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The Sapling and Other Stories

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The Sapling & Other Stories

by

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of Bard College

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Preface

I have forgotten who I am. All I know are words. Words are in my mind and on the page in front of me. They are spoken around me and invite me to respond.

Although I am not a religious person, I remind myself that in the beginning was the word; language is the bearer of life, the beginning of it all.

Thank god I was able to forget myself, because if I had not, my own words may never have come.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my mother and father for always trusting and believing in me.

Thank you to my sister, Robyn, for pushing me to grow.

Thank you Robert Kelly for guiding my curiosity and creativity.

Table of Contents

Fog.....1-42

The Sapling.....43-77

Stolen Hats.....78-99

Introduction

A strong desire to explore the voices and lives of different characters guided me through this project. When I began writing I did not have a clear picture of who would pop out of my imagination and appear on paper. Prose offered a free form to allow my thoughts to flow uninterrupted; I was breaking out of old habits. Writing poetry was a kind of personal catharsis for me, an important journey to go through as writer, but not accessible for those who read my work. The line breaks in poetry distracted me. I focused too heavily on when to break instead of allowing the poem to unfold. I have found poetry serves as a tool to begin writing. It is the rag from which I squeeze out my emotions and confusions.

On a rainy day in September I sat in my kitchen with a spark of inspiration to begin a piece. The day before I had written a poem in the form of a dialogue between an old couple. They were saying their last goodbyes to each other after a long life together. I sipped my tea and the watched the flag on the porch of the bookstore next to my apartment blow in the wind. That is how Richard and Sue Crowfoot, the characters of “Fog” came to be. Through my belief in them I was able to explore a topic I had experienced first hand with my dear friend who withdrew from Bard to fight Leukemia. The stem cells and bone marrow transplant proved helpful for Marina but they did not cure her of her cancer. She is still being treated after a series of relapses.

The advancements taking place in the biomedical field are astounding. If Marina had been diagnosed ten years ago she would not have survived the onset of her disease. Her treatments have been heavily based on gene therapy and stem cells, both of which are

fairly recent medical discoveries. This led me to the writings and talks of Ray Kurzweil, a man who believes death does not have to be a part of life and is on a mission to turn the human body into a system of computerized cells, communicating with each other in code. Possibly by the year 2040, doctors will be able to redesign bodies from the inside out with programmed computers the size of red blood cells. I am thankful for the benefits of technology, yet I cannot help but feel disgust towards a man who is pushing for the human body to take such an unnatural turn.

Death became a strong theme in the piece. I realized I believe death is just as important as birth. It is everything in between that matters. Therefore how can any life have meaning if an end is not in sight? The finality of a life makes every action, every feeling, and every circumstance incredibly powerful. Why did the Gods of mythology envy humans so much? Because humans savor the one life they have been given. Immortality is a curse; life and death are a blessing.

“The Sapling” is not a traditional narrative. It is a meditation on three voices: a little boy, his mother, and his father. I allowed the voices to take me wherever they wanted to; I did not think about the outcome; I did not think about whether the dots connected or if the story made sense. I wanted to allow the voices to be as free as they could be, unattached to plot, unattached to purpose. The more I wrote the less free it became. I could not let go. I worried that my reader would not be able to connect to the shifty characters. I am not sure if the story is about the same three voices, the same family, or even the same little boy, but I chose to stick to my initial intention. The characters are nameless and remain mysterious in their complexity.

The last piece, "Stolen Hats," was created from a dream I had a couple of years ago. It is a reflection of my effort to write lightheartedly. When I took myself less seriously the characters unfolded quite naturally. I discovered a silly side of myself, one that I usually keep to myself because the silliness is rooted in judgments I make about the world. I realized, however, that everyone makes assumptions. The assumptions are usually off target but they make for great writing material. I gathered my somewhat bitter and off-putting ideas and turned them upside down to shine them in a different light. What came out was somewhat of a Socratic dialogue between a woman and the lovers of her past.

Fog

Part One

His hands shook with the slight tremor of a man beyond his years. Clapsed between them he held a mask meant to be his one and only distraction for the evening, that was, until the phone rang.

Richard Crowfoot sat at the desk in his office above the Lost Shore Bookstore. His feet were propped up and he leaned back in his rickety chair. A faded twenty-fifth anniversary banner still clung to the wooden beams in the ceiling. The letters sagged making the ‘o’s in books appear as tired droopy eyes.

The office was packed tightly with books from floor to ceiling and smelled of pipe tobacco and cat litter. Richard ignored the ringing phone as it reverberated off the surrounding hardback books whose fabric covers had worn feeble with time.

The mask he held was a simple green monster his grandson had made. The canvas was a paper plate painted with delicate shades of watercolor. He put it up to his face. The eyes were cut out uneven. The slits weren’t quite large enough to see out of. The nose was created by an outward jut of some sticky material that smelled a bit like raspberry jam but resembled a glob of white glue with wooden beads stuck to it. He didn’t intend on wearing it, but if he decided to venture out into the night, perhaps to catch the end of the Red Sox game at the tavern, maybe he would honor the spirit of Halloween and be the monster his grandson wanted him to be.

Richard took a deep breath and stood up for the first time in a couple of hours. His legs were stiff and he looked around for his cane.

He hobbled past the ringing phone and went downstairs to make a pot of coffee. His usual three to six cups a day helped him take breaks from the paperwork and case materials permanently spread across his desk, a desk that had served his father and his grandfather before him. It had taken him months to refinish the cherry and find inlays of Connemara marble. He imported it from Ireland to restore the desk to its original mystique, an expense that cost him a pretty penny. When he felt he had done his best, he had to find four men to help him haul it up the stairs and push it into his westward facing office. It was no picnic. That desk bore its years in weight.

Richard filled the coffee filter with freshly ground beans and saw through the kitchen window his wife's high-pinned bun rise just over the wooden fence of the garden. Sue was outside harvesting the last of the tomatoes before the frost set in that evening.

The sound of the phone was no longer audible as the screen door slammed shut behind him. He walked along the stone path that led to their small garden, opened the latched gate, and grabbed a harvesting basket from the tool shed. All he could hear was the autumn air pushing its way through his jacket and around the tiny hairs in his ears. The breeze tickled the trees around him; their few leaves held on to the branches with all their might, the thrill of the height was more exciting than the fall would be, and perhaps not as painful.

The sun was warming the damp ground where Richard walked. He stepped carefully between the garden beds trying not to trample any plants. He stood in front of a patch of yellow tomatoes and began to pull them from their stems. Sue was doing the same, but kneeled in front of her plant and worked at a faster pace. Any work in the garden went faster with more hands,

and was always more fun with another person. Richard always appreciated spending a few hours in the garden everyday to refresh his mind, but soon winter would keep both of them inside the house working on projects here and there when the bookstore was closed.

Nowadays Richard worked off the books on special investigation cases. Many of his cases were unsolved and hauntingly whispered to him as he fell asleep at night. He did more investigating in his head than anywhere else by going over the details of a case ad nauseam.

When they were done picking tomatoes, Richard helped Sue carry the buckets into the house for her to begin canning. His coffee was hot and ready.

The phone rang again.

“Are you going to get that?” Sue asked as she sliced a tomato into four quarters.

“I don’t feel like answering the phone, its just one of those days, I just want quiet.”

“It could be Thala calling about Thanksgiving.” She said patiently in protest. She knew Richard didn’t enjoy speaking on the telephone, even if it was his own daughter.

He grunted and grabbed his steaming mug. The ringing guided him upstairs and down the hallway to his office. He pushed open the brass knobbed door and made a beeline for the shaking receiver.

The Crowfoots only had one telephone in the house and neither of them had cell phones. Both he and Sue knew that if anyone wanted to reach them they would call the house and if no one answered they would leave a message. The answering machine had been the same for years, first Richard would say, “Hello, you’ve reached the Crowfoot Household. We sell books not crow’s feet—” then Sue would chime in with the humor that Richard lacked with his monotone voice, “we’re not in. If we don’t already have your number please include it in your message, to

reach the Lost Shore Bookstore please dial 04 instead of 05” and then together they said, “Have a splendid day!”

They had purchased their two story brick building after moving to Camden over three decades ago. Over the past twenty years the town had changed into quite the tourist destination. The harbor attracted couples for romantic sunset sails and families for catamaran excursions out into the Atlantic. The nearby cliffs of Camden Hills lured rock climbers to scale the steep routes up to the ledges overlooking Megunticook Lake and eastward across the ocean. Camden was known as a great getaway for all ages in every season. Local delectables of fresh seafood were available for most of the year and Cappy’s Chowder house boasted the best clam chowder in all of Maine.

The Lost Shore Bookstore faced Elm Street and welcomed each passerby with its large storefront windows and dangling wooden sign. Once inside the bookstore there were four rooms stacked from floor to ceiling with shelves of books. In the back room there was a door that led to their kitchen. When Sue cooked, rich smells seeped underneath the cracks and infiltrated the store adding a homey feeling for browsing customers. There were times when Richard would peer above his reading glasses at a child or hungry looking father asking him what the delicious smell was. “Oh that’s my dinner,” he would reply and then look down again to whatever it was he had been reading.

Camden had been the perfect place for Richard and Sue. Richard settled down in his early forties after retiring from his post at the Coast Guard after twenty years in the service. He joined the Coast Guard straight out of high school. Having been a star athlete with the choice to attend college at two very fine Universities, free of tuition, he chose instead to model his everyday life on the strict schedule of a cadet at the United States Coast Guard Academy. After his duties

ended he missed life out at sea like a sickness so he chose to stay with the Guard to become an Ensign. He moved to Portland and shortly thereafter he was promoted to Lieutenant and onwards awarded the title of an Officer. He felt most at home out at sea. After a long day the soft motion of the boat rocked him to sleep. He thrived on the salty air and each morning in his position at the helm he inhaled the tobacco he packed tightly into his old meerschaum pipe.

He was awarded the honor of becoming an Admiral after twenty years, and at age thirty-eight he retired. After a couple of years working odd jobs and maintaining a happy lifestyle of sailing and juggling around ideas to start his own business, the Portland police force showed interest in hiring him. He went through a series of interviews and personality tests. They trained him for fourteen months before he was granted a gun and badge. The benefits included health care for him and his family (once he had one) and a handsome annual salary that would allow him to travel and buy anything he wanted or needed. He met Sue shortly after he joined the force. They met at Fort Allen Park on a summer day in 1973. He proposed and married her two years later. They were expecting their first child after seven months of marriage and chose to name her Thala, short for Thalassa, his little goddess of the sea.

Upon receiving merit for his service of thirty-five years, Richard turned seventy-seven and decided to lighten his load. After so many years of high stress cases, his nerves were testy and a chunk had been chipped off the block of his mental happiness. He went through phases of breakdowns and panic attacks, and finally with as much audacity as he could muster he asked to give up his position.

That happened three years to the day. Now he only participated in what he called high interest cases. They were the ones that really took a knocking on him. He couldn't refuse them

for fear of missing the rush of solving a case, saving a life, or turning in a criminal. But that life came with sacrifices.

The phone was still ringing.

“You want to take this call, Ruby?” He asked his aging calico cat who was napping on top of last Sunday’s newspaper. “Sometimes I wish I was a cat so *I* wouldn’t have to deal with all this nonsense,” he said in response to her sleepy eyelids. He picked up the phone mid-ring, “Richard speaking.”

“Happy Halloween sir,” he recognized the voice on the other line immediately, “Charlie here. We have the results from the autopsy sir. There’s something,” Charlie paused, “peculiar about the body, similar to the Whittler case.”

Exactly forty-nine hours ago Richard was motoring back to the harbor in his 32-foot sloop after an afternoon of sailing when he saw something cast ashore near the south side of Curtis Island. He noticed a head of hair and quickly realized it was a drowned body. He radioed the station and asked for a team to meet him at the island. He circled the island looking for any survivors. The rescue team came in a patrol boat and quickly took the body. He hadn’t worried about it since. People drowned all the time and he always thought a soul was lucky to be lost to the sea, but similarities to the Whittler case had reason to be concerned.

Richard agreed to meet Charlie at the funeral home. He stood up, cracked his back in both directions, nuzzled Ruby on her forehead and grabbed his hat and cane. Sue was still downstairs chopping tomatoes.

“Was it Thala?” She asked without looking up from her cutting board. “No unfortunately not, it was Charlie,” she looked up. Richard continued, “there’s something I need to take a look over at Ellen’s,” her eyebrows shifted downwards in perplexity. He kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll

be back in time for dinner. We'll talk about it when I get home." As he pulled open the door of his car he heard the phone ring again upstairs. Sue clunked up the stairs to pick it up. He waited a couple seconds just in case it was Charlie calling to change his mind. He stood with his bad knee propped up in the car and the other planted on the ground. His right hand held firmly onto the steering wheel ready to pull himself into the driver's seat. He waited, but silence was the only answer. It must have been Thala calling to plan her trip up from Philadelphia. He started the engine and left Ruby peering after him in the upstairs window, a faint yellow aura glowed around her.

~

Richard drove north on Elm Street passing the harbor on his right to veer left onto Mountain Street. He pulled into the parking lot of the Longley Family Funeral home. Charlie was waiting for him outside. He was a robust looking man of about forty, a balding bachelor without any prospects. He was smoking a little cigar with one arm crossed over his protruding potbelly to support the weight of his smoking one. When he saw Richard pull into the parking lot he nodded his head in a greeting and shifted his weight away from the patrol car he was leaning on.

"Thanks for coming out today sir," he said extending his hand for a firm shake. "I wanted you to see this for yourself." Charlie had always respected Agent Crowfoot for his history in the field. He took one last inhale on his cigar before licking the pads of his thumb and pointer finger to put it out. He opened his brown overcoat and placed the unfinished cigar in his pocket. "We'll make this a quick one," he said as he held the door open for Richard.

