was paler and fraying, considerably more used. He scooped Devon off of his feet and into his arms and squeezed him. "Maybe we'll catch a foul ball."

“Or a homerun,” Devon said. “The radio said it might rain.”

Bud looked at the cloudy sky. “It won’t,” he said. He looked at Devon and noticed Maria had cut his hair. “Thanks for dropping him off.”

“You’re welcome,” Maria said. Their eyes met and looked away.

For the third time, Bud’s head was above his feet, the way he had been before falling over the rail designed to keep him alive.

He admired the stadium from this angle: each of the forty-six thousand seats held a body. It was a sea of red shirts and hats, dotted with the flesh of faces and rolled up shirt sleeves. He watched as kids chased each other in the walking areas, threading long adult legs. Crowds this size fascinated Bud. That so many people could come to the same place at the same time and do the same thing; the concept seemed so unlikely.

But this crowd would not remember Bud well, and he did not blame them. They would say he was irresponsible, leaving his son in the stadium with no one to take him home, watching his father’s death and looking toward a life without one. The replays would show Devon looking down, reaching out for his father’s hand with his baseball mitt while his other arm held onto the barrier.

Bud tried to shift his thoughts but he couldn’t. He remembered the first time he lost Devon. They had been at a friend’s house while Maria was out-of-state on a work trip.

Devon was the only child present. Bud had tried to coax the boy into sleeping by leaving him on the couch in the living room with the lights off and a cartoon playing in the background. He gave his son a blanket and met his friends on the back porch where

there were beers, barbeque, and drinking games. Twenty minutes later, Bud returned inside and saw the couch was empty.

“Dev?” he called. “Dev, where are you?”

He walked down the dark hallway and pushed open the door to each room, but they were vacant. Devon hadn’t opened any doors at home yet, and Bud knew the boy lacked the strength to turn a knob. He was only sixteen months old.

“Devon?” Bud said more aggressively than intended. His voice took after his father’s: angry, a habit he broke when he could. Now he could but chose not to. He stopped moving and listened. He heard muffled laughter from outside, but indoors it was silent. He realized the boy was not inside—Devon did not understand how to be quiet—when they played hide-and-seek, he gave away his spot immediately. Bud crossed the tiled kitchen, opened the sliding glass door to the backyard, and poked his head through the opening.

A dozen men and women stood on a cement patio in front of a green yard enclosed by a wooden fence. In the middle of the patio was a glass table full of beer cans, a bag of chips, an ashtray, and a dinner plate with cocaine remnants and a rolled-up dollar bill. A grill seared chicken, and a thirty-pack of beer lay on the ground with the cardboard ripped open.

Bud knew it wasn’t possible, but he asked anyway. “Devon hasn’t come out here, has he?”

“I haven’t seen him,” one of the men said.

“Did you lose him?” Gloria asked. It was her house.

Bud looked down. “No, he’s around here somewhere.” He went back inside and slid the glass door shut behind him. Gloria opened it and followed him.

“I remember him being on the couch when we went outside,” she said.

“That’s where I left him.” Bud touched his hand to his forehead and closed his eyes. “I already looked in the rest of the rooms.”

“Did you look out front?” Gloria asked.

“He can’t turn the knob,” Bud said. Aloud the claim sounded less confident than it had in his head.

“They can’t until they can,” she answered, and went out the front door. Bud followed her.

“Devon,” they called back and forth as they walked down the street, through the grass of the undivided front yards. It was eighty-five degrees and humid; Bud sweat through his white shirt and a wet spot formed on his back. Ten feet ahead of Bud, Gloria looked side-to-side as she called Devon’s name, her hair following each swivel of her head.

Bud watched her and became frustrated. He ran up to catch her.

“Hey,” Bud said, “Devon is my son. I’ve got this.”

“I’m just trying to help,” Gloria said.

“Well, help less. Follow me.” Bud walked forward and Gloria waited until he was ten feet ahead of her. She then followed slowly and kept her distance.

When they reached the fourth house down the street, a man who looked to be in his eighties sat in the shade of an open garage door in front of a blinding cement driveway.

“This little guy yours?” he called. He sat in a red lawn chair and wore a Cardinals ballcap and a plaid button-down shirt under a pair of overalls. A baseball game was being called on a radio. The man held Devon’s arms in the air as he stood on the man’s legs and smiled, then threw up on the concrete.

Bud felt sick.

He now faced the ground. The cement walkway looked less than twenty feet away, and he figured it wouldn’t be long—just one second, probably—to cover the remaining distance. Though his body flailed, searching for the balance it would never achieve, he felt that if he shut his eyes he would know which way was up and which was down, and that if he made it out of this, he would be able to somersault underwater.

A gnat hit the back of his throat.

He remembered how he had taught Devon to somersault at the lake the past summer. Devon had been five and he and Maria were at the beginning of their separation. Bud played with Devon in the clear water where it was a little over three feet deep. Sand and pebbles covered their toes and their feet scraped hidden rocks and boulders, pain they laughed off.

When they found a spot deep enough and without rocks, Bud held his arm in front of him as sturdy as he could, and Devon, in a green snorkel mask and inflatable arm floats, swung around it like a monkey on a branch. Once Bud’s right arm got tired, he switched to his left, and after a few minutes Devon was spinning in the water without the need of his father’s arm at all.

Bud was so close to the pavement now that he was almost touching it. He laid in what would be his final position, facing the sky. He searched for Devon, but he had lost track of the boy, and Bud was okay with this because this was what he always did. He lost everything. His wife, balance. His life, Devon.

The boy was up there somewhere, Bud knew, but his vision was blurry now and he could only see shapes. He felt a change in the way the clothes felt on his back: they were touching the concrete. A raindrop landed on his forehead, and the big, spring drop traveled through Bud's body and made him warm. He tried to muster a wave to Devon, wherever the boy was, but the pull from gravity wouldn't let him move his arm.

Checkers is My Temple

“hey,” I said to Haze in a text message. Haze was a quasi-friend and clingy former client from my online sex work. He was obsessed with me. “you want to watch a movie tonight?” I knew he would say yes, and I felt bad leading him on, but fuck it. It would be worth it for him in the end. He was just a pawn.

It was mid-morning on a Friday, and I was only fifteen minutes into my shift. I pressed send and put the device in my jeans pocket and began bagging the groceries of the next person in line at Checkers, a woman who appeared to be purchasing packets of frozen farm-raised fish, processed deli meats, genetically modified vegetables and other garbage. A cart full of unhealthy options I couldn't let pass without attempting to dialogue and dissuade her, but she was refusing to participate.

“The conditions in which these animals live before they are killed is appalling,” I said as I put a pound of the cheapest eighty-twenty ground beef we offered into her grocery bag (which was plastic even though I had given her the option of paper, in addition to the alternative option of purchasing a reusable bag for a mere ninety-nine cents). “Have you seen the most recent documentary about what actually happens in the meat-packing industry? It's reprehensible.”

That morning I was also experimenting with the decision to stop blinking in order to let people know they were receiving my full attention. I noticed that when I did this,

most people were unable to connect their eyes to mine for extended periods of time, breaking eye contact in order to look at anything but me. *Cowards*, I thought. *They need help. They need to be shown the truth, they just don't know it—how to receive it.* This was true for all humans, and I was going to make them change, starting with Haze.

I spoke and packed and packed and spoke, yet the woman continued her refusal to acknowledge me, which was far-fetched considering my unrelenting stare in her direction. She even went so far as to start a nonsense conversation with the woman behind her—an eye-catching blonde woman wearing an elegant outfit of a blindingly white sundress, a straw hat with a red band around its base and a small, black, curly-haired dog in her arms. Her eyes were dark—black, even—and she seemed to only be purchasing a box of matches and a jug of lighter fluid. When I looked at her she looked directly at me, and I was both alarmed and impressed when it was I who was weak and unable to maintain eye contact.

I finished bagging the woman's groceries and handed her the items, but in the exchange, I accidentally dropped them on the ground, spilling and cracking her eggs (she had bought the kind that was Styrofoam-encased, non-organic, and non-free range or even cage free) and milk (also non-organic), which burst open and spilled across the tiled floor. I grabbed a nearby rag and got down on my knees, continuing my diatribe. "You have to vote with your dollar," I said to her as I pushed the milk and broken eggs to a pile in the center of the floor. "Unless you stop buying these brands, they'll never change their inhumane practices." Milk and egg soaked my knees as I continued to sop up the spill. The woman watched silently and glanced left and right as if she were humiliated; the woman behind her with the dog had vanished—she must have found a different line.

Plastic versus paper, free-range versus not, mass-produced meats—these things had begun to irk me in a way that I had found to be nearly uncontrollable. How could people make these choices and eat these things that were so clearly detrimental to the environment, especially when a virtually identical, just-as-effective but environmentally-conscious, narrowly higher-priced option was available? I couldn't understand.

“Of course,” Haze responded. Eager, obsessed. “What do you want to watch?” How did the Christian god—arguably the most successful religious narrative of all time—save the world? By forcing his son through an experience.

“i don't know. we'll find something. but when you come over i'm going to save you.”

Ten or fifteen minutes passed before Haze answered, but I knew he was at work so it didn't bother me.

My phone dinged. “Lol. What?”

“i'm going to save you,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“i want you to see me for what i really am.”

“Lol alright. I can't wait.”

“have you eaten breakfast yet?”

“No.”

“good. don't eat anything for the rest of the day.” Haze liked this, I'm sure.

Abandoning total control.

“I won't.”

* * *

Whoever is reading this needs to know one thing. That I, Alexander Llewelyn Bishop, am a god. I first understood this while under the influence of an isolated peyote ritual down in the Arizonian desert, but I'd had an inkling long before then.

Years previous, about seven or eight before today, I began to understand how special I was. Not physically—I'm only slightly taller than the average American male at six foot two-and-a-quarter inch without shoes. I exercise with weights and I'm stronger than most people with a similar body frame, but I wasn't naturally athletically gifted from birth. I simply desired to create the most perfect body I could achieve—the Greeks did the same thing. Physically speaking, I am above the average human being. My penis size is only slightly larger than average at six and seven-eighths of an inch when erect.

Although I can't do it now, I long jumped eighteen feet and eleven inches at a time when I was training my cardiovascular and muscular systems with the highest intensity I have so far attained in my current form. I have thrown a weighted disc over three hundred yards. I'm white, which, due to sociological factors, means people are more likely to follow what I have to say. I'm charming, I'm intelligent, I'm chosen. I'm a god.

I'm also a bagger at a grocery store called Checkers, which is the perfect job to have if you like interacting with people. I do. I'm not interested in the money—they could throw my check in the trash for all I care. You see, years ago, about ten from today, when I was eighteen, I began accumulating wealth as an online sex worker. I masturbated for mostly men in front of the camera on my computer and the amount of money I was able to make was surprising, to put it mildly. I made a lot. My bank account erupted and in addition to money I received gifts which were often just as good as the money, if not better. For example, some of the gifts I've received have been a new computer, name

brand clothes and shoes, all-inclusive vacation packages, musical instruments (guitars, both electric and acoustic, and a six-piece drum set), and more. Two males who really liked me, maybe even loved me—one of whom was Haze—took up payments on my car and rent. I briefly lived with Haze after exiting college with an undergraduate degree in biology and he continues to deposit money in my bank account to this day on which I continue to live quite comfortably.

I have, over the past two years, cut down my online sex work down to almost nothing. Imagine your favorite professional athlete—the amount of attention they receive, whether they want it or not, and how valuable their time is. Now imagine me—a god—and my time, the things I realized I must do to help the people of this world. What better way to reach them than to act like one of them: an average person with an average job, and gently nudging them in the right direction. Some people were difficult to reach—like the lady in line had been—but others I found to be quite receptive. I cornered them in the frozen food section and showed them my research, and they promised me they would continue the research on their own when they got home. They didn't know it, but Checkers was where I could lead them toward the truth, and when they asked me, "Where is the aisle for chips?", they were actually saying, "Show me the way."