As soon as he entered the lobby, Richard could smell the familiar potpourri that Ellen, the owner of the funeral home, always refreshed to keep the environment welcoming and uplifting,

despite the reality of such a place. It always reminded him of his aunt's closet, the only thing that was missing was the mothball smell to top it off.

There were people waiting on the plush velvet sofas. They all looked morose, the expression on their faces were downcast in a stagnant frown, but the youngest girl, who looked to be about four, was exploring the room as if she was on a treasure hunt. She was extremely curious as to what everything felt like and even tasted the draw lines on the curtains. Richard took notice of her right away. Her black dress with yellow ribbon around the rims reminded him of one Thala had worn when she was around that age. The girl's mother beckoned for her and she turned around, saw Richard staring at her, and ran to hide her head in her mother's lap.

Across the room was a worn out woman with her head resting on the shoulder of a man who looked like he could have been a ghost. His face was grey and his hair was tightly tied in a long ponytail at the base of his skull. His eyes were just as black as his hair and appeared even darker because of the puffy half moons under his sleep-bereft eyes. Richard could not help but stare at the couple who looked like a match made in heaven, both disheveled to the point that they no longer cared who looked at them, or what they were looking at; it even seemed they didn't care where they were. There was a sliver of drool hanging out of the woman's open mouth. It landed softly on the canvas of the man's jacket. He didn't seem to notice the excreting saliva or the obvious stare coming from Richard. Charlie tapped Richard on the shoulder and directed him down the stairs into the basement.

The smell was no longer of fresh potpourri. There was not even a hint of a flower down on this level of the house. They were underground. The only smell that was describable was that of formaldehyde: the suffocating, gaseous smell of a chemical that is made to lengthen the life of decomposing of flesh. He knew the smell well. The first time he had encountered it was on his

first case. It was a minor homicide. A case that turned out to be a raped high school junior, a seventeen year-old who was hoping to win the title of queen that night but was found beneath a dock at the Portland marina.

The lights down in the basement were buzzing with the irritating sound a bulb makes before it flashes one last time and is extinguished forever. Ellen's son, Sean, was down in the lab going over the test results that had come in from the lab earlier that morning.

Sean was leaning over the counter when he noticed the two men come in. He stood up straight and opened the glass door that separated the dead from the living.

"She's in here," he said as he slid the door wide enough for them to fit through. "I am glad you got here when you did, her mother and father are upstairs waiting for her to be placed in the coffin. They're taking her back to Ohio for the service tomorrow. You knew she was from Cincinnati? I had no idea. How did she end up in the West Penobscot Bay?" Charlie was silent and looked a bit annoyed at his short rant.

"Richard, meet Sean." Charlie waited a moment. "Sean, this is the Admiral." Sean had heard about the famous Admiral Crowfoot from his mother, but didn't say a word; he shook his hand and looked to Charlie for the order of things. It had been almost two years since the Admiral was called in to inspect a body. It was Sean's first year working in the family business and recently things had been a little weird.

"Alright," Charlie made one loud clap between his hands, "let's not waste time, her family is waiting for her. "

They approached the side of the dissection table. Richard shuddered. Her flesh was sewn up and the formaldehyde pumping through her veins made her skin glow a bland shade of pink, a rosy red that was most definitely overshadowed by the blue tinge of her bloated body. He had

seen victims of drowning, but had never seen anything like this; her flesh was gnawed all over, she had been a floating buffet for shrimp and other hungry nibblers in the water for weeks. There were craters of wounds all over her. Her face hardly looked human. Her eyes and nose were no longer there and puffy lips peeled back to reveal swollen gums and half hidden teeth.

“Pretty remarkable huh?” Charlie commented on Richards gaping expression.

“I couldn’t believe her family came all the way to take her back. They couldn’t afford to fly her out. It’s definitely going to be a closed casket wake.” He raised his eyebrows as he put plastic medical gloves on both his hands. “Her mother and father already saw her,” he took a deep breath as the gloves snapped tightly around his large wrists. “She had been missing for almost a month, but we couldn’t get any more details from them than that. End of story.”

“Why not?” Richard asked. Sean sank off to the side.

“They were sworn to some confidentiality agreement with the treatment center she had been sent to. When she was sixteen, age of death eighteen, she was diagnosed with stomach cancer and her family sent her to some clinic to be treated. They won’t disclose the name or location. They signed a paper and took an oath. They’re pretty traditional folks. They didn’t want her cremated, they are set on burying her in their family plot.” He began to chuckle. The sucking of the air ventilation system muffled the sound of his laugh.

“Now listen to this,” Charlie sighed, “the results from the autopsy are similar to what we saw with the Whittler case: an atypical organ anatomy. The girl’s body was mutated. There’s something strange going on here. I am afraid to admit it, but we’re pretty much in the dark here Admiral.” His face looked morose and disappointed. The expression resembled a little leaguer who had just lost his chance to make it to the semi-finals.

Richard absorbed the information as he stared past Charlie. The Whittler case was one of three that Richard was still investigating. They all had a common thread: Unexplainable Anatomical Alterations or ‘U Double A’ as Charlie’s forensic team called it.

“The reason we knew something was wacky with her stomach,” Charlie continued, “was because of this—” he lifted her black blouse with his plastic covered sausage shaped fingers and revealed a series of orange circles below the left side of her rib cage. “In the spirit of Halloween eh?” His humor was as horrible as his breath. Richard came closer to the body. The orange circles were randomly scattered but constricted to a three-inch circumference. He reached in his pocket for reading glasses, grabbed a pair of medical gloves, and put on a breathing mask to help with the smell. He leaned over her body and pushed down on the spot infected area. If Charlie and Sean had no context as to who Richard was or why he was there, they would have thought he was a mad scientist. He pushed down on her stomach and he dropped his head to one side to listen to the effect. His fingers began to sink deep into her flesh, causing the cadaver to shift a little against the pressure.

He raised his head. “What did you put down on record for cause of death?” Richard asked blankly.

“It was a drowning. Her lungs were clogged with salt water. She—”

He was no longer listening; his eyes were squinting against the salty air stinging his face. His feet were slightly over the edge of the shoreline; little pebbles fell down and splashed into the ocean far below him. His boots were splattered with blood from the hog they had slaughtered at his uncle’s farm. The squeals were still ringing inside his head and all he wanted was the wind to replace them with a gentle hushing sound, like his mothers breaths in between the words of stories she read him before he fell asleep.

The eyes. He remembered them as if they had just flashed in front of him. The hog's eyes had burned with the wish to live, the wish to bask in the sun for endless days and rub against the cool mud of the earth hoping that the heat from his skin would evaporate and fill the humid air around him with a gentle mist.

The wind pulled his arms out and away from his sides and he leaned his head up towards the sky. An airplane flew above him, creating a direct line between the sun, the body of the metal winged aircraft and his own vertical body. What a good day to fly. He took a breath in and exhaled slowly looking across the sea. He knew his father would be wondering where he was. They went up to Maine every August to help with his uncle's slaughter and leave with a penny or so of the earnings. His father always complained that it wasn't even enough to pay for the boy's schoolbooks, but his mother always said that the fresh air away from Boston did the whole family good. Yes, if by fresh air you mean pig shit and the smell of death, he had heard his father mutter under his breath.

When will you be ready to die? His younger brother had asked him earlier that day at breakfast. Just like the hog, we don't have a choice. He wondered whether the answer was a true one, whether death could and should be a choice one makes for himself. Birth being a passage, so is death, but birth is not a choice, so why should death be?

Richard's mind flashed forward to the day their dog had been hit by a car, its neck bent backwards, its spine broken. Thala had screamed and ran into the house. When Richard heard her his heart jumped and his legs sprung him out of his chair. She could barely communicate what happened and just pointed with her little fingers out towards the road. He ran outside hoping Sue was safe and when he saw a car pulled over and Sue and the driver bending over something in the road he knew it was their collie Pearl who had been hit. She died a few minutes later. Their

family's grief for the animal was like the death of a sibling, though he knew the death of a child was worse than that of a pet, far worse, stinging the heart with a black sadness forever. When he knelt down to rest a hand on Annie's suffering body, he felt a sudden gratitude that it wasn't Thala that had been hit.

"Richard, are you alright?" Charlie asked. Richard nodded his head in an effort to refocus.

"Yes, obviously it's drowning, but are you sure her that's how she initially died?"

"Whether it was an accident or a suicide is unclear, but there's no evidence of rape or misconduct," Charlie pulled off his gloves and threw them in the trash. "Let's get a cup of coffee Admiral, there's a lot to discuss here." He looked over to the corner where Sean had been standing. "Thanks for your time Sean. And good job with the body, it's not easy to make a drowned girl look that pretty." He winked and headed towards the door. Sean refitted the girl's blouse, chased all the wrinkles out of it, and picked up both her hands to rest them neatly on her chest, one on top of the other. Richard watched as he conducted the ceremonious movements.

"Admiral," Charlie said as he held the door open, "let's get this show on the road."

~

The afternoon slipped quickly into evening as Richard and Charlie sat at Peter Ott's Steakhouse and Tavern. It was one of Richard's favorite places. It had been there since Richard could remember and still served the best steak and fries. Today he wasn't there for his usual entrée, but his usual spot: the quiet booth that was tucked in the back of the restaurant. It conveniently offered both comfort and confidentiality.

"I am glad we decided to make this one a beer instead of a cup of joe," Charlie said after he took a large gulp of his Guinness and leaned back into the soft cushioned booth.

Richard sipped his Stella and watched the Sox game out of the corner of his eye. They were down ten to four at the bottom of the seventh. They still had a chance. The bartender below the television caught his attention. He was dressed like a zombie, his eye sockets were painted black and his neck had a line of fake blood near his Adam's apple to make it seem like he had been slit straight across the throat. Richard couldn't help but think of the girl's empty eye sockets and bloated cheeks.

"I am ready to wind down for the day," Richard mumbled without looking at Charlie. He knew he must head home for supper shortly. He agreed to stay for a drink because he didn't want to go straight home. He needed time to adjust. He reminded himself of what he knew: Camden, Sue, Halloween, earlier in the day he picked tomatoes and nuzzled Ruby on her soft head. All that seemed so far away. He always slipped into a different world when he was called onto a new case. He lost himself in it. The way he lost himself in the sea. It was the same rocking motion, the same excitement of heading out into the unknown open horizon.

"You have plans for Thanksgiving son?" He asked more cheerfully.

"I am headed down to West Bath to see my sister and her new baby." Charlie smiled a smile that was welcoming but lonely.

Richard smiled back. "You really don't have any suspicion that that girl was murdered?" he pushed on.

"Something weird is definitely going on here," Charlie admitted and relaxed his frame. "Why, what's on your mind Admiral?" He leaned forward in interest, his elbows jutting out onto the tabletop and his hands came together in a prayer position in front of his chin. His eyes were fierce with the intensity that had brought him where he was now, one of the leading investigators for the mid-coast state police force, a man who Richard trusted with any case.

“What’s her history? Any mental illness, depression, suicide attempts?” He was fishing for an explanation that had no bait to lure in a bite.

“Nope, nothing, as clear as crystal, of course her family is a bit odd, but the way they talked about her made her seem as perfect as a doll in a basket. Nothing wrong. Dedicated student, a team player, she volunteered at their town’s hospice center.” He stopped, that seemed like enough to convince the Admiral that she was in no way subject to taking her own life.

Why would an eighteen year old want to die? Richard thought to himself. He remembered when Thala was that age. She had been through some awkward phases, especially in middle school, but in high school she stayed busy with soccer and piano, always off for a tournament or recital. She was simply too busy to get involved in drugs or caught in the wrong crowd. He and Sue were involved with her education from the beginning, teaching her how to read before they put her in school, and helping her with her homework when she fell behind or was in a slump. She was a strong student throughout her years at home, and when she decided to attend college at the University of Pennsylvania, they were sad to see her go, but glad she wasn’t leaving them for the West, at least she was staying on the East Coast, and close to the ocean. That was certainly reassuring for Richard.

“You know Admiral,” Charlie sat in silence for a couple of minutes as Richard fell into the well of this thoughts, a habit that people witnessed every now and then when in his presence for a good chunk of time, “something tells me she didn’t want to die, but didn’t have a choice.” He paused. Richard gave him a look of interest and he continued, “I have a strange feeling something went wrong, there was no evidence that pointed to the possibility of manhandling or abuse—except for her odd markings.”

“Yes, her stomach.” Richard interjected. “She probably knew she was going to die because of her cancer, so she decided to die quickly instead of painfully.”

“Maybe.”

They both took another gulp of beer.

“We need to trace where these bodies are floating in from.”

“That’s the piece of the puzzle we can’t figure out sir. It’s starting to get under my skin. These bodies, this is the fourth we’ve found yet we have no idea where they are coming from. It’s pulling my strings Admiral, and we’re not getting anywhere. I feel like the conductor of a train that just won’t budge, no matter how much coal I pack into the engine.”

“Charlie, you’re a good agent. I know this is frustrating, especially when a young victim shows up as a case, but it brings us one step closer to solving this.” Richard took the last sip of his beer and slapped a ten-dollar bill down to cover their tab, “Well Captain, I need to get home.”

Charlie stood up and shook the Admiral’s hand with a firm grip, “I will contact you if anything else comes up sir.”

“Thanks for your good work. Call me anytime son,” he sounded reliable, like a friend who really meant what he said, “don’t hesitate, I may not answer the first few times,” they laughed lightly, “but call enough and I won’t have any other choice.”

The truth was, he had no idea whether or not they were closer to solving these cases, but something was missing, something that, once discovered, would make the two men sleep without shadows floating above them. Richard drove straight home, past the wandering trick-or-treaters and away from the sleeping ships in the harbor.