You may be surprised that it was mostly men who were interested in my online services, but men, I believe, are more likely to reach far out of their way to find what they need sexually. And today, in (but not limited to) America, where men are trained to ignore emotions and repress urges (women are also taught to repress sexual urges, however, emotional acknowledgement is celebrated), it became clear to me that the

Internet allowed desolate and often pathetic losers of men an anonymous place to explore their sexuality.

Over time, these men's attraction toward me turned pitiful and I realized I may have been doing more harm than good. That was when I picked up this job at Checkers and performed less and less online. Of course, sometimes the benefit outweighed the means—in Haze's case, for example, who had become my first and most ardent follower. But for the other hundreds (probably thousands) of men who only wanted a quick release, my duty as a god got lost in the Internet's chaos.

There was another reason I considered quitting altogether—a girl who I met in college and with whom I fell deeply in love and who loved me back. Strong; our bond was fashioned out of cable-laid wire-ropes. I hadn't felt a love like this but once when I was fourteen and learned what it felt like to develop a true connection with another person.

Mayumi was Japanese, and though everyone aside from me called her by the English name she'd chosen—Margaret—I called her Mayumi, the birth name given to her by her parents, May for short. When we were together, nothing mattered except us and our bodies. Simply touching and talking was enlightening and energizing and we never wanted to quit. We fueled each other merely by being alive. When we were apart—which happened only by necessity—we daydreamed about each other and allowed things we had previously found important to fall to the wayside. We didn't waste time making it official—we moved in together as soon as it was logistically possible, when I was twenty and she was twenty-one.

May wasn't bothered by my sex work—that's how amazing she was. She wanted me to be successful in whatever it was that I wanted to do, and though I didn't want to do sex work forever, I knew the money I was stacking up would provide for us for years to come, maybe even for the rest of our lives.

However, our relationship only lasted four years. She took a job in San Francisco the same month I graduated, and I moved with her and we lived together in a one-bedroom apartment downtown. Through her high salary and my never-ending stream of money we afforded the city's skyrocketing rental rates with ease. But it was there our relationship would crumble, when after a fourteen-gram psilocybin mushroom binge (the largest dose I have taken to date, done so out of boredom from canceled plans to meet a friend at the Golden Gate Park for a game of disc golf), I threw her laptop out of our third-floor window and onto the street. I demonized the scorching blue light from the computer screen and was overcome with rage toward its centrality in our lives. I couldn't deal with the computer merely being off—I needed it to be destroyed. Mayumi, in her unbelievably kind nature, forgave me for that, but later, when I engaged in sexual acts with a female masseuse, she kindly asked me to leave.

It's important that you understand I loved Mayumi with all my heart, so I must explain why I chose to engage sexually with another woman. I had never been an untrustworthy companion before this encounter, and I don't consider myself to be an untrustworthy one now. But as I sat alone in our apartment one day, cleverly developing ways to spend my time—exercising, exploring, writing, growing—I came to the realization that I hadn't, and may never understand the feeling of cheating. The feeling of betraying the person I cared about most, the intense shame that would accompany an act I

could never go back and change. Surely it would be one of the strongest feelings of guilt and criminality, and I am nothing if not someone who openly experiences each new thing I can find in life. So, I paid the kind young masseuse for a hand job. I did not engage further than that, and I had been correct: with unfathomable immediacy I felt like committing suicide in the most painful way possible and would have done so had Mayumi asked me. She didn't; she was too perfect to ask for something so painful and permanent. She only asked me to leave, which was also painful and permanent.

Now, listen, when I say I am a god, I mean I am one of the chosen ones. I am probably the only chosen person alive in North America at this time, and maybe currently living on this earth. They—or better yet, we—don't come often, and even when one is alive, they may not succeed in forming a movement. The last one here in America was Joseph Smith, over one hundred and fifty years ago, unless you include L. Ron Hubbard, who was simply a con artist (though an effective one, there's no denying that). I can't say with one hundred percent certainty that I am the *only* chosen one alive right now, there's no way to know. There are 1.34 billion people currently alive in India, and 1.39 billion alive in China. The world is at its highest population in the history of humanity and, statistically speaking, it would come as no shock to me to find that another person in another country has been chosen in the same way I have. Odds are, though, at least in North America, it's just me.

I must also make clear, since we're dealing in the realm of gods and power and the unseen, that I am not a religious person, however, I was raised in a Protestant household in St. Louis, Missouri, as the only child of my mother and stepfather, though they both had children from previous unsuccessful attempts at having a family.

There were two sons on my stepfather's side who lived with their birth mother and stepfather of their own in a nearby town in Illinois, and a daughter on my mother's side who lived with her birth father and stepmother. My birth father was raising another family with another woman (technically my stepmother, I suppose, though we've never met) somewhere in California with a boy of their own, technically my half-brother (who I've also never met), and my live-in stepmother had a daughter being raised by the ex-wife of her birth father. Yet somehow, in all this, I technically remain an only child. My mother, stepfather and I would go to a church in downtown St. Louis by ourselves every Sunday morning, and on holidays the stepsiblings and their respective formations of parents and families were cordial and in close enough proximity to join each other and enter the congregation as one large amorphous blob of a family.

Yet even with, or perhaps despite my classically American upbringing made up of indoctrination, arbitrary rules, and shame-based morality-enforcement, religion was never able to sink its teeth into me; it just seemed too labyrinthine to be true. Maybe it was anger spawned from instances like when my mother tithed away thousands of dollars while refusing to pay for desperately needed braces when I was entering my pre-teenage years. Or the hypocrisy I noted as a child seeing homeless people sleeping on the steps of our church's front doors. "Why don't they let them sleep inside and make them leave in the morning?" I childishly asked, but no answer I heard ever satisfied this question. When I learned churches paid no taxes and saw the prestige of our pastor's car and house—far nicer than ours—the final nail on the cross had been pounded. I swore the whole thing off.

But while I don't consider myself to be religious, it would be in error to say that my thoughts, judgements, and decisions are completely god-free, though "god" must be altered to describe the collective consciousness of the world we inhabit. For example, killing living things, littering, destroying the environment, or simply being willfully ignorant of these crises—these are unquestionably against the "will of god," or the "will of the world," however you want to phrase it. I was raised to "Love thy neighbor," and to "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." These trite quips won't leave my head, but they need not be bound by Christian dogma to be effective rules of thumb by which a person can live and be a contributing member of society. Perhaps paradoxically, I can see now that my non-religious conformity certainly played a role in my being chosen as a god. Jesus didn't maintain the status quo; he shook up the Roman system and was killed for it. Joseph Smith was killed for modernizing Christianity. Muhammad killed others for their lack of faith toward his teachings. Yet each prophet spent every waking breath saving the souls of those who they encountered. Everything that played a part in my evolution—sexual experimentation, religious indoctrination and the rejection thereof, Mayumi—formed me into exactly what I needed to be. I suppose it's ironic that I had to ingest mescaline—a psychedelic, mind-altering substance—from the peyote cactus and temporarily change my consciousness in order to discover something that had been a part of me my entire life, though dormant. But divinity is complex that way.

* * *

It was later in the day and I was still at Checkers ready to go on break. I had been there for four hours and had some successful conversations with a solid handful of

shoppers, preaching around the store and especially in the checkout line, my pulpit; I felt good about the day's production value.

I walked to the back, behind the customer service center and toward the employee break room. The hallway went through the break room and led to men and women's changing areas. Along one wall were lockers. I opened my locker with a key from my keychain and began to take off my forest green work shirt—I don't relax in the same clothes I work in—and began to change right there in the hallway. Before I could remove my shirt, my boss Ms. Taylor tapped me on the shoulder.

"Afternoon, Alex," she said. Ms. Taylor was a young and attractive woman to have as a boss. Although I wasn't aware of her actual age, she looked like a forty-five-year-old who had taken care of her body and skin and was blessed with the good fortune of quality genes; a combination that made her desirable to most of the men I worked with.

"Good morning, Ms. Taylor," I said. "How are you?" I widened my eyes and held them open—perhaps she would appreciate my display of complete attention.

"I'm fine, Alex, how are you?" Without waiting for an answer, she continued. "Would you mind coming to speak with me in my office?"

"Sure," I said. She turned around and walked back the way I had come, toward the customer service area and opened her heavy, blue metal door with a sign that still read "Mrs. Taylor," though she had been divorced for over a year.

As we walked, I looked out toward the store and a person caught my eye: it was the woman in the hat with the red band from earlier, with her black, curly-haired dog still in her arms. She was wearing sunglasses, but carried no basket or cart of groceries, and it

was clear that she was looking at me. I stopped in my tracks between the two counters of customer service agents and looked back at her. She looked at me for what seemed like an eternity but didn't move. I waved but still she stared, immobile.

"Alex," Ms. Taylor said. "Are you coming in?" She was seated behind her desk and facing me.

"Yes, sorry," I said. I took another look at the woman whose sunglasses were now off and if there had been a doubt before, there wasn't now—she was looking directly at me. Her eyes, pitch black, were impenetrable. I blinked, then shook my head, regaining my wits. I turned and entered Ms. Taylor's office, shutting the door behind me, and sat down in a chair facing her.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Ms. Taylor sighed. "Marcel told me that you got into a fight with a customer yesterday and dropped her bags on the ground. Is that true?"

"Yes. I mean, I know what he's talking about, but I didn't get into a fight with her, we were just talking."

"But you dropped her groceries on the floor and they spilled?"

"Yes, but it was an accident. And she was behaving rudely and wouldn't listen to me."

Ms. Taylor sighed again and leaned back in her chair. She seemed to be gathering her thoughts before deciding how to continue. "Look, I just got back from Scottsdale visiting my kids, and there have been seven complaints about you since I've been gone. Seven, Alex. I've only been gone for three days."

"What are the others?" I asked.

She flipped through some papers that were stapled together. “Most of these are from customers who say you’ve made them feel uncomfortable. A couple of these are from your own coworkers. They say that you’ve been saying weird things and honestly, scaring them.” She looked up at me, then flipped to the last page of the packet. “This says you told someone you are ‘chosen.’ What is that all about?”

“Who said that?”

“I can’t say who it was Alex, but answer me. Did you say that?”

“Yes,” I said, “I said that, and I’m sorry the customer became frightened.” I waited a second before I continued. “That was not my intent. My intent was to help them. As much as I could.”

“Help them with what?”

“With reaching their potential. By following me on a path to enlightenment.” Ms. Taylor looked at me, quietly, as if she were digging into my brain. Before she could say anything, I added, “It’s true though. I have been chosen.”

“What?”

“I’m a god.” I grinned as she studied my face. My smile was wide, I could feel it approaching my ears.

Suddenly, she smiled and laughed. “You’re funny, Alex, you really are. I’ve always thought you were smart. Look, I’m not going to fire you, but I *am* going to move you into the back where you’re not going to be interacting with shoppers. I don’t want you saying those things to people anymore. You’re going to stock the dairy products and frozen foods.”

I thought about how to respond. “Thanks Ms. Taylor, but I’m not interested in doing that.”

“Well, that’s where I’m putting you. So go ahead and get with Fred in the back and he’ll show you what to do. And you’re going to need a sweater back there, it’s pretty cold.”

“I’m sorry Ms. Taylor, but that’s not happening.”

She scoffed. “Yes, it is,” she answered bluntly. “I’m moving you to the back.”

“No, it’s not,” I responded. I took my shirt off and put it on her desk and shivered as my bare skin met the air. I tightened my abdominal muscles. “Thanks anyway, but I won’t be doing that.”