He pulled into his driveway and gazed through the sunroom windows at Sue who was sitting at the dining room table with a glass of wine. A single candle in the middle of the table lit her face perfectly. He could see the sharp line of her nose that led to her closed mouth, her lips were in the position they took when she was focused. Her head was tilted downwards; she was probably reading an article in the New Yorker or one of her favorite literary magazines. He wanted tell her about the girl, the way Sean placed her hands gently on top of her chest in a final resting position, but he knew she would not take the news of a death, even of someone she didn't know, easily.

Sue was a sensitive woman, when she heard from Jean-Louis—the baker who told her one morning that her friend's son was in a motorcycle accident and was taken into the critical condition unit—she called the boy's mother and left a message on the answering machine and went down to the marina to cry before coming home. Later that day she found out it wasn't her friend's son but a friend of the boy's. She was somewhat relieved and prayed for the boy that night before she went to sleep.

It's not that she was a considerably religious woman, she was raised Catholic, but did not attend Church except for Christmas Mass and occasionally sang in the Women's Choir when she felt particularly musical. She still prayed, out of habit perhaps, or because it comforted her. Richard was used to the sound of her soft-spoken voice murmuring nightly prayers before she lay beside him at night. Her white cotton nightgown ended at her ankles and covered her to her wrists, but near her heart, lace was woven ornately across her chest.

He opened the door, hung up his hat and cane, and slipped into his house shoes. The woodstove was lit and the heat calmed his nerves. Sue had cooked a butternut squash soup and he could smell its sweetness in the air.

“My darling Susan,” he came up behind her chair and placed both hands on her shoulders. Her wool sweater warmed his hands that only a moment before had been cold on his steering wheel. There was no reason to tell Sue about the girl’s bloated body, how she floated for so long alone in the water until he found her. There was no reason to upset her. “What a Halloween,” he said as he pulled out a chair and sat beside her at the table. “Have we gotten any trick-or-treaters yet?”

“I put out a bowl of candy on the steps, I hope they take only a few each.” She smiled and put her magazine down to face him fully. “I remember when I was a girl, I used to take a handful of whatever I pleased.”

“Well, they’ll take what they take I suppose. Is Thala all set for Thanksgiving?”

“She’s coming up with Quinn on the twenty second. Ian won’t be joining us this year, apparently he has to work on a show in Washington D.C. that runs through the holiday weekend. He’s been working awfully hard this year.”

Ian Hutchinson married their daughter two years after she graduated from her masters program in education. He was a lighting engineer from Scranton, Pennsylvania. Their son, Quinn, was turning three that winter.

“Shall I heat up some bread for our soup?” he proposed. She didn’t object, who could to warm bread with butternut squash soup?

He served the steaming bowls and sat across from her. The candle glowed gold between them.

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The frost bitten leaves crunched beneath her mud caked boots. She was wandering around the forest trying to find the edge of the water when she saw something glimmer against

the bark of the hardwoods. She looked towards the water and back again. She couldn't help but feel drawn to the only thing that offered brightness on such a night. A deep breath led her towards the indefinable object.

The closer she wandered the more she could make out the roundness of a head and the straight lines of limbs. The moonless sky did not keep branches from striking her face. Each step she took thorny brambles attacked her legs, but she did not bother to reach down to detach them from her pant leg. Soon she was running. Her feet lifted off the ground and her jeans tore from the sharp grabbing thorns.

It was a body. A girl's body. Oh good God, it was a dead girl lying in the middle of the woods close to the water, but far enough away to have been left undiscovered for quite some time. The body was shriveled in some places but overall it was a disgusting bubble of bloated flesh. Her eyes were missing and she was lying on the ground in a fetal position.

She felt her vocal cords dying inside her, a scream was blocking her from breathing, but when she opened her mouth no sound came out, she had no breath. She was strangled from the sight. The proximity to death brought her to her senses quickly. The smell was unbearably sharp, a pungent scent of rotting insides and putrefying flesh, the black rot of a once living being.

She tried to scream, but her lungs would not comply. Panic filled her. She looked around to see any hint of a flashlight or a passing boat, something or someone who could help her. She looked from right to left as quickly as she could so as not to miss anything. But something filled the space in between her and the trees, in between everything that existed in that moment in time. A thick cloud of fog quickly blanketed the forest. Whiteness surrounded her and nothing was visible beyond the reach of her own hands. She sunk down on her hands and knees. Her weight on all fours gave out. Her chest fell to the ground. She rolled onto her side and curled

up into the exact position the girl lying beside her was in. They seemed to be shrinking into two tiny fetuses, one dead and one alive. The fog was swallowing them. Finally she screamed.

Sue woke up. Tears streamed down her face. Her long cotton nightgown was spiraled into a tight twist around her body. She gasped for breath and felt her chest rise and fall.

Richard slept silently beside her lost in his own nightmare.

Part Two

It was another case of the pains of a growing teenager. The only meat her family could afford was the marked down Spielman Specialty meats. They usually bought it a day or two before it went past the expiration date. Her two older brothers ate like wolves and she could pack a couple of pounds down a week at least. She was a freshman in high school and her body was beginning to even out with her breasts. The more height she added the more her heavy torso looked balanced in comparison to the changes puberty had brought on.

She started her period the summer after she turned twelve. She was visiting her cousins on her mother's side of the family for an afternoon of fun in the sun. Sun burnt all over and annoyed to the max from the screams coming from her little cousins each time they jumped into the swimming pond, she found herself sitting on the toilet, head in hands, listening to the air conditioning unit rumble over her. When she pulled down her pants, there was a brown paste on her underwear. It was not a thick clump of a mess, she would have known if she had soiled herself; it was a thin layer of discharge that didn't smell or have much of a texture. She placed a few sheets of toilet paper in her panties until she could change them when she got home. She hadn't felt much like swimming that day anyway.

Four years later, she had grown accustomed to the monthly time when she would have to sneak the trips to the local drug store for over the counter painkillers and feminine products. Her two older brothers knew she was a girl, meaning there was something different down there, but past that they had no idea or didn't really want to have any idea what a woman had to do to take care of herself during her time of the month.

She needed meat to keep her healthy. She went to class at eight thirty every morning, five days a week and she worked nights at Wendy's near the interstate to get enough money to chip into her schoolbooks and clothes, occasionally buying herself an exciting new dress for a party. Sometimes her family needed help with the bills here and there, and she knew without her job, they probably wouldn't get by some months. Their landlord was a wealthy woman from old Cincinnati blood. She was a sore thumb at times and when they didn't pay their rent on time she would cut off their electricity or heat.

She had recently developed a crush on a boy in her class. She had known him since sixth grade, but had only really started to notice him lately. They had geometry together and in the afternoons she always watched him walk towards the big oak tree on the side of the road behind the gym to meet his mom or dad or whoever was picking him up. She overheard him talking one day about getting a motorcycle to ride to school and take trips on. She fantasized about holding onto his skinny waist while the wind rushed through her hair. They would skip their last class to go sit near a waterfall or have a picnic in a meadow on the outskirts of the city. She liked the way his hair fell into his eyes and the way he said hi to her, quiet and shy, but when she could see his smile, her whole body felt weak with an urge to grab his hand or pull him into her.

The pains began to bother her one night when she was closing. It was around midnight. Her shift didn't end until two that morning. It was a Friday night and she knew she could sleep in the next day. She was standing at the register when an extreme pain caused her to double over. Her friend Todd saw her and seemed concerned, but the more she tried to ignore the pain, the more it started to bother her. It wasn't until the next afternoon that her mother called the ambulance. Her father watched from the porch as the EMS team loaded her into the square vehicle. She knew he was worried about the hospital bills. Her mother begged him for what seemed like hours to let her call 911. It had turned into a scene and the sooner she was out of the house the better. She didn't care where she was going just as long as she got away from her mother's crying. It was making the pain in her abdomen worse.

After two days in the hospital the test results from the MRI came back. The doctor told her in two brief sentences that she had developed stomach cancer and a tumor that needed to be removed as soon they could schedule it with the OR. They took her into surgery the next day. She woke up with her brothers asleep in the chairs beside her bed and her mother rocking back and forth on the floor with her knees clutched close to her body. Her eyes were blood shot and tired. A fake smile appeared on her mother's lips when she saw that she was awake. She sensed in the air that her father had been there and had left a trail of upset behind him.

In another couple of days she would be out of the hospital depending on how well her body adjusted to the surgery. The doctors came and updated her once a day on her levels of rehabilitation and the therapy that may or may not be needed. Another couple of days turned into a couple of weeks and soon she was beginning to feel her life was slowly flushing down the toilet along with the hospital food she was throwing up daily.

We've entered you into a treatment center. The nurse told her one afternoon. You're a perfect candidate and lucky to have been accepted. It was her only choice. Her mother was smiling, her father was stone cold and silent and her brothers had no idea where they were sending their sister. All they heard was New Brunswick, somewhere in Canada, a center that was being funded by the Department of Health. Her case was sensitive enough to peak the interests of the researchers and hopefully she would be cured within six months to a year.

She wrote a letter to the boy who may or may not have bought his motorbike. She told one of her brothers to leave it in his locker. She knew he would check it after lunch before he had to get his books for class. It said something along the lines of: I've always loved you but I never had the courage to tell you. I hope we can hang out when I get out of the hospital. I notice the way you use your ruler and can tell from how you answer questions in class that you are really smart. I know we would learn a lot from each other. If you want to write, send a letter to the Collective Center for Cancer Research. I will write to you from there and you'll have the return address. Until then.

They attached her to a portable saline source and drove her to the airport. She had only been in a plane twice before. Once to visit her dying grandfather in Arizona and another time to go to Disneyworld in Florida when she was about eight years old.

The plane took off. She couldn't tell whether it was her medication that made her feel drowsy or the tilt of the metal winged plane against the pressure of the atmosphere. She fell asleep within minutes. The city lights blurred below her and fireworks exploded behind her darkly fallen eyelids.

The treatment center was a busy place, much busier than the hospital she had spent a month in. Her days were jam packed with sessions. She would go from a fifty-minute session with a psychologist to a specialist who talked with her about what they were treating specifically inside her. Then she would spend hours in a treatment room where they hooked her up to machines and listened to the inner workings of her body. She went through surgery a couple of times but they were tiny surgeries compared to her first and practically painless.

Her room overlooked the rocky seaside and she fell asleep to the sound of the waves crashing against the shore. She felt at peace.

The library was full of books she had never seen or heard of, and she didn't have to worry about completing her mundane school assignments anymore. She was reading and talking to interesting people. She made friends with the other patients. They were from all over the world, and despite the language barriers, she enjoyed the company of such vastly different people than her.

She loved sitting outside in the sunshine. The days lasted longer than at home. She had never experienced so much daylight. Her body began to feel lighter and better except for a few spells of utter fatigue and numbness from all the medication she was taking.

She sent a letter the boy and was waiting for a response. Her mother wrote to her but her writing was in a scribble she couldn't read. Once a week she would call home and talk long enough to feel thankful that she wasn't there anymore. She was in another part of the world, far away from Spielmans Specialty meats, Wendy's, and the harsh ordeals of high school.

At night she would dream her body was full of white balloons to float her up into the sky and carry her to the boy's doorstep. She would land softly on the green grass in front of his house. He would see her standing outside, recognize her, and open the door. Standing face to

face he would slowly raise his hand to her cheek. Their embrace would be long and tender with kisses landing on the eyebrows and cheeks until finally their lips would meet. The softness of his tongue and sweet taste of saliva would last for hours until the morning light reminded her of another day.

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One afternoon she went for a walk and found a boy around her age sitting in a wheel chair near the edge of the cliffs. He noticed her approach and turned his head immediately away. He was upset. That much she could tell. She said nothing but quietly stood next to him and took in the view of what seemed like an endless ocean stretching far into the nowhere.

His legs and lower torso were wrapped in some type of wire. She wondered how he went to the bathroom. After a few moments of silence, she looked at him and smiled. He looked down to where his body was aching and then up again to her. The slight smile she gave him brightened his entire demeanor. He told her he was thinking about rolling off. He spoke English with a harsh accent. He sounded like he was from the Eastern Europe or Russia. She replied that his family would miss him and probably wonder where their son or brother had gone. She also told him that there were many people at the center that probably cared for him. Life would get better for him once he healed.

People jump all the time, he said. Sometimes the bodies are found; sometimes they just drift in the ocean forever becoming a part of it. Better to be a part of something as beautiful as this than as ugly as this. He looked down to where his legs used to be.

Amazing things are happening all the time, whether we can see them or not. She tried to tell him that miracles were going on inside his body that would take time but would eventually heal him and take him home.

He didn't want to go home, he said. He wanted to go somewhere else, somewhere where he wouldn't feel the ghosts of his legs, somewhere where he would understand why his bones were growing back but were being programmed to move with the synapses in his brain. There were complications that would never be solved, and he didn't want to be the one to have to wait it through. He didn't want to be the one to test it out. Maybe he was supposed to have died in the accident but he was being kept alive for modern technological advancements. It had been five years and some man's ego was attached to his survival. He didn't want to live so some doctor could boost his medical reputation.

There was a movie playing and she wanted to watch it with him. He agreed and they backtracked along the trail together. They ate banana pudding and watched the movie. Afterwards they talked and watched the sunset sparkle on the horizon.

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For the next couple of days she walked along side the boy in the wheelchair, sharing her experiences, and tying all her memories together for him so her life made sense. He did the same, but his life was vastly different from hers. He was from a city called Minsk in a country called Belarus. She didn't know if this country was a part of Germany or Poland so she looked in an atlas in the library one evening. It was east of Poland and north of Ukraine, a part of the world she had never really thought about.