“You’re quitting?”

“Yes. I wanted this job to talk to people. If I can’t do that, I don’t want it.”

“Fine,” she said. She picked up the shirt from her desk and threw it in the corner. “See you, then.” She grabbed a pen out of her mug and started writing on one of the papers in front of her.

“I hope so,” I said, smiled, and left, shutting the door behind me.

* * *

When I had first arrived at my university in early August at eighteen years of age, I hadn’t had so much as a sip of beer my entire life—my body had always been in peak physical shape, and I enjoyed how easily strength and flexibility came to me, and how it impressed those who saw what it could do. Jeopardizing this with poisonous substances, I thought, would only succeed in regressing me either physically, mentally, or both. I continued my physical lifestyle, and within a month I participated in daily practices with

rugby, ultimate Frisbee, basketball, and table tennis. In addition to schoolwork, I was a busy man, but with these collegiate teams I learned that most of the participants of each sport fetishized binge drinking and cannabis use, and though I held out for a few weeks, eventually I experimented too. Finally, after a team-bonding drinking game with the ultimate Frisbee team involving being held upside-down by the ankles and slurping beer out of a disc, I relaxed my black-and-white view of drug and alcohol use. I saw the benefits of participating in social events, and though I never became much of a drinker, I smoked cannabis often and felt intrinsically drawn to other mind-altering substances that grew from the earth. As I experimented further, I found that psychedelics were most effective in clearing me of the mental debris that inhibited my true self. Psilocybin mushrooms and lysergic acid diethylamide transformed my body into a seamless conduit through which something greater than myself could flow. If my body was a tube, my first psilocybin mushroom experience was a pipe cleaner. I became energetic, clear-headed, and powerful. Each step was with purpose, and I knew that I was different from everybody else.

After college, and after I left San Francisco and moved back to St. Louis, I read about a place in the uncultivated Arizonian wilderness called the Peyote Way Church of God, where participants employed the naturally occurring hallucinogen found in Peyote cacti known as mescaline in the same way indigenous people had done for thousands of years. I had invited Haze; however, he lacked the confidence to consume an ego-destroying dose of peyote and politely declined.

I boarded my yellow 700 c Schwinn Herald road bicycle with a buckled helmet and traveler's backpack (packed with a one-person tent, sleeping bag, cast iron frying

pan, glass water bottle, Nature's Own granola bars and other snacks, two shirts, two pairs of underwear and socks, two shorts, a box of waterproof matches, one bar of Dove soap, a toothbrush, and Tom's fluoride-free toothpaste) cinched tightly, and started pedaling alone and heading west, from Eastern Missouri toward Arizona and the Peyote Way Church of God.

The Peyote Way Church of God had a certain way of doing things, and though anyone could participate—one didn't need to be a member of any tribe or specific state—the person ingesting the tea, prepared by brewing and steeping peyote cactus buttons, had to be alone. "Another person," claimed their website, "could be a distraction from prayer and communion with the deity." After a supervised twenty-four hour-fast during which I rested in a room with a carpet, a bed, and a desk, provided by the church, they set me out in the blistering Arizona desert—it was July, mind you—with a ten-by-ten-by-ten square foot canopy tent, a chair, a yoga mat, a sleeping bag, and a gallon of water. I was encouraged to bring a hat and a book, more water if I thought it necessary, and pens and paper to record my thoughts over the eight- to twelve-hour mescaline trip. The church owned over sixteen-hundred acres of land, four-hundred of which were designated to me and my trip, with my little white tent smack dab in the middle. There were four plots in all, allowing for four "travelers" to make their journey at the same time.

When I arrived and throughout my day-long fast, the church preached a few benefits of the journey I was about to take although I had read it online already. They told me about the blessings and benefits a journey with peyote often brings to its participants, such as the "introspection and examination of conscience," "forgiveness of self and

others, renewed confidence, improved health, and a healthy attitude,” and “a loss of selfishness and awareness of the god within.”

And then, finally, on a completely empty stomach, I ingested the tea.

It’s impossible to describe what my roughly ten or eleven hours under the influence of both the peyote tea and the scorching desert sun was like, and though as I already stated, I had had an inkling before that I was special—more than just a simple earth-walker—in this experience, the church couldn’t have been more correct. I clearly saw the god within me. I knew I had a purpose—that my life meant something more for the world at large. I could feel it in every cell of my body, in every inhalation, pulsing through each vein. A glow emanated from me like an aura, a glow that I still feel to this day, a glow now backed by the knowledge that it was placed in me for a reason.

* * *

I walked the short walk home from Checkers to my apartment complex. When I arrived, I rolled a joint with organic hemp wrap and organic, hydroponically grown cannabis and put two tabs of lysergic acid diethylamide under my tongue. I opened the sliding glass door and sat on my balcony in the brittle white-and-yellow aluminum-and-vinyl lawn chair given to me by my mom as a housewarming gift which she had proudly found for a quarter at a yard sale, puffing on the joint as the tablets dissolved.

My balcony faced a green recreational area shared by the entire complex which was made partially private from the city streets by each of the monotonous blue-grey and brown buildings that almost acted as a fence. An empty basketball court enclosed by a black chain-link fence was to my left, and a covered pool enclosed by an identical, yet shorter black chain-link fence sat in the middle, with all the land to the right covered in

dark green, healthy grass used by tenants playing flag-football games or soccer, though this was empty too. A cement walkway wound around all the equipment, curving in and out at random places with exits from the path leading to the entrances of each building. Squirrels chased each other around the few meager tree saplings sprinkled by the walkway and about the square. The bounces from their bushy tails intensified with each hop.

I realized I wanted to be closer to the animals and to feel the grass under my feet and between my toes, so as little light giggles began to creep out of my mouth, I raised myself, feeling weightless from my drugs, and floated out my front door and down the shaded wooden steps. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, cold from the cement emanated into the soles of my feet and into my ankles and up my calves. I laughed at this feeling, turned the corner, and walked to the back. As soon as I reached the edge of the cement, I plunged my feet into the warm grass, feeling the dirt and the base of each blade. I scrunched my toes, digging them into the thick, damp earth. I noticed each prick from each blade as they sliced tiny slits into my skin, disguised as a tickle. It was a manicured lawn and had been recently mowed. I bent over and brushed the tips of the blades with my hand, and when my fingers unintentionally brushed the top of my foot, it tickled, and my body convulsed in an orgasmic wiggle.

I looked up at the sky and squinted into the sun, then noticed a woman—the same woman (again?) from Checkers that morning. She still wore her huge straw hat with a red band, the blindingly white sundress, and was now walking her little black dog on the sidewalk, approaching me. She wore flip-flops on the hot pavement and her dog trotted alongside her in the grass, uninterested in any scents or sounds. In fact, he seemed to be

only interested in me. I watched them walk in my direction, she with her head down and the dog, watching my moves in a way that felt like judgement.

I was really tripping now, and the colors around me—green grass, blue sky, white clouds, this woman’s peach skin, white hat, red band, the dog’s black fur—swirled like liquid, touching and bending each other’s boundaries like oily paints in a pond of water. The woman’s hat drew my eyes like a magnet, and I found myself unable to pull them away from her. As she came closer, less than twenty feet away or so, she looked at me. I didn’t notice before, but she was wearing brown sunglasses.

What a sight that must have been for her—me, in my silky blue athletic shorts and a plain white shirt, barefoot with dirty toes, giggling and grinning wildly from ear to ear at the beauty of the nature surrounding us. The sound of crickets chirping, the drone from the cicadas, and the wind rustling vibrated thickly around my ears like earmuffs of rippling water after a stone strikes the surface. She stood there, an undeniably beautiful woman, with long, golden locks of hair spilling from under her hat and onto her shoulders. She and the dog both stared in my direction. She removed her sunglasses, and the centers of her eyes were just as I had seen them earlier—completely void of all color, like pitted olives.

“Hi,” I said, doing my best not to blink, but I couldn’t hold it—her gaze was too powerful. I looked away and blinked, smiling sheepishly.

The woman bent down and picked up her dog, holding it close to her chest. “Hi,” she said.

“Did I see you at Checkers this morning?”

“Perhaps.”

“You bought lighter fluid and matches,” I said and began giggling again. It was funny, at first, I had been absorbed in the woman’s eyes, but now my attention had been stolen by her dog. His mouth moved unlike any dog I had ever seen, forming shapes and vowels like a human, but the woman was saying the words. His stare was unwavering, exactly the kind I was aspiring to achieve.

“You will save Haze tonight,” she said. I quickly looked from her dog to her.

“You know Haze?” I asked.

“We both do,” she said. “Don’t we Cimeries?” She grabbed the dog’s paw and lifted it repeatedly, making it look like he was waving. The dog let this happen and his mouth started moving again, then the woman turned back to me and spoke. “Save Haze, and you’ll begin your journey to save everyone.”

“What do I do?” I asked.

“We’ll guide you.” She turned around and walked back the way she had come.

* * *

Later that night, around 7:00 pm, Haze came over and we each ingested five grams of psilocybin mushrooms, boiling them into a tea and drinking it then eating the squishy remains to ensure nothing went to waste. Instead of watching a movie, we hallucinated and talked with ambient electronic music thumping in the background. Stretches of silence and conversation rose and fell like a sine wave. Haze didn’t try to pursue me sexually—he knew I had no desire to engage with him and respected my boundaries. We passed around an organic hemp-rolled joint filled with cannabis flower and I told Haze about the woman in the white hat with a red band and her dog who I met earlier in the day, and Haze told me about an experiment they were doing in his

laboratory, in which they were injecting fish with a chemical and recording the rates at which their muscles atrophied. It was, Haze said, one in a series of serious steps to formulate a potential cure for Alzheimer's and dementia. Haze, obsessed with pleasing me as he most certainly was (controlling another human through sexual means—especially the withholding of—is a euphoric experience that should be taken whenever you have the chance), said nothing when I knew that his trip was taking him off into another land.

You see, earlier in the week I had received a package ordered from a site on the darknet containing sixty dried peyote cactus buttons, equal to four earth-shattering hallucinogenic experiences, six heavy ones, or ten average trips. Twenty of those buttons I ground into a powder and put into Haze's tea—I didn't let him into the kitchen to see I had brewed his batch separately. He would thank me later when he came back from his journey, realizing my true potential and his own potential as a follower. Haze was none the wiser—he laid his trust entirely within me and assumed whatever he was drinking was exactly what I had said it would be. I hadn't lied; I said we would be ingesting mushrooms, which we did. I only hoped that the twenty-button dose I supplied him with would be large enough to give him a mescaline trip similar to the one I had experienced in the Arizona desert, to crush his ego and find awareness of the god that was within me.

Two hours after we ingested the substances, Haze sat on my living room floor with his back against the front of my light brown recliner and described in detail his work. He was so lost within his mind that I was sure he had forgotten I was even there. "After we observe the fish for four days, we have to kill them," Haze said under his breath. "Their muscles get too weak, and their gills can't pull oxygen from the water

anymore. It takes about five days for that to happen, so we kill them by then. It's the law."

"How do you do it?" I asked. The ebbing and flowing intensity of the mushrooms crashed on me like ocean waves, sound and physical objects around me—my walls, furniture, and furry, carpeted floor—shared the same space. I could see the thumps from the music and smell each thing that surrounded me. When Haze spoke, the psychedelic fungi eliminated every possible distraction from my mind and generated a focus like looking through a tunnel.

"We break their necks," he said. "I pinch them with my fingers and snap them in half at the head." He paused, then added remorsefully, "It's the worst part of the job. But it could potentially save millions of human lives."