He told her stories about his childhood when he lived alone with his mother. She was an actress who was in her fifth role at the Maxim Gorky Theatre. They lived by the old Kalvaryja cemetery. Every day he would run through it to get to school on time in the morning. One day he came home and discovered to his discontent that his mother had brought a man home with her, not a cast member or a director, but a man who claimed to be a producer for a new theatre

that was to open that spring. He wanted her to be one of his main actors. His first production was going to be *A Winter's Tale*. He told his mother he wanted her for the role of Queen Hermione. She would beg Leontes to love her and believe in her. He wanted her to be painted in white when she transformed from a marble statue into a mother waiting to be reunited with her daughter.

One night his mother did not return. Three days passed with no word until he received an urgent message to meet her at a train station in a town he had never heard of. The producer had stolen all her money and left her.

Then the accident happened. He stopped there.

She held back the urge to ask what happened. She liked listening to his raspy accent and the way his English slipped in and out of recognizable words. When he spoke words she had known forever, his accent made them sound like she was hearing them for the first time. His 'h' sounds had a harsh edge to them. A 'ua' sounded more like a 'w'. His long and short 'o' sounds were much too long or too short so he said words like bowl and orange in a way that made her smile. Sometimes he forgot to say 'the' or 'a' before a word. At first she smiled outwardly each time he made the mistake but he did it so often she started to get used to it.

His sentences were direct and to the point. She liked that.

She was beginning to forget about the boy who used to wait under the oak tree. She no longer missed the way his jeans sagged or the square outline in his back pocket where his wallet had worn through the denim. His entire persona was fading from her memory.

One afternoon of a nurse showed her a scan of her stomach on a monitor. It looked more like silly putty than blood and cells.

The doctors at the center collectively called her into a board meeting one sunny April morning. She sat down across from them in a wooden chair made for what seemed like a giant. Her feet barely touched the ground. She looked up and recognized each pair of eyes staring at her. She knew all the doctors, some better than others. They smiled and she looked back at them like a newborn babe does to her guardian angels gathered around to welcome the newly arrived into the world.

They were silent for a couple of minutes, longer than was comfortable for her. The doctor in the middle of the table was the first to speak. She was the director who had welcomed her day she arrived. The woman was in her late forties, with long chestnut hair, and green eyes. She was British and spoke slowly, almost as if she was speaking to a toddler.

She said the treatment plan was going slower than they had hoped and they weren't sure her life could be saved. They were doing all they could and would continue to do so but without the activity in her cells taking direction she may not survive the treatment.

They wanted her to know just in case she had any wishes to see her family. The director said there was a chance life may leave her at any moment.

She realized they wanted her to talk or do or say something, after all, they were gathered in the same room at once for a reason. She had no air for a second until the silence in the room made her shiver. She said she did not want to see her family. She wanted to wait. If she died she was prepared to die. If she lived she would live with what course her body chose.

All the doctors smiled in unison and stood up. She stood up in response and shook a hand or hugged each doctor in turns of them leaving the room in different directions. The room had various doors that led to the different wings of the center. They called it the Hive. Once all the

doctors had emptied out she was standing alone. The white and yellow walls calmed her. The breeze was blowing through the window and suddenly she had an urge to walk to the shore.

She tried to find her friend but he was nowhere in sight. She scanned all the usual places he normally spent time in, but to no avail did she find him reading or drawing a cartoon character with verbal bubbles popping out of their funny shaped mouths.

She decided to go to the shoreline anyway. The sun was setting by the minute and she didn't want to miss her favorite moment.

While she walked along the stone path she knew so intimately, she began to think about all the moments she would miss in her life if she died. Life flashed before her like a movie preview.

If she was going to die, she wanted to die quickly; she was walking in a different gait now, a kind of run with a hop every now and then. She was running faster than she ever thought she could, she felt like she was flying. The sound of her feet was barely audible as they touched ground. She was lifting ever so slightly.

She ran faster and faster until she saw the edge of the shore. It was at least a forty-foot fall into the water and the bottom was rocky and jagged. She knew and understood if she did not stop she would fall...or fly. There was a thought in her head that she might not fall. She could just float and land in the water; after all she had never swum in this ocean for as long as she had been there.

Her feet lifted off the ground. She was flying. She knew she was flying. She did not stop. The wind carried her out and over the edge of the shore. She flew over the water and grazed it with her fingertips. The water reacted by spreading like sparkles underneath her. She lifted her chest and flew in spirals around the clouds, high, and low, and back down towards the shore stopping just before she reached land. She didn't want to get sucked back into the force of

gravity quite yet. She raised her head and chest and glided through the sky. She wanted to reach the outer rim of the planet. She flew past earth and circled the moon and all around the earth, flying back into the stratosphere, visiting any country she wanted to see. Then back out again to breath the air of the solar system. She soared in and out of countries visiting islands off Japan and the Himalayas and back down again to Madagascar. She headed for Mars and onto the moons around Jupiter. She caught the Milky Way and slid down it like a three year old at a playground. She was happy beyond happiness, joyful beyond recognition, and free beyond the limits of a human body.

Part Three

Sue woke up. Her head was heavy. She turned to where Richard had slept but he was already up. His warmth was gone from the sheets and a chill spread through her outstretched arm. She threw a shawl over her shoulders and made her way to the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her face. The water was taking a while to warm up. As she looked into the mirror she remembered the face without eyes. Her nightmare came back to her in quick flashes. The fetal position, the scream, the feeling of the fog pushing the life out of her.

With a rosy complexion about her face, she rushed down the stairs and saw Richard walking down the driveway with the paper resting in his arms like a fresh loaf of bread. She made a cup of tea and sat down in a reading chair to think about the images still sharp in her mind.

Richard walked slowly back to the house. After refilling his coffee cup, he sat down on the couch with a grunt trying not to spill. Sue was sipping her tea, lost in the herbs on the bottom of her mug. He watched her for a few seconds waiting for her to look up.

“I need to reorganize the section on dreams in the store. Remember when I used to read all those dream analysts? Carl Jung and Carlos Castaneda,” she was looking straight at him, with an excited quiver in her pupils, “I wonder if we have those lying around.”

He didn’t say much for a few minutes. He thought about his dreams, but all he could remember was darkness and indiscernible figures, people with visible bodies but hindered features.

“I dreamt last night of a drowned girl,” Sue whispered as if she were saying her nighttime prayers. “She was puffy and had no eyes.” A burst of laughter caused pent up tears to break free, “I am a bit shaken up I guess.”

Richard put down his mug and grabbed a pillow from behind him. He threw it on the ground to kneel at the base of her chair. She looked at him and blinked. The tears fell into her lap. He reached around her and rested his head against her chest. The embrace reminded him of the two miscarriages Sue endured before Thala was born. He used to hold her like this when she would break down and cry in this very chair. It turned out the third time worked like a charm.

“You are right my love,” he looked up at her, “the call yesterday—when I went to meet Charlie—” he said slowly. She nodded. “It was about a body they found near Curtis Island, a girl, eighteen. When I saw her, her eyes had been eaten out, and the salt water had infiltrated every pore of her body.”

Sue dropped her mug. The tea spilled onto the rug and out onto the hardwood floor. The tinted water crept ever so slowly away from them before disappearing into a crack in the floor.

The phone rang a couple days before Thanksgiving. It was Charlie calling to tell the Admiral he was leaving town and had not heard anything new concerning the details of the girl's case.

"Drowned, that's it, no suicide, homicide or pesticide," Charlie's bland humor needed some spice, "I'll call you if anything comes up," he said before he hung up.

Richard had an inclination to open a completely new file on all these cases. They should all be considered one case, he grunted to himself as he walked through the aisles of the grocery store gathering things in his cart that Sue had put on the list for him. Kosher salt to brine the turkey, heavy whipping cream for the pumpkin pie, wow was he getting hungry. He was excited to see Thala and Quinn, whom he had not seen in a whole year. He was always fascinated with the differences between mother and son. He remembered her when she was Quinn's age, playing with her dolls and pretending she was an escaped zoo animal in the back yard. Sue would bring her a bowl of milk and she would try to lick it up pretending she was a cougar or jaguar. Last time he saw Quinn he was picking up sticks and pebbles and hitting everything in sight.

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Thala arrived that afternoon. She had cut her hair short and when she turned her head quickly towards where Richard was standing its shimmering blackness resembled that of a flapper girl from the twenties. Two skinny locks curled into sharp ringlets in front of her ears and close to her jaw. Her smile was still as wide as ever, and the dimple on her left cheek that appeared when she smiled was still Richard's favorite place to kiss her.

She pulled into the driveway with Quinn asleep in his car seat. His little hands were limp in his lap and his shoes had been kicked off. One of his socks hung onto the edge of his toes.

Richard brought their suitcases upstairs while Thala used the bathroom. Sue was working in the bookstore ready to flip the open sign when the clock struck five. Thanksgiving was the next day. Sue was excited about catching up with Thala while Quinn played with the wooden train set she had kept for him for all these years.

Thala came out of the bathroom and pulled her hairbrush out of the bag on her bed. Mid-stroke, she noticed the door to her father's study was shut. Wondering if Ruby was stuck inside the stuffy room, she stood in front of the door listening for a distressed meow. She began to turn the knob when she heard a cry from Quinn who had woken up from his nap and was still strapped into his car seat. She flew down the stairs and saw Richard attempting to unstrap him. She knew it had been more than a year since they had seen each other and was curious if Quinn would react differently to his grandfather after that long of a separation.

Richard was having a difficult time figuring out the logistics of the seat belt. Quinn was staring up at him with sleepy eyes.

"Do you remember Grandpa?" Thala spouted loudly as she reached in the back seat to unclick the seat belt. Quinn stood there looking around in both directions, rubbing his eyes, still half asleep.

"Quinn?" Thala said gently.

"Yes, hello Granpa how's the books?" Quinn spoke with daunting precision. Last year his only words compromised of those that covered what he wanted, simple one phrase lingos that Thala understood the best. Sue and Richard had a hard time guessing what he was saying, but now he was clearly speaking English, not his own form of baby gibberish. Richard marveled at Quinn and how much he had grown and felt proud all of a sudden.

The setting sun cast light on the brick building and windows with a magenta colored wand. They played with a soft bouncy ball until Sue closed the store and came running out the back door. She had tears in her eyes when she pulled away from Thala to run her hands around the precious frame of her face and through her hair. Quinn stopped playing and stood in front of her.

“My little Quinn!” Sue leaned down towards him. He wrapped his arms as well as he could around her knees. Sue kissed him on the head and kneeled down to look at him closely. “My, my, we have a little man in our family now.” She nuzzled his nose with hers and reached for the crook in Richard’s arm to stand up. “I made a tuna casserole for tonight, it used to be your mama’s favorite dish.”

“Tuna from the ocean?” Quinn looked to his mother for an answer.

“That’s right bub, tuna from the ocean! I love fresh tuna and Gramee’s casserole is the best I’ve ever had,” she whispered loudly, “even Daddy thinks so.” Sue heard her and smiled.

“Do all fish come from the ocean?” Quinn asked.

“No, some come from rivers and lakes too.” Richard answered with his booming voice that could easily scare a child at first. “There are some kinds of fish that can only live in fresh water as opposed to salt water.” An image of the bloated body flashed into his open eyes like lighting from a storm in his frontal lobe, he stopped talking for a second and had to remember what he was saying. “Yes, trout and bass are good examples.”

“Come on old man,” Thala joked as she held the door open for him, “I brought a few bottles of wine. Lets open one to celebrate.”

While Quinn took a dive into the toys that were spread out for him in the open living room, Sue turned the oven on low to heat up their supper. The three of them sat down to catch up. Sue

inquired about Thala's teaching position and whether or not she felt like she had enough time to spend with Quinn. Thala was working over time and not being paid for her hours and their house was falling apart because their landlord didn't believe in treating tenants like real people (their bedroom ceiling had collapsed and the landlord replied by telling them to shut the door and move into another room). Ian was always working late on shows and talking about how he could make more money if he was on the road. They were struggling with their differing opinions on how to raise Quinn but for the most part they agreed on the essential decisions. Ian wanted another child, and so did Thala, but not until they were a little more financially stable. Thala was turning thirty soon after Quinn turned three so they could wait until he was a little older, that way she wouldn't have two babies in a car seats, a nightmare she was told from other mothers. It was always easier when one child was old enough to help look after the younger.

"We could be a modern nomadic family, Quinn will grow his hair out long, and he'll have his brother or sister dangling off one of his hips. Ian will do the lighting for shows around the world and I will make all our clothes and take their education into my own hands. They will be allowed to skip all the standardized testing they make kids go through these days. It'll be perfect! They will grow up around the world, speaking different languages, meeting all kinds of people."

Richard and Sue were both listening intently but once Thala realized what she was saying she laughed out loud and ran over to where Quinn was playing. She flopped down on the floor and grabbed him by to hang him in the air above her. He giggled uncontrollably. "What do you think bubs? Should we travel around with Daddy and go see all the places he gets to see?" Quinn nodded his head. "Ok." She lowered him down. His head rested gently on her chest for a moment before he pushed himself up and jumped off her and back into the game he had been playing before her rambunctious interruption.

Thala sat back down with her parents. Their faces looked older and more tired all of a sudden. “I am going to quit my job.” They both looked shocked. “Just for now, just to get things going a little faster in our lives, Ian and I have already talked about it and we think it’s the only solution right now. He makes more money in a weekend than I make in a month. And I do want another child. We have the opportunity to travel and not a lot of people do in this economy. I want to see things before I get too old.”

Sue reached for Richard’s hand and he responded right away. They held hands silently for a couple of seconds before Richard spoke.

“Thala, when will we see you?” His eyes were as sad as his voice. “Your mother and I love you dearly, and we want you to be happy, so yes, go, travel, live around the world while you are young, and then come back.” He patted her on the thigh and smiled trying to wipe away his sadness.

“Yes, my darling girl. Go. Follow your heart. You have always been good at that, and what a blessing it has done for you. You have our support. You have our love my sweet child.”