I watched Haze, waiting for his epiphanic moment to occur, to look at me in my divine light and fall to his knees, praying. He would hallucinate for upwards of twelve hours, so I would have to get comfortable and let everything take place when the chemicals desired. A couple times Haze vomited, first onto my carpet—which I didn't even bother cleaning up—and then into my toilet. I sat in my recliner with my eyes shut, seeing sounds and hearing colors that had never existed. I put a stocking cap on my head and pulled it down over my eyes and smiled so wide my cheeks touched either side. I wondered what the woman with the dog was doing now. Did she live nearby? Perhaps I should go see her, I thought, then Haze came out of the bathroom. I pulled the hat up from my eyes and saw he had vomit and blood all over the front of his grey sweatshirt.

"Where did the blood come from?" I asked. Did I say it or think it?

It didn't matter; Haze immediately said, "I threw up blood," and pulled flat his shirt to help me see it better. "This doesn't feel like anything I've ever taken before," Haze said, babyish and blubbering like he was going to cry, which was just one stop on his path. I had cried out in the desert—deconstructing mental barricades necessitates it. I turned back to face straight ahead and pulled the cap over my eyes.

"You're on peyote," I said. It was okay that I told him now, nothing he could do would take it out of his system. He was in the beginning stages of a half-day hallucination no matter what. "You're on peyote," I said again, giggling. "It's okay to tell you now, nothing you can do will take it out of your system," I mumbled. "You're in the beginning stages of a half-day hallucination no matter what..." my voice trailed off.

"What?" he said. He put his hand on the wall as if he was going to faint. "You put peyote in my tea?"

I had told him I would save him tonight. And when he saw me for who I was, he would be saved—he would see that I was a god. "I told you I would save you tonight," I said. "When you see me for who I am, you will be saved. You will see that I am a god."

"A god," Haze repeated, and looked down at his shirt. "I go outside." He could no longer speak in full sentences. He went to my front door and walked onto the wooden deck, leaving the door wide open. I followed him out—perhaps I would stumble upon that woman again. Haze took a step to descend the stairs, but his legs had weakened, he was really in no condition to be walking at all. They crumbled beneath him and Haze fell down the entire staircase, descending all three levels, tumbling end-over-end like laundry in a drying machine. When he finally reached the cement pavement on the bottom, his

head smacked the concrete with a whack so audible it sounded like a tree branch had snapped.

I thought about leaving him down there but decided to bring him back to my apartment. If this was the way he needed to be saved, I had nothing to be ashamed of. I walked down the stairs and took a good look at him: the right side of his forehead had been decimated by the concrete pad, flattened and oozing brain matter. Haze was in another realm, still living but no longer with me. He would have made a great follower. I hoisted him over my shoulder and carried him back to the top. I wrapped his clothed body in Saran Wrap and laid him on the tiled floor of my kitchen to rest.

* * *

The next morning, I was greeted by a stench and I knew that Haze needed to be disposed of. However, it was not quite 11:00 am and I feared that anyone seeing me move my friend's corpse may not understand what I had done for him no matter how hard I tried to explain it.

So, I waited. I smoked a joint and waited, and waited, and waited. The day was getting warm, and I removed all my clothes and sat on the vinyl lawn chair on my balcony and absorbed the pleasant midday sun. Eventually I fell asleep, and when I woke up the world was darkening around me. Haze's restful body patiently awaited my next action. He and I were both ready to give him a proper ceremony.

I redressed but chose to not wear shoes. I picked up Haze's body and slung it over my shoulder. He weighed, I guessed, around one hundred and seventy-five pounds. I left through my front door and down the stairs. It was only dusk, but I wasn't bothered as I had been earlier in the day about the possibility of anyone seeing us. When I reached the

bottom of the stairs, I opened the back door to my car and pushed Haze's stiff yet somehow floppy body inside and shut the door behind him.

I went back upstairs to collect some things—wallet, cellphone, etcetera—and when I came back, the woman in the straw hat with the red band stood by my car with her black, curly-haired dog in her arms. She was looking in the back seat of my car, then somehow intuitively—for she couldn't have heard me as I was shoeless and completely silent—she turned and looked at me. Her eyes, the color of pitch, were locked onto me.

I watched her as immobile as Haze—silently and nervously, though I'm ashamed to admit it. We stayed this way for such a period that the concept of time faded entirely. I couldn't look at her for more than a few seconds, so I periodically swiveled my head to look elsewhere. Her dog rustled and she stroked its head and neck slowly and gently. I felt compelled to say something.

“Were you at my store yesterday?” I asked.

“*Your* store?” she answered.

“Checkers, I mean.”

“Yes, I was. I saw you.” A moment passed.

“Checkers was my temple.”

The woman looked into the car.

“That's Haze,” I said.

“I know.”

“I'm saving him. Do you want to come?”

“Yes, I do.”

The woman got into the passenger seat with Cimeries and the four of us drove out of town until the roads lost their curbs and the vegetation grew taller and more unkempt. Until cracks and potholes became common, until pavement was lost altogether, giving way to rocks and gravel which eventually gave way to dirt. I didn't know where I was going—I had never been on any of these roads before, but something was guiding me—god? Cimeries?—and knew exactly where to go. After hours in the car, I pulled off onto a small dirt road, then a smaller one, and finally, the path simply ended, and I parked. It was a clearing with a hill about fifty yards to the right and a forested area and some rusty automobile trash to the left. The grass was flat and yellow, the dirt a light brown, and two small, round boulders laid not far from each other.

We both got out of the car without speaking and she let go of her dog and let him roam the area on his own. We opened both backdoors and she pushed Haze's feet toward me, and I grabbed his shoulders and pulled him out. His head banged the metal car frame as we dropped him to the ground. I dragged his body by the armpits to the rocks.

“Did you bring any matches?” I asked the woman.

“Of course,” she said, and gave me a box. I held it up.

“I have these same matches at home,” I said.

She made no noise as we gathered sticks and stones and large branches of wood from the nearby trees and worked together to create a fire. When the pile was large enough, about five feet high, we lit it, and when the fire was raging, we carried Haze's body and laid it on the top. It dwindled momentarily before melting the Saran Wrap and consuming Haze's clothes and hair and eventually melting his carcass. His skin burnt away, and his ribs stuck out which burned peacefully before glowing orange then white

then finally crumbling into ash. The dog wandered and explored the area but always came back to check in with the woman. The two of us sat on large rocks less than ten feet apart.

I couldn't put my finger on her, she was quiet but knowing, in an instinctual way. It seemed that she knew what I was going to do before I did it, and what I was thinking before I thought it. I looked at her as she watched the fire and I noticed things about her that I hadn't noticed before. Her lips glowed red, but it didn't look like she was wearing any makeup. Her gorgeous wavy hair looked too beautiful to be real. Her sundress now shone blindingly white—whiter than it had been before, so white it hurt my eyes. She looked into the fire, and orange ribbons flickered across her black eyes. At her ankles was her dog, who turned to look directly at me.

"I just realized, I don't know your name," I said to the woman. The woman looked at me, but it was the dog who answered in an incomprehensibly deep voice.

"Go into the fire and know me."

Before I decided to move my body rose and began to glide on its own. I floated; my muscles were no longer in my control and I felt immeasurably happy. My conception of earth and humanity shattered, and my ears rang. I felt euphoric, one hundred times the strongest orgasm I had ever felt. The feeling transcended my understanding of human pleasure entirely and erupted through my toes, fingertips, eyeballs, and scalp, out to the tips of each individual hair.

My body had reached the base of the fire, but my legs didn't stop moving.

"I'm there," I said.

“Join him,” said Cimeries in his low, rumbly voice. “He is waiting for you. He will serve you.”

I looked down as my bare, dirt-covered feet kept moving forward, finally stepping on the glowing coals, crumbling under my weight, and upward, stepping solidly on the logs that hadn't been burned through, and finally to Haze's body, whose organs had sizzled away and was now all bone burning like coals. I stood inside the body and turned around to face the woman and the dog. I watched the woman's face as her eyes were overcome with blackness, then I looked down at Haze.

I am a god.

Ole Smoky

Nashville, Tennessee

“Let’s see. You had burning during urination, right?” the nurse on the other side of the phone asked loudly and casually. I heard her mouse click in the background.

“Yes,” I answered.

“And when did you come in?”

“Tuesday, I think.”

“Okay, let me pull up your file here.” She breathed into the phone. Just from her breath I could picture her: beige handset held to her ear with her shoulder, mouth touching the plastic. “Can you verify your last name and date of birth?”

“Bastian, December fourth, nineteen eighty-eight.”

“Greg?”

“Yeah.”

“Greg, you tested positive for chlamydia.”

“Shit.” I grabbed my penis which tingled at the tip and burned through the urethra. The feeling went away when I was distracted, but each time it was mentioned the sensations appeared again. My underwear also felt scratchier than usual. “Well, I’m glad we know what it is. What do I do now?”

“Chlamydia is a bacterial infection. Come back to the clinic and we’ll give you an antibiotic to get rid of it. You said you don’t have insurance, correct?”

“Right,” I said. It was eleven a.m. and I stood barefoot in the kitchen without a shirt on, looking into the refrigerator. I wore silky basketball shorts that stopped at my knees. My right hand held the cellphone and my left index finger was in my bellybutton, looking for lint. While the lady talked, I stared at a loaf of bread on the middle rack and wondered what I could make with it. I took it out and set it on the table and searched for other ingredients. No meats, no cheese. I found some jam and a plastic jar of peanut butter which was cold and solid. I put my hand over the phone. “Sunny,” I yelled down the hallway, “stop putting the peanut butter in the fucking refrigerator.” I didn’t even know if he was home.

“That’s fine,” said the nurse. “We can prescribe and give you medication at no cost.” She paused as if waiting for me to say something. I didn’t. “Do you have any questions for me?” she asked.

Mimicking the nurse, I held the phone with my shoulder and ear and unscrewed the lid from the peanut butter jar and put it in the microwave. “Should I call the people I’ve had sex with and tell them that I have it?” I punched numbers into the keypad on the microwave and pressed start.

“That would be the nice thing to do, yes,” the nurse said, her voice becoming gentler.

“How far back, do you think?” I asked. The microwave hummed.

“You said the burning started about a week ago?”

“Maybe eight or nine days.”

“I’d go back at least a couple months. It could have laid dormant in your system before it started causing you problems.”

I groaned. I thought about the people I’d slept with from back home in Greenfield, Minnesota. The past few months had been a better-than-average hot streak, and there was a solid handful of people I would have to call.

“I don’t want to do that,” I said. “They’re going to be mad at me.”

“I know it’s a hard conversation to have,” the woman said. “But they’ll be glad you told them.”

“What if I don’t? It’s not illegal, right?”

“No, it’s not illegal if you choose not to do it. It would just be nice.”

“But I really don’t want to.”

“Well, it’s up to you.”

“You’re right. I’ll do it. Thank you.”

“Okay. Come into the clinic as soon as you can and we’ll get your prescription. And, this goes without saying, but try to avoid sexual contact until you finish the bottle.”

“I will. Thank you. I’ll be there soon.”

Abby

“Sup?” she answered. She was glued to her phone—texting, posting, commenting, liking. Our relationship had begun through social media and had stayed that way.

She was the first person on my list, which had to be written out like a to-do list in order to make sure I didn’t forget anyone. I figured the easiest way to remember

everything was to list each fling in chronological order, and if I contacted them in that order, I might be able to find out who gave me the infection.

Abby and I had used each other over the course of a few weeks after another shit relationship had just ended. Sex—that was it. No sleepovers or pretending like there was more than there was. She would dial me up around midnight, drunk though she was only twenty, and get dropped off at the door of the house I shared with three roommates, the house I lived before moving to Tennessee to work for John Tesh’s syndicated radio program. We didn’t use protection, she was Catholic and despised birth control, but when we came too close for comfort, she had no qualms when I asked her to take a Plan B.