Thala began to cry, not a wailing cry but silent sobs, her deep unsteady breath kept tears from falling. Richard and Sue collectively moved to sit by her and each put a gentle arm or hand somewhere on her shaking body. Quinn saw what was happening and walked slowly towards his mother. He noticed they weren’t saying anything to her to make her stop crying. He found his place in the triangle of mother and grandparents and put his hands on top of the cluster of interlocked fingers. On top of that he rested his forehead in an effort to give his mother air to breath.

Turkey day arrived at long last. Richard's appetite had been teased and tested as Sue called him downstairs to sample the gravy and stuffing and smell the baking pumpkin and pecan pies, but not eat, oh no. He had to skip lunch to wait to eat around four o'clock. By that time he was both cranky and hungry, not really appreciative of all the cooking Thala and Sue had done, and how they put him directly to carving the turkey right after they gave their thanks. Quinn was sitting in his high chair with sweet potatoes and green bean casserole already stuffed in his mouth, a smile spread across his lips to top it off, not to mention food all over his face and bib. As Richard peeled the breast meat off layer-by-layer, Sue and Thala munched on a spinach salad to start off their long afternoon of feasting. He slipped a piece of steaming meat in his mouth and savored the energy it gave him. Just after he swallowed, the phone rang loud compared to the munching mandibles of the family. He looked at Thala and Sue and Quinn and knew that because he standing, he was the one who would answer the damn phone.

It was Charlie. Calling on a holiday, as usual. Richard joked about what kind of news he would hear once Christmas rolled around. Charlie chuckled lightly before he cut to the chase surrounding the information he had heard from F.B.I headquarters in Boston. They too had found a couple of bodies with similar genetic mutations. It was nothing new. They had found their first body five years ago.

After Charlie released his files to headquarters, they informed him some of their victims still wore wristbands with patient ID numbers. The thick letters GH&VH was the common denominator and told them right away where the bodies were coming from. Investigations into the Department of Health were ordered and rumors spread threatening to leak information to the media. Charlie knew that once these cases were solved the truth would be groundbreaking but had no idea it was already old news.

The mystery of GH&VH was finally revealed to Charlie. It stood for Give Health and Vital Healing and had sprouted off of a larger center for spirituality. The center for health and healing was founded in the late seventies but over the past decade had transformed into a center where medical experiments were being carried out completely under the table. The major funding for the center was from private donors; millionaires and billionaires, your favorite aging movie star and the white collar Wall Street banker were backing the research for their own benefit, hoping they would someday have the technology to make any ailment, or any life threatening sickness, curable. They wanted to live forever, to defy the law of death, the chance to be at the height of their species, at the forefront of civilization.

The families of the victims had all known their loved one was sent to a treatment center but had no idea of its whereabouts. In fact, some families had never even been informed that their loved one had died. Some still believed they were being treated. You can imagine the shock when told the person had been dead for years. The victims all had one thing in common; they were all on the verge of death, sent to the center because their bodies were in a condition of no hope, fragile and very sensitive.

“Richard, the turkey is getting cold,” Sue hollered from the dining room.

He told Charlie to wrap it up. The final thing he told Richard was that his father had recently undergone heart surgery and had been told that if he had had the time, if his heart had been a little stronger, he could have waited a couple of years for a newer technology that would guarantee his heart to have everlasting health. Not a guarantee that some other system in his body wouldn’t fail, but an absolute promise that he would not face heart failure.

“It’s these types of technologies that are being researched at this center Admiral, I am not sure they are murdering people there.”

“We can never be certain of anything in this world. Have a good time down there and give me a ring when you get back into town.”

“One more thing sir—I am going to visit the center. I’ll give you all the details when I return.” And that was that, Richard went back to slicing the meat off the steaming turkey carcass.

~

It was March, the holidays and the new year had come and passed, jingle bells and sleighs and all the jazz of the season had left Richard more tired than he had ever felt before, not to mention the coldest months of the winter had made his bones stiff and his jaw tight. The ground was thawing and spring’s delights were just around the corner. Ships in the harbor still slept underneath blankets of protective layers. Their masts were disassembled and the galleys were locked up with thick planks of wood.

After Charlie reported all the details concerning the treatment center, the unsolved files were shut and labeled suicides. There was nothing more to do. The funding would continue and the medical breakthroughs would hopefully thrive.

Sue’s birthday was coming up and two days after was their anniversary. For thirty-eight years they had shared everything, a bed, bottles of wine, friends had come and gone in both of their lives, but out of all the translucent and impermanent details which falter in and out of a lifetime, the great pillars of their marriage had kept them both sturdy; they had succeeded in what one could call the joining of two lives. And it was every year after his wife’s birthday, and their anniversary, that Richard felt the weight of time.

Time, an idea in and of itself, and just as ambiguous as the answers to lifelong questions, had suddenly began to weigh heavy upon his psyche.

Thala and Ian had placed all their belongings in storage and were now touring China and Japan, a part of the world Richard had always been eager to see, but never had the motive to make the actual journey. The new weight he felt was making him restless, he wanted to start something new, the ground was still too hard to plant the garden, and his clock building failed to supply the rush of excitement it used to give him. He wanted to be out on the ocean. Wanted to tack with the wind. Wanted to feel his pipe between his teeth and the helm at his hands.

Sue had seen this in him before. She proposed they take a trip as soon as the marina opened again. They had two weeks to plan and just enough savings to buy supplies for a journey down the coast as far as they pleased. Sue was thinking the Outer Banks off the coast of North Carolina, Richard was thinking a little farther and wilder, such as Cuba or Jamaica, somewhere where the weather was hot and the fruit ripe. However far they decided to go, they were going, and that was that.

A couple of days before they set sail, Sue was running around packing her journals and books that she wanted to read. Meanwhile, Richard spiced up the boat, replaced all the light bulbs and installed a brand new refrigerator, something he had been meaning to do for the past couple of years. Just as he pulled into the driveway, back from his last run to the hardware store, a sharp pain shot up his left side and splintered into his chest. It only lasted for a few seconds, but afterwards, he was out of breath and shocked. He closed both his eyelids separately just to make sure he still had his motor functions. He moved his shoulder in the socket and squeezed his bicep to feel if he was sensitive to the touch. All was normal; he must have just been feeling charged from all the movement his body had been through in the past weeks. He could see Sue running around frantically throwing things into the suitcase she had sprawled in the middle of the

living room before he left. She had always been an ample traveler, a fast packer, generally ready for adventures no matter how short notice they were.

For the first couple years of their relationship, before they were married, they traveled together almost every other weekend, north to Nova Scotia, and south to Boston and New York City exploring state parks and historical places, staying with family and friends and camping in the warmer months. Fishing and kayaking were some of their favorite things to do before Richard purchased their 32-footer and set her sails. The sloop soon became their home away from home and felt just as comfortable as the two-story brick house they had made together ashore.

They loaded everything into the car. Ruby sat on top of her litter box in the front seat curious to see what all the fuss had been over. When the car jolted forward, full of all their stuff, Ruby looked back and forth between the house and the road as if she couldn't make up her mind as to where she wished she was.

They arrived at the harbor. Husband, wife and cat boarded the boat, now packed with fresh food and all the personal belongings they desired. It was two o'clock in the afternoon and the wind was blowing in from the Northeast at a desirable nine miles per hour. The sky had a few clouds, but a happy go lucky blue drowned the white speckles of clouds.

Sue pulled in the fenders as they motored their way out of the harbor, silently saying their goodbyes to Camden. There was no view as astounding as the one from the water. Camden's waterfalls and meandering streams made the town seem like a fabrication of a lost boy's imagination, enough space to feel free, but just enough knots in the tightrope of society to keep the roots and vines from taking over.

Their first day went smoothly and the sunrise of their second day out at sea was the color of summer peaches. They were making good time and felt satisfied being away from the coast they knew so well.

“She needed to stretch her sails just as much as we needed to get some fresh air,” Richard hollered to Sue as he sat at the tiller guiding the wind vein to keep their course straight. She was at the bow enjoying the sunlight, nonchalantly scribbling down her thoughts in her journal. Ruby was down in the cabin satisfactorily grooming her calico coat on their bed in the v-birth.

Everything was calm.

If I could choose, today would be a perfect day to die, Richard thought to himself.

The Sapling

~Bedtime~

"The splendid fragmented willows make the yew tide glow," he read as he was trying to fall asleep, but for good reasons he could not remove his mind from the gripping memory of her ivory skin. This made the little boy itch with so much pleasure he could not look at how his mother poured milk in ever the same way. She would lean over and her breasts would tilt ever so swiftly towards the floor. She would bend and he would bend and together they would watch the white liquid arabesque down onto the sleeping cereal, now tucked beneath a blanket of the freshest milk.

~Sugar~

You don't always have to put sugar in your tea, the eyes of an old woman said as she peered down at him from behind the green tinged counter. His mother sat in the back of the salon awaiting her weekly color touch up as well as the compliment from the stylist who would tell her she was the prettiest woman on their block under the age of ruin. The women younger than this elusive cut off line were all downtown working as secretaries for the married lawyers and bankers patiently awaiting the day when the men would grace their fingers with theirs as the daily coffee was given hour after hour, meeting after meeting, until finally her boss's finger would slide down from the skin above her knuckles down onto the smoothness of her polished nails. She would take notice first, then he would until four eyes locked in a dreamy contractual commitment. He would budge from the sudden intimacy only to ring his CEO to tell him to make the final deposit into his IRA and

inform him of his two-week notice—of course office lingo does not allow for such a fantasy to really come true, but it doesn't hurt to dream such a dream.

The little boy picked up the silver spoon and sank it deep into the white sparkling sugar. One, two, three spoon fulls of heaping treasure were dumped into the now dark imported English Breakfast tea. He liked watching it disappear into the murky water and marveled at how such a magical grain could disappear so completely. As he poured it into his cup, he imagined angel wings must be something like falling sugar, amassed in the air, somehow connected to the angel's arms and interwoven in the space where the shoulder blades meet the upper ribs (angels bones are ivory). He wondered how they flew so gracefully without their wings crumbling underneath them. There must be some unnamable force holding the sugar together, strong enough to carry the weight of their bodies, but loose enough to allow the air to travel freely around each grain, offering support from a dance between oxygen and sweetness. Perhaps the angel's bodies are weightless, and the sugar is merely attracted to their ephemeralness. It doesn't matter where the angel is at anytime because sugar will fly from the closest kitchen or cabinet or bakery or pie shop or cane field and gather ever so gently along their slender fingers and down onto their silken forearms and up their porcelain shoulders, blossoming out into the perfect multitude of a wing.

"Sweetheart go and drink your tea with the other women," his mother called from the back of the salon.

"Sometimes he gets very distracted by things," she mumbled to her stylist, "I just wonder if it is a serious issue or not." In a whisper she added, "dumping three spoon fulls of sugar into his tea! I just hope his imagination is as boundless as his curiosity."

~A Stroll~

The color of her lipstick captured the tone of western sunsets and her yellow dress beamed brightly but not blindingly as it mirrored the off yellow that can often be confused with the color of bile. It was far from that hideous excrement that comes from the inner tubes of the body, for it made her skin shine against the cool cotton fabric. Summer was about her, which made her feel free and gave her the perspective of a newly hatched butterfly free from its cocoon.

She did not walk in a bounce, she fluttered gaily from one store window to the next, skimming the glass cases to see if anything interested her. She knew she could fly as quickly into one store and out just as fast if she became bored or changed her mind. She was attached to nothing, and her options were endless. There was no end to Fifth Avenue that she could sense ahead, no policeman telling her the road was blocked because of this or that—no children missing their parents, no man searching for his fiancée who had disappeared just after the raiding had begun, no old man claiming a neglected child had stolen his watch—there was absolute tranquility and calm this particular afternoon and it just happened to be the warmest Saturday she had experienced so far that March.

At her side the little boy trailed behind him a wooden train pulled by a string he had taken from his father's tool shed. He had only been inside the rusty tin roofed building a couple of times, and never by himself. The hand that always led him was cold and clammy with a hairy backside. The hand had calmed him the first time he was taken along on this rare visit to the shed. Its coarseness had offered a reminder of a reality he could hold onto. Inside the shed was damp and smelled of summers at the ocean, but not the ocean he had known. This was an ocean that could not breathe. It was cramped. The damp air was

screaming with claustrophobia in all corners. He could feel the plants pounding in against the outer shells of the walls trying to take over the sudden sore implanted in the living forest. Nails and screws were strewn unwittingly all over the wooden benches as if awaiting the grave of a steel handled drawer.

His father had never taken him with him and after years of fearing an area so protected by his father he was breathlessly nervous when entering for the first time. He held on so tight to his father's hand that the squeezing excreted sweat in his palm like a kettle about to boil. Then he saw the string on the middle of a wooden shelf. He could tell the other objects had their place because they were made out of metal and steel, however the softness of the ball of string calmed the racing tempo of his heart.

"Papa look," he said quietly as he pointed in the direction of the shelves.

His father turned his gaze followed his son's fingertips.

"Do you want me to cut you some?" he whispered low as if they were disturbing the sleeping shed.

The little boy gave a quick bob of his chin in approval and bashful excitement. His father left him standing in the middle of the room as he slowly removed the ball of yarn from the shelf and cut a section with a pair of rusted scissors. The room became looming when his father's back was turned to him. After a long moment he realized his eyes were searching for the outline of his shoulders in the shadows. He could no longer tell which bench his father was standing in front of. Suddenly his figure walked out from the darkness holding the patch of loose yarn out in front of him.

The wheels were responding well to the cracks in the sidewalk as he held on tightly to his mother's soft hand. The string was wrapped around the wrist of his right arm as he

gently guided the train along behind him. Obstacles lay along the path so walking from shop to shop manifested into a series of adventures. While managing to keep hold of his mother at her fast pace, a plastic bag transformed into a bubble of destruction avoidable only by dodging other people walking along the busy avenue.

She was in the heels that pumped her calves gracefully along. He remembered the first time she tried on the shoes after returning from Italy with his father. She had favored the red leather stilettos ever since they arrived home. The time during their absence was endless. Nora, his nanny had taken him to museums and parks, but it was not as intriguing as the times he spent playing on his own. He would build cities out of wooden blocks, experiment with ingredients his mother left out on the counter, pretend his father didn't see him huddled in the corner underneath his desk. He loved the way his father's foot tapped against the Persian rug as he listened to stock values on the radio, how his mother tasted the dish every now and then to test the spice and thickness of a certain recipe. His nanny was young. He wondered if the decisions she made were the right ones.

The train was speeding along, making turns at one hundred and thirty miles per hour at least. The passengers were flanked to the sides of the rail cars and he wondered if any were filling up with motion sickness. A little girl tried to read her mystery novel but all of a sudden the book was slapped out of her hands and away from her eager eyes. A man was slowly sipping his hot morning coffee when it suddenly spilled all over the tie his mother had given him that year for Christmas. But then all was well again when they entered the lush environment of the perfume shop or boutique that smelled like Jasmine or Rose mixed with linen interwoven with silk.

Tailors were standing behind the counters measuring women who stood with a cigarette pressed between lush lips. A look of boredom in their eyes made him wonder what happened to them along their stroll to the shop. It made him sad to think they had lost something important along the way.

~The South Side~

He came home late one rainy night. Standing in the main hallway, he removed his coat and hat. Raindrops fell from the wool and dripped into what seemed like endless puddles on the marble floor.

What a walk home, he thought to himself as he hung them on the looming coatrack. He was glad he was away from the smell of the carcasses—hooves, tails and snouts were the main castaways he encountered when he was returning from the district, but on some nights he could not tell if the smell was that of animals or human bodies.

Most mornings he awoke knowing that he may be called again to return to the place he had grown to loathe. His thoughts were sticky and hot. He tried to shed them as he lathered and rinsed his face, picked out a button down and sash, a belt buckle and trousers, cashmere socks and leather soles. He could not peel himself away from the resistance he felt towards the kind of errands that fell so heavily under his responsibility.

On these particular days he always wore dark colored pants to avoid any trace of his wanderings into the filth filled section of the island. After years of answering telegrams telling the time and place of his demand, he quickly learned that it was only the time that would change, not the place. The cobble stone streets and the bell he rang with the corner of his handkerchief became a familiarity that would haunt him during moments he least expected.

The attendant always greeted him the same—he placed his arm out for the coat with a silent mouth and down cast eyes. He chose not to give this man his hat because he knew soot was caked on his fingertips and did not want to risk ruining one camel skin after another. The first time he found black fingertips on his hat he punched a hole through the top and cast it into the Hudson. He did not want to play with the idea of someone finding it. The danger his stitched initials on the rim posed could possibly cause a reporting to some dime priced headline. He reassured himself he was not over reacting. Under these circumstances one could never be too careful.

~Balloons~

She walked in carrying red velvet cupcakes with yellow frosting. She decided not to put sprinkles on top because he would most likely object to his friends seeing sprinkles on his birthday cupcakes. He was too old for sprinkles anyway.

When she passed through the hallway on her way to the living room she stopped to marvel at the way the light fell underneath the entrance pillars. She had never before seen so many tiny shoes all in the same place. She hadn't the slightest idea that the shoes of little boys and girls could look so picturesque next to her front door.

Upon entering the living room the sight was too perfect. The girls wore bows matching their dresses and shoes. She noticed the bows complimented the shade of their hair. The boys sported suits so well cut they looked twenty years older than they actually were. Most of them were running around the table puffing the air like rhinos hunting their prey. The girls were huddled near the fireplace waiting for whatever was to come next.

The expressions on their flush faces made her remember the exhaustion of her shyness at most all of the social gatherings she attended during her youth. She used to be what her father called 'a flower too afraid to wander away from the thorns'. He used to make fun of her because she would spend hours in the afternoon preparing for the evening, but once the liquor was flowing, any gentleman who would approach her was quickly scared off by her silence and discomfort. She did not know how to talk to the young men who were obviously in the phase of life where they saw themselves as men but were still repressed by the rash disposition of boyhood.

During these uncomfortable times she could hear her father's laughter from across the room. He sipped his whiskey and smoked a cigarette between bursts of laughter. He poked fun at the fact that she was keeping herself in such a sticky place. "The sooner she pushes herself away from the wall the more comfortable she will be. I remember the first time I spoke to Ruth, I could barely keep my hands from shaking," he went on to entertain his listeners. He was making a fool of his only daughter. Was she supposed to be flattered by her peers as they each came to talk to her of nothing but nonsense?

The journey home always made her feel better. While she stared at the passing fields, numb to the knot in her stomach, her mother would respond to her father's drunk teasing by recalling the thoughts that had been brewing in her mind all evening while watching her husband's reactions. Her two older brothers stayed silent during the conversations surrounding their sister's impatience with these so-called suitors; they could not defend young men struggling with the duties and pentacles of courting, for they were just as clumsy juggling with the game of female acceptance.

But of course these were only children. The girls, she doubted, had never even had their lips brushed with a kiss. When they saw her carrying the cupcakes their attention was drawn in full force by the shape the baked flour held the frosting.

She placed the cupcakes on the table, which was the signal for the maids to begin the surprise she had planned. They did just as they had rehearsed the night before while he was dreaming above them on his goose feathered mattress—all of a sudden the lights were extinguished and the room was pitch black. The girls gave little yelps of fright and the boys started to giggle knowing a birthday cake would surely come next.

The heavy wooden door that led to the kitchen swung open revealing the silhouette of a magician. Her smile beamed in the darkness when she realized the little boys and girls had left their concrete positions to gather around him; they no longer cared who they were standing next to or where they were. All they cared about was the man who had drowned everything in a magical midst.

The magician stood in front of a rolling tray that held the crystal glasses and plates set out for the party. His hands begin to search for something. All eyes watched him carefully—including those of the maids standing against the wall. He patted his pockets, removed his hat and looked inside, but what he was looking for was nowhere to be found. He hunched forward and let out a sigh. Then something in the room caught his eye. He slowly began to make his way towards the only source of light in the room. The children parted ways like the Red Sea for Moses.

When he reached the roaring fireplace, he got down on his knees, clapped his hands twice and quickly reached into the fire pulling out a bright white bunny. He

immediately cuddled it against his chest, whispering something in its ear. The bunny looked perfectly relaxed as if it had just come from a wild patch of fresh carrots and clover.

The children screamed in approval. The maids held their hands flat against their chests aghast with relief. All she could do was smile wildly as she thought about what was to come next.

The magician gave the bunny to a girl standing close to him and as soon as she had it in her arms the children began to stroke its soft coat obsessively. He casually walked back to the tray, the tail of his long coat trailing behind him. The children followed him back over as the little girl held the rabbit with extreme responsibility.

Next, he pulled a silk cloth from an inside pocket and placed it over the glasses and plates. He told a little boy to blow on it three times and make a wish for his favorite food, drink, or sweet. The boy approached the tray and closed his eyes intently for a few seconds, puckered out his lips and blew three fast breaths onto the glowing red silk. The magician gave a nod of approval and with a quick thrash of his arm the silk was removed and a plate of chocolate covered strawberries, a chocolate milkshake, and macaroni and cheese were sitting upon the tray as if they had been there all along.

“All three you wished for eh? Did I not say ‘or’?”

The little boy sank back into the crowd embarrassed. The others around him looked towards him for the hint of a tear, but it never came.

The magician placed the red silk back over the plates and cups and whispered something that sounded to her like Romanian. With another flick of his hand the cloth was removed and the treats disappeared. She had known his reputation was unusually high, but she did not know he was a miracle worker of his craft.

Observing the lines around his mouth, she realized he had a solemn look about him. The only flicker of a smile she saw was at the blink of a second right before each trick was completed. She wondered where he had been before he made his way into their section of the city.

He motioned for the bunny and placed it on the tray. It sat quite contently on a plate for him and as he gracefully folded and tucked the silk into his pocket, he motioned for the birthday boy to join him—this was what she had been waiting for—the little boy stepped shyly forward away from the comfort of so many bodies to stand in the cold air next to the magician and his mysterious hands. He rolled up his sleeves for the final act and the little boy noticed there was a huge scar on the man's forearm. He stared at it until he heard a hoarse voice give a strict order.

“Place your hand upon the rabbit and make your birthday wish.”

He looked to his mother for approval. She gave him a nod of encouragement and he inched his way towards the animal. The bunny didn't budge under the weight of his hand; in fact, the creature seemed more at peace with the human contact. Its eyes fluttered shut.

The silk sash was placed over the boy's hand. He could feel the rabbit breathing steadily under his palm. Its heartbeat calmed his quickened pulse. He closed his eyes and tried to think of something reasonable to wish for. There was a good chance it would come true so he had to think carefully. He couldn't wish for what he really wanted because he didn't want anyone to know that what he really wanted was to touch her lace covered skin and kiss her perfumed breast. He was sure the magician could hear his thoughts because he

let a breath briefly tug his vocal chords, creating a deliberate sound of impatience. He quickly refocused his mind and wished for what any little boy would wish for.

When he opened his eyes, the cloth was removed and his hand was hovering above a triple-decker cake. It was his favorite: chocolate mousse.

He knew his mother had planned this. When he flew down the staircase this morning he could tell the air about the house was different. There was a hushed tone lingering upon the cherry blossom wallpaper. Even before that, while he was still greeting the morning light, the gargoyles outside his window were stricken with tension, awaiting the moment they would be able to open their stone shut eyes to hunt the creatures that had been itching them in their nightmares.

He had completely forgotten about the rabbit until a strange noise came from the ceiling. The creature, supported by a ribbon and two large blue balloons, slowly cascaded down from some unknown source. Without any delay, the children took notice and began to scatter around the room frantically, not knowing where the rabbit would land. Just before it was set to land on the table, it bounced back up again and floated high above the small but eager hands. Down it floated in the direction of a maid, who immediately reached up her arms thinking it well past the time for the end of the highly anticipated show, however, just before she could touch its limp limbs, it bounced back up again.

Floating higher and higher above the stunned audience, the rabbit simply went along with wherever the balloons floated.

She looked to her little boy. His eyes were entranced upon the last beams of sunlight as his birthday sun set its way towards the tips of the skyline.

~Ponderosa Pines~

She came every Wednesday afternoon at five o'clock. She knocked five times before coughing into her already grit covered sleeve. The cotton of her clothes always the same colors of brown dirt and charcoal gray. Her layered skirts approached the top of her hips like the flood line on a tree: the lower half seemed darker and slimmer than that of the dried upper section.

He could always smell her before he reached the door and pulled with all his strength. Her smell reminded him that he had not practiced the piano at all this week. A terrible mistake due in part because his cousin had come the past weekend for her occasional visit. She, however, smelled nothing like the piano teacher.

Katherine, his younger cousin always smelled of cinnamon and vanilla. He remembered for the smell for the first time at the end of the longest journey he had ever taken.

A steam train had taken him hostage for days. He couldn't keep track of how many times he had woken and how many times he had fallen asleep to the rocking of the car on the steel tracks. During his waking hours he unpacked his trunk and dangled his clothes from the rafters above. His fort would be the perfect camouflage to the looting Natives if they tried to jump on the train at the next station.

They would not find him because they would have no idea that what was hanging were clothes—because they didn't wear any. He heard tales that they wore skins of animals instead of clothes; some were as coarse as the skin of a boar and others as soft as a bear.

He would peek out from behind his cloth bunker and if he saw anyone he would fall back on his bed as stiff as a board, not making any sound, hands clenched at his side.

When the train stopped, his mother shared her surprise as to why all his clothes were unpacked and hanging about him. Her banter was quickly drowned out when he realized there was something luring him outside and away from her bickering.

The aromatic bliss was coming from giants with huge trunks for bodies. Their hair was a tiny bit thicker than his own, green, no longer than his fingers, and contrived a tart taste when crushed in his teeth and tasted.

The green of the pines spread outwards and over across the steep Rocky Mountains. As he turned back to his new friend he realized there was something sticky on his fingers. It was oozing out of the bark like blood from a cut. Their blood was thick and smelled sweet like honey.

The trees were still and silent. Their blood had dried thick in some spots in the shape of dried tears. What could have harmed these gentle trees? The little boy couldn't help but feel a string in his chest tighten and almost snap. A heart broken buck must have come to this tree and scraped it in agony after losing his mate. His antlers tore at the flesh of the well-rooted creature causing pine needles to fall like snow upon the buck's chestnut skin.

"That is a Ponderosa Pine son," his father said in response to his son's petrified gaze. He slapped its trunk as if it was an old friend of his, "or as Uncle Bill likes to call it, a Blackjack Pine," his father said loud enough for all to hear. He stood with his hands on his hips, his suspenders had been removed from his shoulders for relief from the sweat that had settled between his shoulder blades from the journey. Uncle Bill smiled his toothless smile when he heard his brother mention his name, then turned around and continued on to guide the mass of servants and luggage.

"Why is this tree bleeding?" the little boy asked in a breath of embarrassment.

"Something has torn into its bark."

"It was the heart broken buck," he whispered.

"A heart broken buck eh?" his father answered looking around to see where the others were, whether or not his bound books were still in the wagon behind him, and where his wife had chosen to perch for a moment of rest. She had chosen a moss covered rock and was gazing at a purple Aster she had found at her feet.

He attempted to cheer the boy up.

"There's no such thing son, if a buck loses his doe he will not survive. He is killed by his opponent." The little boy's eyes looked blank. "One wins and the other must fall never to rise again." Still his eyes were cloudy with confusion. "Listen son, sometimes in life we have to fight for what we want, all creatures must learn to fight, and sometimes that means we prosper over others, one winner and one loser, one heart broken and the other triumphant in his strength."