She was the sister of a friend which put me in the depressing position of being unable to brag about it to anyone, which fucking sucked because she was hot. She had thousands of Instagram followers from traveling around the world, the type of travel that only hot, rich people can do. Her features were round and soft, and her cheeks were rose gold. When we hooked up, she had just returned from France and I couldn’t believe my luck when I found myself naked with her. I had a feeling that telling her about the STD (I refused to claim it as *my* STD yet) would be the most embarrassing conversation of all the ones that lay ahead of me, like getting a job at Google and revealing that I had never used a computer.

“Well, this is weird,” I typed as hot shame flashed down my face. I couldn’t go through with it. She was too hot. Too confident. I would give a different reason for why I’d messaged. Should I ask her to marry me? No, that was too extreme. Maybe I would tell her I was moving back to Minnesota and we could start a family together. She was Catholic, she might like that. Still extreme.

I was sentimentalizing. This was something I had learned about myself. I latched onto good memories and let the bad ones fly away. I narrowed my mind and tried to remember the person I was talking to. I remembered how she told lies—ah, yes, when we were getting to know each other, I had wondered if she was a pathological liar. She told fibs that simply could not be true. She once said she gave her boss, a married man, a blowjob for a promotion, which I was sure had come out of a movie. She said she had sex with a man from Paris at the top of the Eiffel Tower. They were the kind of stories that don't require rebutting, just a wow and a nod and, like a kid showing off a bad drawing. I reasoned that, as crazy as she pretended to be, she might not be too mad about this. She might even like it—a new sex story to tell, but one that was true. Determined, I hunched over and typed a short spiel I had worked in my head.

I sent: “I just found out that I have chlamydia”. The blue Snapchat arrow emptied into an outline, followed by a couple minutes of silence. I held my breath and was relieved when she didn't take a screenshot of the chat. She was good at social media, and if she wanted to humiliate me, she could do it effectively. I followed up with another message. “I just wanted to let you know that I have it, and that you might have it too”.

“Lol I don't have it,” she wrote.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I'm sure. I don't. But thanks for telling me you have it lol”.

“Haha no problem”.

“Is that all?” she asked.

I missed her but I wasn't sure why. Looks, of course, was one thing. Maybe it was some kind of prehistoric instinct, an evolutionary desire to create the most beautiful child

who would prolong my lineage. But there was something else. Her confidence, which I also hated. That was why, I understood, nothing had come from the two of us. Her confidence was the kind that can only exist in someone who will tell you that they fucked someone at the top of the Eiffel Tower and expect you to believe it. That is, the confidence of a crazy person.

“Yeah, that’s it. I hope you’re doing well”

“I am. Hope you’re good too”

I didn’t respond. I set my phone next to me on the futon and looked out my bedroom window at the front yard. My balls itched and it sent a flash of heat through my body. Each new feeling in the region made my heart skip a beat. Was this chlamydia or some new STD hybrid that hadn’t been discovered yet?

Maybe it lay dormant for so long that it had ravaged my body without my knowledge, and the doctor would have to remove my penis in an unfortunate but life-saving Lorena Bobbit situation. Or worse—I would keep my penis but never get an erection again. Lifelong impotence. Was life worth living knowing that getting laid wasn’t a possibility? That even if someone loved me, we would have to settle for heavy petting and nipple play? I was sweating.

I saw my reflection in the windowpane which returned my gaze as I reflected on the conversation I’d just had. Nashville’s humid summer heat radiated through the glass. Abby could be lying about not having it—how could she know so fast? Had she gotten tested? It was entirely possible that she was not telling the truth. I felt like I was on *Maury*. “The lie detector test has determined *that* was a lie.” She did have an undeniable record of lying, I reminded myself, and though she was overly confident, it was all fake.

Maybe our roles had been reversed and *she* had it but was too embarrassed to tell *me*. My heart had moved to my stomach through the course of the conversation, but it was slowly travelling back upward. I put a question mark by her name.

Stephanie

“Are you joking?” She laughed. Stephanie had a great smile, and I could hear it through the phone. It was nice to hear her voice.

I laughed too and looked down. “I wish it was a joke, but it’s not. I just heard back from the doctor today.” My right hand held the phone, and my left hand held my forehead; my elbows were on my thighs.

Stephanie had moved back to Greenfield after playing collegiate volleyball in Wyoming and graduating with a journalism degree. We had gone to high school together but never were in the same class and rarely talked. I hadn’t known much about her then, but now I knew she was into politics, Hank Williams, feminism, and anal sex.

“Women who are strong feminists are usually also the most...experimental,” she had told me one day in the backseat of her Camry. We were pulled off to the side of a dead-ended dirt road somewhere outside Greenfield. She chose her words deliberately. “I’ve noticed that. My sister likes it, too.”

We had dated for a year and broken up three months before I left Minnesota for Tennessee, before I hooked up with Abby. This was the shit relationship I mentioned before. After our breakup, Stephanie and I still had occasional sex that was angry and fun and made us feel better about the relationships we had destroyed. Our circle of friends

had split into two sects, one for each of us, and our families, who lived a block from each other back in Greenfield, had begun flipping each other off when they drove past.

I grunted and nodded. Cicadas buzzed and we were surrounded by fields on all sides, plus an oil rig to the side of us. It was the summer, and we were cramped and naked, sweaty and sticky, each with a foot out the window to catch a breeze.

“Who do you think you got it from?” she asked over the phone.

“I don’t know yet,” I said. I tried to stop sentimentalizing. I was doing it again. I missed her, though. Why hadn’t it worked out? I could think of nothing that should have stopped us from being together. “I thought it might have been you.”

She laughed. “Shut up. You need to start wearing a condom.”

“I know.” I remembered a song that we liked to quote sometimes. “Well, I guess this is growing up,” I said. She giggled. Our conversation paused, awkward and warm.

“I miss you,” she said.

“I miss you, too.”

“Do you think about me?”

“All the time,” I said. I knew where this was going. I put my hand in my pants.

“What do you think about?”

I laid back on the futon with my head on the wall and looked at the popcorn texture of the ceiling and waited for the right memory to come to mind. A few seconds later I said, “New Year’s Eve last year, when we took ecstasy and went out with your roommates to that club in St. Paul.”

“We stayed up until sunrise,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Usually I hate that, but I loved it then.”

“I loved it, too.”

We paused again.

“Are you touching yourself?” she asked.

“How did you know?” I asked. She laughed. “Are you?”

“Of course,” she said.

I laughed. “Good.”

“Tell me you love me,” she said.

“I love you.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you.” I knew that I’d regret jerking off once I came—my urethra would throb for a good half hour, inflamed—but I didn’t care.

“Promise me.”

“I swear. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

When the conversation ended, I filed what confusing feelings I had for Stephanie in a folder in my head titled, “Things I Will Never Understand,” and locked the ever-loving shit out of the drawer.

Hazel

I sent my friend Matthew a text because I knew he was at work and I didn’t have the number of the stripper we’d had sex with at a hotel downtown.

“Matt,” I wrote. “How are you buddy?” It was half an hour before he wrote back.

“i’m good man. how are you?”

Matthew was Portuguese and had moved to Minnesota with his family when he was around seven. He and his family were members of a Catholic church—the same church that Abby belonged to—that had been excommunicated by the Pope but that flourished in Greenfield. New members from around the world settled into town every year, buying large houses for their families with upwards of twenty kids—no shit—and if there weren't any houses large enough nearby, they would build them. Matthew and his family had been one of these transplants. He had a thick European accent that was augmented by a speech impediment that sounded like a heavy lisp.

About two weeks before I started driving to the Volunteer State, Matthew and I played tennis before getting drunk, doing cocaine, taking an ecstasy pill or two, driving to a strip club, and leaving their parking lot at closing time with a stripper named Hazel who looked younger but was actually five years older than either of us. I had given Matthew fifty bucks in one-dollar-bills at the club, and he had paid for the hotel room.

“Does your dick hurt?” I messaged him.

“haha. no man. are u joking?”

“No i'm serious”

“no mine doesn't. why? does urs?”

“Yeah it does. I have chlamydia. I just found out today”

“for real?”

“For real”

“damn that's crazy. how did u get it?”

“I don’t know. I thought it might have been from Hazel.” Which would have made sense, right? I mean, no disrespect, but she was a stripper. I’m sure she got laid. A couple minutes passed before he answered.

“it couldn’t have been from her because i’m still hooking up with her and i haven’t gotten anything yet”

“Shit, it’s a mystery then. I don’t know who it could be”

“i don’t know either. i’ve never had it”

“Damn.”

“how’s ur new job?”

“It’s fun, but I only work three days a week, five hours at a time so it’s not much money” *The John Tesh Show* was syndicated around the country, and my job was to operate the board, which is radio station-speak for babysitting the computer while the pre-recorded show played.

“come back and work with me. i can get u a job”

Matt made good money doing physical labor in an assembly line at a company in Greenfield owned by a wealthy Catholic man. It was generally accepted knowledge that you had to be a member of the church to work there.

“If it comes to that I will. I’ll come back to visit soon. I’ll let you know when I do”

“sounds good bro. sorry about ur dick”

Chelsea

Chelsea was an ex-girlfriend from college who had unsentimentally dumped me while living together in a house with six roommates. She said our relationship “just wasn’t fun anymore,” but in my head, it felt like rather than breaking up we had simply been put on hold. She was right; it wasn’t fun anymore and a separation was good. But it had never felt like more than that, a separation—there was something easy and comfortable about her, a homey feeling that made me think we would eventually get married. She was the last person from Greenfield I had sex with, and whoever had given me chlamydia—which could have been Chelsea, though I doubted it—she had it by now.

“Wow,” she said through the phone. “Thanks for telling me. I’ll go get checked out.”

“That’s probably a good idea.”

It rolled off her and she changed the subject.

“How is Nashville?”

“It’s not too bad. I work from midnight to five a.m. and fall asleep around six, then sleep till noon. I have the house pretty much to myself until five-thirty when my roommates get home.”

“What are your roommates like? They haven’t killed you yet?” She was referring to the fact that I had found the place on Craigslist.

“They’re nice. There’s Sunny, he just moved in too, he’s from Houston. And Paul who takes the rent, plus a couple others. Somebody keeps peeing on the floor in the bathroom and I can’t figure out who it is. But besides that, everybody’s cool.”

“Are you still talking to Stephanie?”

I knew this would happen. She always asked who I was dating. We didn't talk much when I dated someone else, but once I inevitably ruined that relationship, she wedged herself between us and tried to separate me from them entirely. Like a mom, watching out for my best interest. It was so annoying.

"Yeah, sometimes."

"You shouldn't lead her on, Greg." Her voice was stern.

"I'm not trying to." My voice was whiney.

"She is going to keep having feelings for you if you keep talking to her."

"I know," I said, a child being scolded.

"Alright, well thanks for calling," she said.

"No problem," I said. "Thanks for being cool about it."

"It's what I do." We hung up.

I took a break from the calls and went to the kitchen to find something else to eat. It was one-thirty and a Monday, which meant I didn't have to operate the soundboard for *The John Tesh Show* that night, and that it was okay to start drinking. I found a can of beer in the fridge and cracked it open.

On the back porch, Sunny was on his lunch break, sitting on a beach chair smoking weed out of a glass pipe. I walked out to see him and he hid the bowl behind him, relaxing when he saw who it was.

"Oh shit, I thought you were Paul," he laughed. Paul seemed like the kind of guy who hated drugs, and I understood why Sunny had freaked out.

"Nope, just me," I said. I motioned to the pipe. "You get high while you work?"