The sweet smell of vanilla and cinnamon lingered in his memory until the piano teacher's perfume reminded him to follow her through the main hall and into the parlor where the Steinway was sleeping. He unfolded the protective layer of wood resting over the ivory keys. The Bach sheet music was already open to the piece he was meant to have memorized and rehearsed. Thankfully he figured out how to successfully listen to a record on the Berliner Gramophone next to his father's pastel colored liquor bottles. He found the record and played it a couple of times that morning before his mother had enough time to be torn from magazines and cigarettes to notice he was once again in the room of the house

that was strictly off limits. It was reserved for her husband when he was not to be interrupted.

The little boy politely asked his teacher if she wanted a glass of water before they began the lesson. She quietly nodded her head in agreement with a sense of relief upon her sweated upper lip. The stairs up from the subway always made her legs shake. Her knees were no longer as elastic as they used to be. She preferred the elevated lines with fewer stairs and a better view. He half listened to her mutters and nodded as he left to wander through the maze of servant's quarters. He counted the minutes it took him to pour the water from the pitcher subtracting them from the dreadful hour they had to spend together pent up next to the window as whistles from the games being played in the park below floated up to them.

"Now remember the *piano* is quiet," she hissed, "and the *forte* is strong," she roared. She pointed to the music and a pencil somehow appeared from the bun on top of her head. "Now, begin again."

His shoulders squeezed upwards to bring his elbows in and his fingers up lightly on the keys, and then his joints screamed when the time to play heavy came again. By the end of the hour he was in no mood to play outside with the others.

~Marriage~

She watched as he placed his knife down on the outer rim of his plate and chewed his freshly cut New York strip with a sterile look on his face. His eyes were set in the direction of the vase in the center of the table. It was overflowing with fresh day lilies that a maid had excitedly brought back from a hidden oasis she found in the middle of the park.

She had ignored the maid's smile and tried to quiet her wonder as to why the girl had been wandering around the park in the first place.

She remembered the letter she read earlier that afternoon. It was from her brother, the younger of the two, telling her of his most recent love affair and its demise, how he was in need of money and had an idea for a thriving what was it? Oh yes this is where he left off, a thriving soap business.

"Darling, you'll never believe the idea my brother has for a business venture." He stopped chewing. The one word in the entire English language that he did not care to hear was business. All day he had been listening to two quarrelling partners fight over the percentage of their worth. He was sick of his colleagues, his business associates whom he owned secretly. All their profits, all their interests, all their precious stocks and bonds. He could laugh in their faces if he wanted to. Instead he laughed at his wife who was trying to relay something she found amusing, a joke he found incredibly sour. He put his fork and knife down, wiped the corners of his lips with his napkin, and excused himself into his study.

She watched the maid clear his plate. Suddenly it was as if he had never even been there at all.

~Faith~

He wished he were home. It was cold. With each breath his lungs froze and cracked. The look on his mother's face frightened him and he did not want to be left alone. Somebody important had died. His ghost was now visiting everyone he had known, and he preferred to be with his mother when it was his turn to be visited by Mr. Hickox.

Her hand was soft around his. They arrived at the church late. A crowd of people waited outside. The pattern along the sidewalk was a repetition of black coats and white roses with an occasional neck boasting pearls at the base of neatly pinned hair.

A woman not too far away sobbed into her handkerchief, the man beside her stared at the ground ahead of him not even attempting to comfort her. The doors to the church swung open and the mass of mourners slowly proceeded into the candle lit antechamber.

An organ accompanied the choir of high-pitched voices on the top balcony. Light from the stained glass windows pierced the room with ribbons of color. A group of men already stood in the first row near the altar with their backs against gathering crowd. Their heads were tilted and their arms rested in front of their ironed lapels. They waited for their orders like dutiful pawns in a game. The little boy squeezed his mother's hand when he recognized his father standing among the other men. Tufts of his auburn hair caught streams of red, green, and blue light.

The music bellowed into the tiniest spaces inside his head. All he wanted was to listen to the birds call to each other as the sun warmed the frozen skyscrapers. The bird's melodies were a relief in comparison to the sound of the booming organ pipes.

The bleeding man above the altar caught the little boy's gaze. His thoughts moved away from the birds perched on the steeple to the tears falling from the tortured man's face. They fell from his hollow porcelain cheeks onto the petals of flowers in front of the altar. The crying man looked upwards to the birds. He wanted to join them too. He would have helped the crying man up the stairs to the steeple and pressed his wounds to keep them from bleeding. His nanny taught him to hold pressure on a cut to help it heal. He

would wipe up the drips of blood from where they fell next to their footprints to keep the ghost from following them.

The doors to the church opened blinding anyone who turned around. The organ suddenly ceased from playing and the six men walked together towards the doorway. He wanted to reach for his father as he passed. He knew he was bleeding like the man up on the cross. If only he could grab his hand and squeeze his wounds to keep them from terrorizing him for the rest of his life. He knew he was suffering silently among the other men.

Their figures disappeared through the lighted archway. The crowd waited in silence. He looked to the man on the cross and realized his tears had disappeared; the only hint of a tear was the beads of water forming not on the man's face but on his forehead.

The echoing footsteps of the men were heard before they reappeared in the doorway. Slowly, a rectangular shape tore into the light. The coffin created a tunnel of darkness that guided the carriers of the dead man back to the altar.

They hoisted the coffin off their shoulders and carefully placed it in front of the altar. A man dressed in gold trimmed robes spoke about the presence of many loved ones and the blood spilt trying to protect the one who now lay dead. His hands moved rapidly up and down as his words rose and fell.

She wondered if it was the hand of her husband who spilt blood trying to protect this man. Words are weak compared to actions. At times one must use force to be heard. He spoke many times about the importance of protection. The man who now lay underneath the dark ceiling of his coffin staring into what lay beyond the light of his world had meant a lot to him as a companion, a confidant of sorts.

She was thirsty. Her mouth was parched. She had fretted about missing the service. The nervousness had made her create hypothetical disasters in her head: the church in flames, a killer shutting the impending doors and firing round after round of ammunition killing everyone in the congregation. They would arrive to the unique silence that follows the murdering of hundreds of people on holy ground.

Her husband had sent word of the death last night. A telegram arrived abruptly as she washed her face. She frantically dried her face. Her skin was red as she scanned the message. Mr. Hickox. Dead. Service at Ten O'clock.

Her son was asleep dreaming of pirates on the Hudson. The house was silent. She sat by the fire, her nerves flared as she speculated the whereabouts of her husband. She knew he was safe, but where he was she could not know, and who he was with she would never know.

He had many faces. Those she knew most intimately were those of the protector and provider. He gave her and their child everything they could ever need, more than they could ever need. She had options and freedoms that many lacked; yet over the past few years, a certain depth to him had become shallow. He ate and slept like any normal man and was present as a father but vacant as a partner. When she communicated with him her words became an echo searching the many cracks of an endless cliff, all she could hear was her own voice spiraling back to her. He was a man of vast personality, many stories, and many years. The echo bounced off him penetrating nothing but a brittle spirit. If he did listen, she could sense no response, not even a hint of a reaction. Recently his words were short, to the point, a yes or no; everything seemed to be a plead to be excused or left alone.

She looked towards him. His head tilted forward in grief. She wanted to reach for him but such an inappropriate gesture would have done no good. There is always honor in silence, her mother had told her once. This silence was blasphemous. It was killing her.

The priest began the closing prayer. The mass of mourners stood collectively and crossed themselves. Their right hands finished the gesture with a tap against their hearts. She looked down to her son. His lips were blue but his cheeks burned red and his brow perspired little droplets of sweat. A feverish spread across his eyes. She was relieved that the ceremony was over. The coffin was hoisted up and carried out of the church. The crowd of mourners slowly funneled out of the opened archway to pay their respects to the family of the departed standing by the door.

The little boy was on the verge of delirium. He walked like a phantom beside his mother. She was silent and stared straight ahead clutching her purse between her arms for comfort. He pulled on his mother's black skirt to get her attention. The tugs were too weak for her to notice. His fingers tried to claw a portion of the fabric but failed to even get a grip. With nothing to hold onto he could barely maintain his strength.

They approached the doorway. A whiteness erased everything around him. He was floating above the crowd, dying, already gone, his spirit extracted from the little hold he had on life.

His mother heard him hit the ground behind her.

"Darling?" She turned around. "Oh God!" She screamed in the high pitch of a frantic mother. A man behind her grabbed the little boy's frail body and lifted him, his head unconscious in the crease of the man's elbow. His feet dangled limply in the air.

They reached the bereaved family members standing on the front steps. Their moaning stopped when they saw the little boy. Somebody yelled for a doctor. His father noticed and ran towards the scene to gather the boy in his own arms.

The little boy's eyes opened. The heaviness about him floated away.

He could hear the birds singing their afternoon song. The image of the bleeding man finally ceased its hold on him.

~Icicles~

One had fallen on her when she was girl so she warned her little boy to mind the overhangs on buildings. Don't walk directly below the icicles because sometimes they fall and the higher up they are the worse the outcome, she told him with a kiss before she sent him out the front door one winter morning before school.

She remembered the pain in her head as if it had happened yesterday. She was sixteen or seventeen years old the day she made her way to the river with her father. They stopped at the corner store before walking the remaining two miles to the frozen water. They needed to pick up some shiners. The little minnows would hopefully inspire the pike to bite.

Her father carried the fishing poles on top of his bony shoulder made soft from the layers of wool he wore to keep him warm. They sat on a bench beside the hole he had cut in the ice the previous week. She pinched a live one between her fingers. It squiggled until she stuck it on the sharp hook.

She had grown accustomed to the cold over the past couple of years. Now that her two brothers had left home she was the sole companion for her father on these outings. Her mother was too ill to step outside let alone sit in the cold for hours on end.

Bitter though his attitude could be, she loved the stories from her father's childhood. He too had sat beside his own father and listened to stories from his time. Back then there was no electricity, no radio; the town was deaf to anything but rumors and stories that stuck around because of their ability to entertain endlessly.

She daydreamed during her father's spouts of silence about pies she wanted to bake when she got home. The root cellar was close to empty. Potatoes and canned beans were the main staples of their diet each winter. There were a couple of jars of raspberry preserves she had saved for her friend's birthday, but there was no sugar at all, syrup was their only sweetener, and her mother always threw a fit when she used it for one of her pies. The winter was tiring. She longed to go blackberry picking, longed to scrape her legs against the barbed wire she hopped over to reach the trail on the other side of the pasture.

With an hour or so left of sunlight they made their way back to town. Traditionally, they stopped at Harry's for hot milk with honey to take the sting away from her dry throat and a whisky to cure her father's achy bones.

It all happened very fast. Instead of hot milk she received a cold piece of ice for the bump on her head and a ride home in Harry's creaky buggy. It's a good thing her father had already made his way into the bar because she had stopped to talk to a drunkard's son who had caught her attention before the icicle fell. Her father would have cared more about her ending up with a boy of his making than the dagger shaped icicle looming twenty feet above her skull.

~The Bouquet~

He was late. The bastard. He was always late. There should be some sort of protocol for messengers. This guy had a knack with the ladies that never got him farther than the

whorehouses along the busy avenue. There was always a doll offering discounts to the pretty faced boy.

He was definitely a boy. He doubted if the boy ever held or even shot a pistol, but oh yes he'd handled women before, women of all walks of life; he'd had his way with all the breeds.

Sure he'd been in some fights, and yes, he could defend himself. His knuckles and biceps were stealthy from his childhood as a port man's son. It was easy to lose a hand working in the yards unloading cargo and stacking old ladies trunks stuffed full of China and spices from the Far East. A worker learned to move fast and the strong ones did not last long.

He finally saw the messenger walking down the block towards him with a bouquet of roses propped in his arms like an infant. It was just as he'd thought; the young man had kept him waiting for some preposterous reason. Roses. Unbelievable.

"These are for you old man," he beamed. His face was not as handsome when he smiled. For some reason his face was only pleasing in moments of intensity or heavyset anger.

"Just give me the papers," he responded flatly, every ounce of amusement gone from his voice.

"Looks like its gonna rain eh?" The messenger looked up and around in a moment of unearned procrastination.

"Stop dicking around boy. You don't want to head down that road with me."

"Take the roses sir." He paused. "Take the roses and I'll quit." The boy was serious. He reached for the bouquet. The fragrant flowers reminded him of his wife. Each night she put rose oil on her face, hands, and feet. Suddenly he longed for her.

When he met her she was flawless and simple. Ten years prior, after years of being alone, people wondered why he did not have a wife. His father's fortune was soon to be his and there were many women willing to become an heiress to the unspoken amount of his inheritance. He had only known women to be unnatural around him. They were tense and expectant of nothing more than the width of his wallet. He was miserable. Nearing the age of thirty his father passed away and he became the man all knew he would be.

Partially afraid of being hunted for his money and bored to his bones of the society he had put up with, he disappeared after the funeral. Rumors of his adventures trickled their way back to New York. Riding camels in Egypt, skiing in the Alps, drinking with expatriates in Paris, courting Princesses and Duchesses, witnessing the newest inventions after his return from Europe at the World's Fair in Chicago. His colleagues wondered what exactly he was in search of and what ideas he held for the future of the vast family empire.

He spotted her on the second day of the fair. Tired of the hour-long sit down meals and repetitive banter of men seeking the solutions to modern day politics, he decided to wander among the vendors selling children's trinkets and memorabilia to look for something to eat. The smell of roasting meat and short bread guided him in her direction.

Standing in a mess of a booth selling apple, blackberry and strawberry pies, her grace was apparent despite the poverty she had come from. Her mother sat in a wicker chair behind her too frail to stand. The eyes the distraught woman went blank as she clenched the sides of her seat in some kind of daytime nightmare.