Sunny waved me off. “My job is easy. This actually helps me focus.” Sunny was Taiwanese and had adopted an easier-to-pronounce English name; I didn’t know what his real name was. He worked as some type of engineer who balanced car tires, programming the machines that did the balancing, or studied the numbers to make sure the tires were balanced, or something like that. I couldn’t remember how he had explained it to me. Companies like Goodyear, Bridgestone, Yokohama, all relied on people like Sunny’s mathematical genius to make their tires the best on the market. He took another hit of his pipe and held it toward me. “You want some?”

“No thanks,” I said. “If I get high now, I won’t get anything done the rest of the day.”

He nodded. “Who were you on the phone with?” he asked. “Your girlfriend?”

“No,” I said and paused, wondering if I should tell Sunny about the chlamydia. I had just met him a few weeks ago. If he learned I had an STD this soon, it would be a defining feature of me as long as we were friends. What the hell. “I have chlamydia,” I said. “I was letting this girl know.”

Sunny doubled over and laughed so hard he lost his balance and almost fell out of his chair. He laid a hand on the wood railing to steady himself and put his hand up to cover his mouth like he was breaking into a coughing fit. “Oh, shit,” he said, catching his breath. His face was beat-red but beginning to regain its normal color. He composed himself. “That is funny.”

I laughed too. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“You’re calling the people you had sex with to let them know?”

“Yeah, I am,” I said, grimacing to give him an opportunity to tell me how he didn’t envy my position.

“That’s tough,” he said. “How has it gone?”

“Not too bad, yet. Everyone has been cool about it so far. I just have one left.”

Sunny chuckled and turned his pipe upside down, tapping the ashes out with the butt of his lighter. “That sounds horrible,” he said. “I wouldn’t do that. I would let them find out on their own. Just like you did.” He looked at me and added, “But it’s probably the right thing to do.”

Lauren

“You *fucking* asshole,” she said. I had a feeling this would be the worst one of the bunch, which was why I saved it for last. If I would have stayed true to the chronology, Lauren would have come before Chelsea. I knew I could get through the conversation if I put my head down and powered through it.

“I know, I’m sorry,” I said, then hesitated. “I didn’t know.”

She pounced. “You didn’t know what? That if you’re fucking lots of people at the same time, you’re going to get an STD?”

I took a deep breath in lieu of saying anything incriminating. I hoped the breath would suggest that I understood why she was mad, and that I accepted this was my fault. It didn’t seem to be working. After more time passed, I added, “I’m sorry, I just wanted you to know.”

“So I need to get tested?”

“Probably, just to be safe.”

“Jesus. You are a slut.”

“I know,” I said. She was right, I had acted like a slut. I looked at my toes.

“And you obviously didn’t wear a fucking condom,” she said. “I can’t believe you. That’s disgusting.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Bullshit.”

We had met six years earlier in college before reconnecting through social media and hooking around the same time that I was closing in on the job in Nashville, with applications out in Seattle, LA, New York, Timbuktu, anywhere to get me out of Minnesota. I hadn’t been looking for anything permanent, a fact I had neglected to mention. When we ate our first of three dinners together, at the El Corral in Plymouth, she told me she had a three-year-old son and an ex-fiancé who she had kicked out for perpetually cheating. I thought she was messing with me about the boy, but he turned out to be real.

“I thought we were going to be something,” she said.

From our first conversation, she seemed to be obsessed with cheating, sniffing out cheaters like a private detective. From friends to relatives to celebrities, she informed me that cheating was more common than I ever knew or cared about. Men and women cheated at the same rate, she claimed, but men got caught more often because they were worse at hiding their tracks. She had never done it—of course—but everyone else was guilty. She told me how to catch a cheater, from smelling the compromised penis to waiting until the culprit was inebriated and forcing the truth out like a terrorist suspect

under interrogation. She had sized me up from across the table; I could see it in her eyes when she squinted at me: *Who else is he fucking?*

“Who did you get it from?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. Not that I would have told her if I knew; I may have acted like a slut, but I respected the rules of privacy.

“Fucking-A, how many people could it be?”

“A few people.”

“I’m going to throw up,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Fuck you” she said and hung up. I was sick to my stomach, too. All of a sudden, I hated my cavalier attitude toward sex and my exceptional months of bachelorism. I was disgusting, a pig. I had proved her right even though we weren’t dating.

I imagined what our future relationship could have been: One mellow Tuesday we would order pizza and watch a movie, a drama about love. I would watch the movie and she would watch me, dissecting my body posture, the things I laughed at, the things that kept me in suspense, before waterboarding me in the dishwasher in search of the truth.

* * *

I crossed the last name off the list and set it down. Abby’s name had a question mark by it, but no one else had been any help to find the chlamydia’s origin. Was it possible that it began with me? It had to start somewhere, right?

I went back to the kitchen and found a second beer in the fridge—it wasn’t mine but, fuck it, I’d replace it later—and walked out to the porch, where Sunny had fallen asleep on the lawn chair. I wasn’t sure if he had been there the whole time and skipped

the second half of the workday, or he had gotten off early. I sat in the chair beside him and rested, too.

“How did the conversations go?” Sunny asked after a minute, keeping his eyes shut.

“Not great,” I said, “but it got easier as it went.”

“How many people did you have to call?” he asked.

“Like, five or six?”

Sunny scoffed. “You never have to see them again. What’s the point of telling them? They would find out on their own, eventually.”

“I thought that’s what you were supposed to do,” I said.

“Man, you don’t have to do anything.”

I thought about it for a second. “Maybe they won’t spread it to other people if they get checked out.”

Sunny looked at me, bewildered. Then he relaxed and faced the sky again. “Yeah, maybe. It just doesn’t seem worth it.”

Maybe Sunny was right. I walked inside and went into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. There was a bread crumb in my chest hair. I picked it out, ate it, and frowned.

I didn’t care what Sunny said, it had been worth it. It had to have been worth it, or else nothing was worth anything. My pride had taken a dip, but maybe that was a good thing. And while it seemed like I would never find out who gave it to me, I guess it didn’t really matter. I caught it, I let the women know that they could have it, and now I was going to get rid of it. I no longer felt like my heart was in my stomach, but I felt different

somehow. Like, maybe I would wear a condom from now on, if there happened to be one nearby when I needed it.

I stood in front of the toilet and tried to urinate, but it burned and I had to stop momentarily to take a break. Someone had peed on the floor again and I had almost stepped in it. I put my hand on the wall behind the toilet and leaned on it and caught my breath before relaxing my midsection and starting a stream again. I winced as it came out, slow and painful at first, and sucked air through my teeth.

When I was finished, I took a shower, got dressed, and drove to the clinic. I was pretty sure they had free condoms there.

The Neighbor

A shriek erupts from the apartment next door. “Are you kidding me?” she yells, then is overtaken by a fit of giggles.

The west side of my apartment shares a wall with this insufferable woman. As I read a book on my couch, I perspire. This happens when I am annoyed. I have seen this neighbor of mine on the elevator at least a dozen times in the four weeks since she moved into the building. Each time, we have ridden in unhappy silence to the fifth floor and walked down the hallway to our separate apartments without saying a word.

When she first moved in, I tried greeting her with an emphatic “Hi!” or “Hello!” but she never responded. Instead, she either looked away or right at me, and remained silent. She isn’t hard of hearing as I thought may have been the case. Through these walls I have heard her hold a hundred conversations—she always has company—and she responds happily to her guests. Since I have given up the idea of a neighborly relationship, I would like to tell her how rude she is, but I have not yet worked up the courage.

This woman is about twenty-five with straight, chest-level, jet-black hair. (“Oh my god,” she says—no, *screams*—and laughs. “Ruff! Ruff!” her dog barks. She has had this dog for one week and I swear, I am going to kill her, it, myself, or someone else.) She sneezes loudly and often—is her apartment infested with pepper?—which is a quick,

high-pitched squeal that sounds like she has been violently frightened. Maybe I just think that because it is violently frightening to me. This woman annoys me, always. When she watches television, the volume is blasting, and she frequently hosts night-long parties with steady, thumping electronic music that last late into the night. Instead of walking, she stomps.

I believe I have reason to be annoyed, but I admit sometimes she annoys me and later I realize she was not home. This annoys me twice as much because I think about the time I wasted, sweating and being annoyed when she wasn't there. Then she arrives, slamming her door, which she always does—*loud*, wall-shaking slams—and I am annoyed all over again. It's exhausting, being annoyed like this all the time—far from the relaxing environment I have tried to create for myself. (“Ruff! Ruff!”)

There is a knock at my door. I set my book down—the opening lines of which I have reread a dozen times and no further because of this woman and her dog—and walk across the studio toward the door.

The apartment is the size of a tennis court. I moved in three years ago when the building was nearly empty and recently renovated. I had just turned fifty-one and lived my whole life as a bachelor, aside from a short stint as a husband from 1993-1995. Once I was divorced, I went straight back to bachelorhood. I had always been a partier, and that was the life I led—drinking, light drug usage, and nights spent awake until dawn tiptoed over the skyline. But I can't do that anymore. I need all eight hours of sleep, not just four.

Before this oppressive neighbor moved in, the apartment was perfect. It is on the top floor of an old brick building down in the industrial part of town where there are few businesses, people, or curbs on the street. The building used to be a storage warehouse for

items transported by train. There are empty slabs of concrete where equipment used to load things onto freight cars as they passed through toward their destinations. (“Ruff! Ruff!”) The slabs are obsolete now but the train tracks are still there and trains use them every day. They come at three-hour intervals: 6:00 am, 9:00 am, 12:00 pm, 3:00 pm and a couple more at night, shaking the brick walls and causing red crumbs of sand and clay to drizzle onto my cement floor. This does not bother me, I like trains. When I was a young boy, I lived in a house just twenty yards from a train track and felt them rattle my bedroom every night. Now the familiar whistle and metal screeching and ding-ding-dinging from the crossing signal soothes my nerves, nerves that are usually overwrought with tension from this terrible, disrespectful woman next door.

I open my front door and before I can say anything, Zack says, “Hey, man.” His voice is slurred and his teeth are caked in plaque. White strings connect the corners of his mouth. “I hate to do this, but can I borrow some money? I don’t have any alcohol and my body needs it. I could die without it.” I believe what he is telling me; he looks haggard and smells of stomach acid. I open my door wider and motion for him to come inside. (“Ruff, ruff!”)

Zack is my other neighbor. We share the wall to my east. He is kind, courteous, and clinically depressed. I like this about him. Depressed people make me feel less depressed myself and it’s a small price to pay to give him twenty dollars from time to time. He has humble eyes that look at the floor and long black hair that is grungy, like a musician’s. I rarely see him with company, but I often hear him throwing up, either when he has drunk too much or has not drunk enough.

“I heard you throwing up this morning,” I say as he walks into my apartment. The sharp smell of stomach acid wafts behind him.

“Oh, you heard that? I’m sorry, I can’t keep anything down, not even water. My body is rejecting anything that’s not alcohol.” He moved in a year ago after a divorce from his ex-wife. She took their two dogs and moved in with her mother and he took the cat because he had it before they were married. The cat is a female and her name is Kittles. I do not like the name but I am not sure why. Her fur is soft and her eyes are rich and green and each time I visit Zack’s apartment she comes to my legs and I pet her. When I pet her she purrs and when she purrs her jaw moves sideways like a cow’s and her jaw bones rub against each other and make a sound that can only be described as the sound made by someone grinding their teeth.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got some money,” I say. “I’ll get my wallet.” The train rattles by, shaking the building like an earthquake; red dust flakes off the walls. It is 12:00 pm.

“Ruff! Ruff!” my neighbor’s dog barks and she cackles loudly. Three huge thumps vibrate the floor followed by the slam of her door. For a moment I think she has left and I feel a wash of relief. My muscles melt, relaxing, as if the air is giving me a massage. Then she laughs and shouts, “Oh, God!” and my muscles immediately tighten. Why did she open her door if she wasn’t leaving? I wish I knew her name, if only so that I could curse her. I find a twenty-dollar bill in my wallet and give it to Zack.

Zack raises his eyebrows. “Must be something fun going on in there.”

“She is obnoxious,” I say. “She just got a dog and it hasn’t stopped barking for the past week.” Zack grunts and shrugs his shoulders. I punch the twenty-dollar bill in his palm. “Here you go.”

“I’ll pay you back on Friday, I get paid then,” he says. (“Ruff! Ruff!”) Today is Wednesday. I ask what he is doing tonight and he says, “Going to Mike’s.” Mike’s Cabaret is a sports bar a few blocks to the north. It is an aluminum-walled building with plaid-wearing, truck-driving, grungy guys inside. Guys like Zack but meaner. “You should meet me down there, or we can go together. I’ll buy you a drink,” he says.

“Okay,” I say, “maybe.” I usher him out of the door. “See you.” He leaves and I cross my apartment to the wall and put my ear next to it. What are they doing in there? I hear a conversation taking place between her and a man. In my head I can see how they are seated: on a couch that faces our shared wall. Talking in my direction. If she would simply turn the couch to face the other way, it would make so much of a difference.

There is another knock on the door.

I open it but no one is there. I hear a rustling coming from down the hall by the elevator, newspapers being folded and crinkled and ripped. I leave my door open and walk down the hall to see what it is. As I pass the woman’s door I slow down and turn my ear to the gap of space between the bottom of her door and the ground. I hear low murmuring and slow my walk to a halt, quieting the swishing of my pants. I lean in closer, but as I do this, the murmuring stops. I continue down the hall.

I reach the end and turn the corner toward the elevator doors and see a puppy—my neighbor’s puppy—making a bowel movement onto a disheveled array of newspaper pages that have been unfolded and laid out. The dog has golden locks of hair and looks up at me while he finishes his business. I give him privacy by turning to look the other way, where I see a mound of dog food next to the wall. My neighbor must have created this space for her dog to go to the bathroom, and perhaps even live. That is simply

unacceptable. If she is unable to take the dog outside for a walk a couple times a day, she should not have a dog at all.

Tap, tap, tap. I look down and see the dog pawing my ankles. I pick him up and his tongue lolls out in a big smile. He is cute, and although he has been barking since my neighbor got him two weeks ago, I am not mad at him. He can't help it, he needs proper training, or else how can he know what he's doing is wrong? His collar carries a bronze nametag that dangles from a metal hoop. The collar is pink though physical evidence shows he is a male. I read the bronze name tag dangling from the collar: *Woof, woof! My name is Stan.*

I look at the mess Stan left on the newspaper and become incensed at my intolerable neighbor. The sweating begins again. This dog deserves better than being left alone in a hallway by himself, and the people living in this building deserve better than having a puppy roam around the hallway using newspaper as a toilet with no one to pick it up. But I can't say I am surprised—this is just like my neighbor to get a dog and abdicate all responsibility for the less attractive aspects of pet ownership within one week. But it won't work this time because I am going to see that she cleans up this mess and takes her dog back inside her apartment.

I storm down to her apartment with Stan in my arms and rap on her door three times. There is a scuffle inside—bodies move and whisper loudly and a door slams. A metal container of—what, nails? thumbtacks?—spills on the ground. Something heavy falls with a thump but doesn't break. Seconds later the door opens and a man stands in the doorframe.

“Oh, hello?” I ask. My expectation of the woman to answer the door takes me by surprise.

“Can I help you?” asks the man impatiently. This must be the person she was talking to earlier. He is more of a boy than a man: he looks like a twenty-one-year-old who looks like a sixteen-year-old. He is taller than I am and has young, boyish features, the kind that women love. The kind I have never had and do not have now. I wonder how I must look to him. Old, probably.

“Um, yes,” I stammer, off guard. “Is your—Is my neighbor home? I don’t know her name.” I must not assume their relationship. He may not be her boyfriend and if I were to imply that, they might get offended. Their generation is both easily offended and unshy in their anger about being so. It is smart to try to remain on their good side.

“I’m sure I can take care of it,” the mannish boy says. “What’s up?” His hair is immaculate, combed to the back with an eye-catching line parting the hair along the left side. I instinctually touch my own hair. It is all there, thank god. I am not going bald, but it is thin. But this man’s hair is stylish, and I make a note to ask my barber if this sort of haircut would look good on me.

I return to the present. “I’d really prefer to talk to—”

He interrupts me and says, “Why don’t you tell me what it is and see if it’s something I can handle. If it’s not, I’ll get her.”

“Okay, well, I found your dog.” I hold the dog in front of me and nod toward him. “He was at the end of the hallway. He went to the bathroom on some papers you left out?” Why did I ask that? It should have been a statement. I am very off guard right now, and I am sweating.

He looks down at the dog in my arms who extends his paws as if he is reaching out for the man, but the man shows no emotional attachment to the dog. Stan's name tag jingles with every move. "That's not ours," the man says.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think I mean? That—" He points to the dog, "—is not ours."

I pause for a second and try to peek into the apartment behind the man, but he moves his head to block my eyesight. I return my gaze to him. "This dog *was* living here, wasn't he?" I ask.

"He was, but he's not anymore," he says. "We don't want him, so he is out there for anyone to claim, completely free." I notice that this man's teeth are pristine, and I become aware I have not brushed my teeth today.

I hear something move behind him in the kitchen. "You don't want him?" I repeat.

"That's right, you can have him," he says as if he is doing me a favor. He begins to back away from the door to shut it.

"I don't want him," I say. "He's your responsibility. Or hers. You can't just leave the dog in the hallway. You have to take him to a shelter or something."

"We put papers out and enough food to last at least a couple days. Someone will take him by then."

"Someone will do what you are supposed to do, for you, if that's what you mean."

"Exactly."

“No,” I say exasperatedly. “Not exactly.” Sweat is on my forehead and lower back and I look to the ground and rub my temples with my non-Stan holding hand. What is wrong with these people? “You have to do it. It’s your job.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Who is going to clean up the mess in the hallway? What if he eats all the food?”

“That’s not our problem. He doesn’t live here anymore. Don’t you understand? He’s not ours. Whoever wants him is going to have to clean it up.”

Stan squirms in my arms, trying to break free. “He’s too young to be here by himself,” I say, but the boy puts his hand up and says, “We don’t need your lectures, man.” He begins to shut the door. “Have a good day.”

“Hold on a minute,” I say, and put my foot in the way of the door. Sweat is now dripping into my eyebrows and on my upper lip. This generation has no manners! “The woman who lives here—who I’d like to speak with, please—this is her dog. She can’t just leave the dog in the hallway. That’s inhumane, and I could easily call the Department of Animal Services and tell them what you are doing is illegal.” I don’t know if such a department exists, but I’m sure these kids don’t either. And if all else fails I could simply call the police. “I could also simply call the police,” I add.

The woman comes up behind the person I am talking to (*Did I get his name?*) and nudges him out of the way. “Look, I don’t want that dog and you can go ahead and call the cops, they won’t do anything. Okay? That’s it. Bye.” She slams the door and loudly locks the deadbolt. Stan bites the tip of my finger.

“Bitch,” I say. Stan cocks his head at me. “Not you.”

I pick up the newspapers from the hallway and throw them in my trash, then take the trash to the dumpster out back. Stan has eaten most of the food put out for him but still seems hungry so I feed him peanut butter from a spoon and we spend time together in my apartment for a while. Luckily for Stan, I do not have to work.

Later that night I decide to join Zack at Mike's Cabaret, and before I leave, I take Stan out to the bathroom. In the first few hours of having Stan, I admit I considered giving him up for adoption, but then I thought to myself, you know what would *really* get my neighbor back for leaving him all alone in the hallway, forcing someone else to take the responsibility? If I keep him, and love him, and we are a happy couple. She will see us in the hallway and see that her plan backfired. And if he accidentally escapes to the hallway and scratches her door to pieces, so be it.

Stan and I head to a small patch of grass at the corner of an intersection two blocks from my building. As we walk there, I get a call from Zack.

"Hello?"

"Man," Zack slurs. He sounds different.

"What's up, buddy?"

"I'm in the hospital."

"What happened?"

It takes him a moment to respond. "I had a seizure. I must have gone too long without drinking. I fell on my floor and broke my spine in three places."

"Oh, Jesus. Are you okay?"

"I'm alive," he says and laughs slowly. "Can you come over? I want to give you the key to my apartment so you can feed Kittles."

Zack tells me the room number and I drive across the river to the hospital and get his keys. When I see him, his mind is somewhere else; he falls in and out of consciousness over the course of our conversation. He tells me that his body seized and he fell backwards onto the concrete floor in his kitchen. Somehow, he managed to call 911 and an ambulance took him to the hospital.

“I called your name,” Zack says, “but you must have been gone.”

“I was home all day,” I say, half to myself, but Zack doesn’t hear me. I am surprised that I didn’t hear any of this happening, but Zack has fallen asleep and I stop thinking about it. I take his keys from their spot on his tray table and go back to our building and into his apartment. Kittles greets me at the door and considers running through my legs and into the hallway but thinks better of it and turns around. I scoop food out of her bag and put it in her dish which she eats ferociously. She purrs while she eats and her jaw bones grind with each bite.

For the next few days, I feed Kittles and take Stan out twice a day. Kittles seems glad to have some interaction and I play with her for a few minutes each time I feed her. My neighbor, that impossible bitch, continues to cackle and sneeze and one night throws a massive party. I am not invited. I pound on the wall with my fist, and around midnight I call the cops. They come and unfortunately leave without making any arrests. After they leave, she is loud again, and I sweat angrily in bed until I finally fall asleep around 4:00 a.m.

On the fourth day of Zack’s absence, I show up to his apartment to feed Kittles and she does not come to greet me at the door as she usually does, but instead lies still on the carpet. I pour food from the bag into her dish but she does not stir, and as I walk over

to her, I see that she is not breathing. Kittles is dead, and I know Zack will be sad about this.

I am not sure what to do with the body. I think Zack may want to see Kittles before she is gone for good, so I leave her there for the time being and go back to my apartment where I try to get Stan to bark to annoy my neighbor. But Stan does not want to make any noise at all, so I am sure my neighbor was making him bark on purpose.

The next day it is noon and I sit at my kitchen table—it is long and handmade with brown polished wood—and color in a notebook with colored pencils. I hear some rustling outside my door. If that is my neighbor, I am going to be really annoyed. I start to sweat at the thought of another confrontation with that trying woman. I go out to the hallway and see Zack walking down the hall toward his apartment. He doesn't look good—his eyes are dark and sunken, he is thin, his skin is pale, and he is wearing a metal neck brace with bars connecting a ring on his shoulders to a ring surrounding the top of his head. To look at me, he must turn his entire upper half. His teeth need to be cleaned.

“Hey,” he says. “They just let me out of the hospital.”

“Hey,” I say. “That's quite a situation you've got going on over there,” I motion toward his brace.

He laughs and says, “I know. I hope I don't have to fly anytime soon. They would never let me through the metal detector.” Zack tells me the doctors put him in surgery and fused three of his vertebrae together. He has to wear the brace for six weeks and is supposed to lay off alcohol, but due to his alcoholism they prescribed a high strength ibuprofen instead of a painkiller. “But it's not strong enough,” he explains. “So, I've got this.” He holds up a six-pack.

Stan heels at my ankles like a well-mannered pup. I can't believe he is so well-trained after I've cared for him for only four days, especially considering I hadn't trained him how to heel or how to do anything, really.

"Did you get a dog?" Zack asks and crouches nearer to the dog's point of view. He moves toward Stan and me and gears in his metal brace squeak and clank. "Hey, buddy," he says and pinches his thumb and forefinger together.

"This is Stan," I say. "He was actually my neighbor's dog, but she left him in the hallway."

"She must not have wanted him anymore," Zack says. He approaches Stan who puts out his paw for a shake. "Wow, you trained him how to shake," Zack says. "Good job."

"Listen," I begin, "I've got some sad news. Kittles died yesterday. Or it could have been the night before, I'm not sure."

"What? Are you kidding?" he asks hopefully.

"No, I'm not," I say. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened, I went to feed her one day and she was alive, then the next day I went to feed her and she was dead." I try to be reassuring, but Zack has begun to cry. I stammer. "I thought you may want to see her for yourself so I haven't moved her or anything."

Zack clinks and clatters toward his apartment. He looks in his pockets for his keys and I remember that I have them. "Hold on," I say, and go pick them up off my kitchen table. I bring them to him and say, "If you want me to do anything, I can help."

"I've got it," he says, and goes inside and shuts the door.

Hours later, I take Stan out for a walk and when we come back, Zack is walking toward the elevator with a trash bag in his hand that I assume is holding Kittles. I walk toward him and we meet in front of the door to the woman's apartment, where thumping music vibrates the floor with each beat.

I point to her apartment and say, "You see what I'm dealing with?"

"Yeah," Zack says, but continues morosely toward the elevator and I leave him alone for the time being. I go into my apartment and bang on the wall, but instead of turning the music down, that nightmare turns it up. I hear noise in the hall and I go out to see Zack, returning from the dumpster.

"Hey," I say, "do you want to go to Mike's later?"

"Oh yeah, sure. I forgot I owe you those drinks."

"No, it'll be on me. We can toast to Kittles."

"Oh, that's a good idea. She deserves that. Thanks."

Zack goes into his apartment and I sit down to try coloring again, but I hear an absurd thwack from my neighbor's apartment and the building shudders. This thwack is followed by more thwacks, which take on a sound like chopping down a tree with an axe. I take a deep breath, but sweat has begun forming under my armpits. I get up and walk to her door. I lean in to listen and hear shuffling papers and the rattling of heavy objects.

I don't know how much longer I can handle this. I know she is going to make me seem like the unreasonable one, but I try to be brave and knock on the door. This time a man who looks to be my age answers the door, wearing a hardhat and a toolbelt.

"Can I help you?" he asks. He is plump with a button-down shirt tucked into his blue jeans. I try to peek behind him to see what's going on, but he quickly moves his

head to block my line of sight. I try to fake him out by pretending to go right and then going left, but he is onto me and successfully blocks my vision. Eventually I give up.

“What’s going on in there?” I ask.

“I’m sorry sir, I can’t discuss that with you. I don’t even know who you are.”

“I live next door,” I say.

“Okay,” he says.

“Well, I’ve been in this building a long time, longer than her.” I point in the direction of where I assume my neighbor is.

“Ok,” the man says, checking his watch. “I’m sorry sir, but I’ve got work to do. What do you need?”

My forehead perspires and I feel a drip of sweat go into one of my eyebrows.

“What is going on in there?” I ask. “What are you working on?”

“I’m not at liberty to share that information with you,” he says, undoubtedly a line he’s spoken a thousand times before. He begins to shut the door and I put my hand up to stop it.

“Please remember that I live next door and would appreciate it if things weren’t too loud?” I did it again—asking a question that should have been stated. These kids make me so nervous that I don’t even want to upset the people they *hire*.

The man rolls his eyes. “I’ll keep that in mind, sir,” he says, and times it perfectly so that the door shuts when he says the word ‘sir.’

“This is where I live!” I shout to the shut door in front of me. “It’s not unreasonable to ask for peace and quiet from time to time!” I turn around and see Zack

watching this from the middle of the hallway. He shrugs. “Looks like she’s building something.”

That night Zack and I go to Mike’s Cabaret and we get a little drunk. I bring Stan with me and am unsure whether he will be allowed in, but Zack thinks it will be fine. Zack asks to hold his leash and I say yes and I think the two of them look good together.

When we get to the bar, the bouncer asks for my I.D. which I provide, then for Zack’s and the dog’s. I say the dog doesn’t have one but he is our designated driver, and the bouncer laughs and waves us through. Zack tries to pay for a drink, but seeing him in his metal neck brace, and with his cat having died, I refuse, and instead pay for his.

Stan sits in Zack’s lap most of the time. Many of the barflies want to pet the dog and Zack and I quickly become the most popular people there. Stan loves the attention and his tongue hangs outside his mouth as he is rubbed by countless strangers.

Eventually we are out of money and leave. I hold onto Stan’s leash and Zack is stumbling; he is more drunk than I am. He explains that he hadn’t drank in the hospital so the alcohol is hitting him harder than usual. I don’t want him to fall again as that would surely mean another trip to the emergency room, so I hold his waist next to mine and it must look like we are performing a drunken three-legged race.

“Hey,” I say. My words are a little slurred but I am thinking more clearly than ever. Zack grunts a question mark and I say, “I want you to have Stan.”

“What?” Zack asks. His words ooze like molasses. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I say. “He’s a great dog. But I want you to have him.”

“Oh man, I would love that,” Zack says and he gives me a hug. His chest heaves and I know he is thinking about his cat again. “I’ll take real good care of him,” he says shakily.

“I know you will,” I say. I pat him on the back and as we release each other, I give him the leash and watch them walk together. They look perfect, I think.

The next morning, I wake up in bed and am hungover. The floor trembles and I worry for a second that it is an earthquake. A Budweiser mirror that hangs on the wall I share with Zack crashes to the cement floor and shatters. The intensity of the shake increases and paint flakes off the ceiling. My chest tightens and I am worried I am going to have a heart attack.

I sit up in my bed. My wall to the west, the one I share with that menace, shudders and bends violently and a crack appears. More cracks appear and finally a hole forms and the wall opens like a portal. Behind it is the yellow bucket of a bulldozer. I am on the other side of the apartment and safe from debris, but the operator of the vehicle doesn’t seem to be worried about this at all. The bucket jerks up and down through the drywall and breaks up all that it can reach. Only sheetrock and wooden two-by-fours come out—there was never any insulation inside at all.

I leap out of bed in my pajamas, standing as far away from the bulldozer as I can get. I jump and wave my arms over my head wildly, yelling “Hey! I’m in here!” I see the man in the driver’s seat wearing a lime green vest and a hardhat. I jump up and down to get his attention and the bulldozer begins to back up. Maybe he saw me, but the bulldozer immediately shifts direction and demolishes another section of wall.

In the hole I see my neighbor and the construction worker from yesterday looking at a rolled-out blueprint on a table. I am sweating all over—from my forehead to my underarms to my thighs and the backs of my knees. I will deal with her in a minute, but first I need to get this person to stop breaking my wall. To my left on the kitchen counter, I see an apple. I pick it up and throw it at the machine's cabin. The apple explodes on the windshield startling the man inside who looks in my direction. He glares at me and pokes his head out of the loader, pointing at me and his windshield, yelling something angrily.

“Stop demolishing my apartment!” I scream back.

He cups his hand around his ear and mouths, “What?”

“I live here!” I yell as loud as I can.

Finally the man turns off the machine and shouts, “What are you doing throwing food at my dozer?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I was trying to get your attention.”

“Yeah, well, don’t do it again.”

“I’m sorry but it was the only way to get your attention, you couldn’t see me.”

“What’s so important?” he asks.

“This is my apartment,” I say and motion to my apartment. We are standing about forty feet away.

The man looks at my bed, my rack of clothes, my brown wooden table, my Persian rug, and my kitchen. He takes the hardhat off his head and scratches his scalp. “Hm,” he says. He gets out of the bulldozer and walks to the other construction worker and my neighbor. I walk towards the group, too. They seem to be unaware of my presence entirely, but I interrupt them.

“What’s going on?” I ask. I don’t care if I am rude, as surely the construction workers were led by this woman to believe that my apartment was unoccupied.

“What do you mean?” says the construction worker with the blueprint, who looks to be the boss. “What are you doing here? This is a construction zone.”

“A construction zone? This is my apartment!”

“Sir,” says the boss, “you need to vacate the area. I don’t know how you got in, but this is dangerous and off-limits.”

I walk to my window and look outside. There is yellow construction tape and fences around the building. There are four dumpsters with debris inside them, and a dump truck parked in the alley. I turn around. “I don’t know what all this is doing here,” I say, “but you can’t tear down my apartment.” All three of the people on the other side of the conversation roll their eyes. I continue. “I pay money every month to live here.”

“I’m expanding my apartment,” my neighbor, that nuisance, that plague says.

“You can’t do that,” I repeat. “I live here. All I want is some fucking peace and quiet. Why can’t anybody respect that?” A knock comes at my door.

“Hold on,” I say. “Do not tear down anything else.”

I open the door and it’s Zack, and he’s holding Stan. “How’s it going?” I ask.

“Fine,” Zack says. He looks toward my wall with the bulldozer in it. “What’s going on here?”

“My neighbor is trying to tear the wall down to make her apartment bigger. They almost killed me.”

“Hm,” Zack says. “Where are you going to go?” He smiles at my neighbor and waves. I pull his hand down.

“What are you doing?” I say. “Don’t wave at her.”

He looks back to me. “Listen, can I borrow some cash? I’ll pay you back next week.”

“Sure, my wallet is on the counter.” I point at it and Zack heads that way. I look back to the three people in the woman’s apartment and they are looking at me. The construction worker in the green vest says something under his breath and the woman bursts out in a cackling laugh. My body is wet with sweat. It’s on my lower back and has drenched my crotch. “What’s so funny?” I ask.

“Nothing,” says the man. He clears his throat and shakes his head. A bead of sweat drips into the corner of my eye and the sweat stings and makes me squint.

“Hey,” Zack calls to me.

“Hold on!” I yell without looking at him. “What is it?” I ask again to the group and continue to walk toward them. I wipe my eye with my hand.

“Well don’t cry,” the boss says. I am now bordering on rage, and my hands are balled into tight fists. I’m not meaning to, but my arms are completely tensed and they are so taught that for a second, I think my muscles are going to burst out of my skin. They are shaking and a few of my finger joints pop. I can hear myself grinding my teeth like Kittles.

“Hey!” Zack calls again.

“In a minute!” I yell to him. “What did you say?” I ask a third time slowly and deliberately to the group, who are standing around the table with the blueprint laid flat.

“What is it?” I am now less than five feet from them.

The man in the vest looks at his boss, then he looks at the woman, my neighbor. I hate her with all my heart and for a brief second, I think it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if I killed her right now. She looks at me, and just when I think I couldn't hate her any more than I do right now, she smiles at me, and I do.

Zack calls to me again, "Hey!" he yells.

I turn around. "What?" I scream.

He holds up my wallet upside-down. "You only have three dollars in here."

VITA

Caleb Olsen was born in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, on September 12, 1989. His family moved to many places before landing in Saint Marys, Kansas, where Mr. Olsen attended the public high school and graduated in 2008. He attended the University of Kansas in Lawrence and graduated in 2012. His degree was a Bachelor of Arts in English.

Mr. Olsen moved to Portland, Oregon, where he performed stand-up comedy for a short time before returning to Kansas and obtaining a position as a copywriter for a local radio station. While in this position, Mr. Olsen was recognized with first and second place awards from the Kansas Association of Broadcasters. He then moved to Nashville, Tennessee, to accept a position as an on-air radio personality. Later, he welcomed the opportunity to return to the Midwest, and assumed a copywriting position at a creative agency in Kansas City. During this time, he was accepted to the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Upon completion of his degree requirements, Mr. Olsen plans to write, teach, and perform improv comedy.