Despite the sickly woman, he calmly asked for the price of her pies. Her voice was sustained in its softness. He introduced himself and she gave her name with downcast eyes. He reached out his hand for a proper handshake and startled her.

She did not know she would be his wife but he knew. He knew immediately after she wiped her hand on her stained apron and shook his hand. Something strangely familiar about her grip gave him the confidence that this woman would be his life long companion.

Friendly to every customer, she greeted the strange man amiably only because she needed to sell as many pies as she could. He dressed in fine cottons and silk and wore a gold ring on his pinky finger. It was her first encounter with a wealthy man. She was shy and studied him slowly. He bought two of her pies and returned the following few days for more.

Over the next few visits he realized she was of a simple kind. Not like the women he had known. She told him stories of rivers and seas that she had read about and asked him if he had visited any of the places she spoke of. He had heard of them but had only visited a few that she mentioned. Her desire to see the world excited him. When he told her he had indeed visited the Nile and the swamps at the end of the Mississippi her composure turned from a hunched girl into a woman ready to face the world.

The scent from the roses reminded him that his wife was expecting him to join her out for dinner that evening. Thanking his olfactory glands for reminding him, he turned and left the pretty boy in his discoveries of the scent of a different kind of woman.

He would present his wife with the roses upon his arrival, a small token of his appreciation for all she had dealt with over the past few years. He knew he had changed but did not want to speak of it.

The restaurant was almost completely empty. He headed straight to the men's room with the flowers and locked himself into a shit stall to remove the papers from their wrapping place around the thorny stems. A thick piece of pink paper hid the scribbled

message. It was just as he had predicted. The time had come for everything to crash. He ripped the papers up and threw them into the toilet.

He washed his hands and carried the roses out with clean hands. He noticed his wife across the room. Sneaking up behind her, he laid a tender kiss on the back of her neck. She turned to face the man who seemed more a stranger than her husband. He smelled foul as he embraced for the first time in months.

~Rules~

He grew into an obedient child. The rules his mother and father ordained in the house followed him wherever he went. Good manners were a habit. Please and thank you preceded and followed his spoken desires. He washed before each meal, scrubbed his teeth before bed, and combed his hair every morning. If he spilled or made a mess of any kind, he cleaned up after himself. When a stain appeared on his pressed shirts he felt he would betray his nanny if he did not press the spot with club soda.

He was made fun of by his schoolmates because he was as habitual as a seventy-year-old man. At lunch his routine was always the same: he unrolled his napkin, folded it on his lap, polished his silverware with large exhales of breath, kept his back straight and elbows close to his body, and held his knife in his right hand to feed himself neatly with the fork in his left. Potato chips and cookies were never in his knapsack. Instead pasta and salads accompanied his sandwich. Like every other boy, brownies, cookies, and occasionally lemon squares made up the sweet end of his meal.

On most days his mother wrote finely printed messages on his paper napkin. They were reminders of his afterschool appointments, their plans for the weekend or a poem she would think up. The little boy found joy in these. He sat alone at the end of the long wooden

table and in his loneliness the napkin he lifted from his lap smelled of her and reassured him he was not as alone as he felt. The few times when he did try to sit with others the discomfort of wondering if what he said was what he would say if he were comfortable kept him from speaking naturally. What came out were jumbles of stories he thought would entertain them. He had trouble digesting his meal because he put so much pressure on himself to fit in. The rest of the afternoon his stomach would complain and he would have no energy to think. His assignments were poorly done and his mood was in the gutter by the time he got home to do this or that or whatever his mother had planned for him. He was conditioned to sit alone everyday when the hour struck for lunch.

One particular day he was eating a delicious cheese and tomato sandwich when a sneaky boy snatched the napkin out of his lap and screamed his mother's message out loud for the entire dining hall to hear. He read in a mocking womanish voice: "Dearest, today will be our afternoon together. Let's go to the Zoo! I love you from my heart all the way to desolate Kalamazoo, your mother." The boy howled with laughter holding his belly as he doubled over. He waved the napkin over his head in his other hand. The laughter spread quickly and the teachers were alarmed but did not try to control anything. The little boy stared at his sandwich no longer hungry. He put his food down and lowered his head. Anger entered his chest and he stood up and walked slowly over to the boy with his napkin. He straightened up from his laughing fit and prepared his stance to backfire whatever the trick might have inspired his victim to say.

"Your mother is a hag and you her bastard," the little boy yelled before he threw a sloppy punch at the bully's head. His nose cracked and blood poured over his mouth and onto his shirt. Both hands flew to his mouth in shock. The napkin was thoroughly drenched

with blood after a few seconds. Both hag and bastard were clearly heard. The teachers rushed towards the two boys. The cursing had shocked them more than the fighting.

The little boy felt a strange enjoyment when his knuckles hit the boy's face. It was the first time anger had given him such a rush. He immediately wanted more and began to hit the boy anywhere he could. The punches he received in return felt strangely fulfilling. The pain introduced him to his true potential. He felt new; something was knocked loose within him he did not know existed.

Dried blood, scratches and teeth marks were his metals of honor as the little boy sat outside the headmaster's office. His stomach growled but his ego was full. He had defended himself and proven that he was capable of something. He did not care whether friends would come of it or more enemies and he could not have cared less. His face hurt when he smiled which made him smile even more. His heart was still racing as the fight played over and over again in his mind. The bully managed a few good rounds on his face and his left eye was swollen and black. The animalistic biting and scratching entered the scene towards the end and was by far the little boy's favorite part. The taste of the other boy's blood was no different than his own. Having never tasted another person's blood, he realized the bully was probably enjoying the fight just as much as him so he opened his eyes wide and fought with all his strength. It took the teachers ten minutes to pry the two boys apart.

The stern looking secretary motioned for him to enter the headmaster's office. He strode by her with the buoyancy of a knight. Her audible scoff did not make him falter. He looked back to where she was sitting and responded with a brilliant smile. The blood caked in the corner of his lip cracked. The taste of blood gave him even more gusto to face the anger waiting on the other side of the door.

He had never been in the headmaster's office. It reminded him of his father's study at first glance until he realized his father's smelled of fresh cigars and the desk, rugs, and window shades were much finer. This thought made the little boy respect the headmaster less. He was bald and overweight in comparison to his father. He wondered whether his father would be proud of the fight he gave today.

"You have disrupted the peace of our community yet you smile as if nothing has happened." The little boy stared him straight in the eye, unashamed. "I am proud of our school's reputation for sending fine young men and women out into the world to defend honor and truth. Today you have disobeyed our morals and made a disgrace of yourself." He picked up a wooden ruler. "Before I was headmaster of this institution I was a teacher for twenty years and there were only a few situations that forced me to beat a child for misbehaving. I believe a violent punishment does not teach a violent student to become less so. Your punishment will be mentally severe. You will be placed on probation for a week and when you return to school you will spend twelve hours a day catching up on your schoolwork. You will arrive at seven and leave at seven. Catching up on your assignments will make you fall behind with your current work therefore summer school is in store for you young man. Despite your family's plans you will be required to stay in school to make up for lost time. Is this understood?" He breathed in deep after such a speech. The little boy said nothing. "Have I made myself clear?"

"What if I keep from falling behind?" The little boy pushed. The headmaster tilted his head in disbelief. "If I manage to catch up will I prove that summer school would be pointless? If I catch up sir, will you still send me to summer school?" The little boy hated

the idea of a summer without trips to the ocean. He had always been a good student. He would prove to this dumb man that he was capable of such progress.

“Only educated men are respected in this world. You come from a highly educated family, one that would be greatly disappointed if you failed to follow my advice. There is much to learn in the world beyond academia but there are many rings to jump through before you are awarded the title of a man.”

The little boy was awfully confused. He wanted to go home to hear the advice of his own father. If his family was so respected then why did he have to prove anything to anyone? Wasn't his name enough?

~A Rough Encounter~

The little boy turned the corner on his way home. He saw his father getting out of a sleek black car. Two other heads popped out of the vehicle. The three of them stood outside the entrance to his building. He could see one man making large gestures with his hands while his father stood listening with no expression. The car pulled up the block and waited. Their bodies were exposed now. The two men stood a good distance from his father and peered at him as if he was a diseased man. He wondered what they were telling him.

He tried his best not to be seen as the little boy inched his way slowly towards them. Crouched like a boy begging for spare change, he listened to the scene from behind a flowerpot. He stayed there long enough for the blood to gather uncomfortably in his hands. The tingling in his feet began to throb. To his right the cool clay of the flowerpot pressed against his skin. It was refreshing. He leaned his head against it and rested his weight on his side. Now he looked like a crippled boy faint from days of begging with nowhere to go. A mother with her baby carriage spotted him and began to talk to him. He shook his head and

urged her onwards saying he didn't want her help. She was flustered and did not want to upset him further. She glanced for a moment at the escalating conversation between the three men.

The little boy could hear snippets of the conversation. The men wanted something from his father. They kept referring to it as "Spicer's half" saying it was unfair of him to negate the promise he had made a month before when they "took out old Hickox" for him. The little boy peeked around the pot when he heard the name. His father looked down at the ground, smiled and laughed the loudest he had ever heard him laugh before he burst into a series of movements hitting the man in the stomach, temple and jaw with impressive speed and precision. The tail of his suit followed his movements like the flowing skirt of a ballerina. The other man threw himself on his father. The little boy ran yelling towards the scene. When he saw his son running towards him he grabbed the raving man around the shoulders and whispered something in his ear. The man looked at the little boy who stood staring at them with anger in his eyes and fear in his stance. He nodded letting his guard down and turned around to where the other man lay on the sidewalk. He threw the arm of his unconscious friend around his neck, whistled to the car and was gone in a matter of seconds.

"What you witnessed just now has made you more of a man. Unfortunately I did not set the best example," his father said as he straightened his clothes and smoothed down his hair. He guided his son inside. "Remember when we spoke about the heartbroken buck?" The little boy nodded. "A man needs to defend those he loves. He has to fight for the well being of his family. It is a selfish misguided if act you act out only out of anger. Those men were threatening the well being of people I care about. People I consider as priceless as you

and your mother. Do you understand?" They were inside the building now. The elevator cast moving shadows across his father's torso.

He father slid the iron door open and motioned for the little boy to exit before him. They stood in the corridor. The mechanics of the elevator clicked as it made its way back down to the main floor.

"One more thing," he said sounding more and more ordinary and normal, the glimpse of power fading from him, "don't tell your mother what you saw. It will cause her to worry and she has been fighting a cold all week."

"I won't," the little boy said with a wince, the cut on his lip cracked and started to bleed. His father took out his handkerchief and pulled him into the light.

"It seems more than one fight has taken place today. Am I right?" The little boy blotted his lip and looked at the floor. His father inspected his cuts and bruises. He was surprised when he saw the bite marks on his arm.

The little boy spoke quickly almost choking on his words. "I fought to defend myself. Another boy made fun of me in front of everyone at lunchtime. I couldn't stand it anymore," he looked to his father hoping his expression was one of forgiveness and understanding, instead he frowned and took out his pocket watch to check the time.

"Something has just come to my attention. Go clean yourself up and start your schoolwork. Tell mother I won't be back in time for supper." He opened the door for his son and patted him inside. He turned around and rushed down the stairs with no time to wait for the elevator. The little boy shut the door behind him and sank to the floor hugging his knees to his chest before the tears began to flow. His mother found him, bathed him, and put him to bed. He was home three hours late. She sent for Nora to fetch the doctor. There

was no time to hear his story. The little boy was pampered and fussed over as if he had been missing for weeks.

~The Punishment~

When she was her son's age a beating was the usual punishment for an ill doing. Depending on the severity of the incident the number of strikes were less or more. She found herself in trouble only a few times throughout her childhood. She took all the blame when she cheated on her math homework with her best friend's help. She was struck ten times with the ruler in front of the class. A couple years later she stole a classmate's frog he had brought in for show and tell and kept in in her desk until recess so she could run down to the river and return it to where it belonged. The boy was distraught in a frantic search for his pet. When the teacher informed the class about the boy's every right to be upset she couldn't help but speak up for the frog's sake. The teacher told her the frog was not her property and she did not have the right to decide its fate. She suffered the punishment for stealing: twenty strikes.

She witnessed the gruesome possibilities of a severe beating when her brothers acted out. Their blistered palms looked like bubbling lava fields and they yelped out in pain when reaching or grabbing or opening something. Her mother was too removed to care, whereas her father was in a constant state of disturbance because the boys' idleness opened more opportunities for them to misbehave.

Her little boy was not seriously hurt. The bite marks were what concerned the doctor most. His skin was broken in a couple of places so all the necessary precautions were taken. The boy suffered through a series of minor operations in order to open the wound and send fresh blood into the area. Although he didn't show any sign of discomfort, the doctor gave

him small doses of medicine to take the pain away. After a couple of days he was up and around.

His mother noticed a drastic change in him. He no longer immersed himself in the games he used to play. He did not care about the neatness of his room or the quality of his manners. When he spoke, which was becoming more and more rare, he spoke in short disturbing phrases.

One night when she was hosting a dinner party, he came downstairs in his pajamas and entered the dining room with a soiled bottom. He screamed at the group and showed his accident in full view to the eating guests. It was the first time she had the urge to beat him.

The little boy was left alone in his room with no thoughts or imaginings to speak of.

Stolen Hats

A woman sits on a stool center stage with a tall coatrack beside her. Hanging on the coatrack are many kinds of men's hats.

When she places a particular hat on her head she becomes that lover from her past. Her voice matches his accent and mannerisms to a T. When she takes the hat off she is herself.

Hanging in no particular order among the other hats are:

A Yankee baseball cap

A furry explorer's hat

A tall stovepipe hat like the one Abe Lincoln wore

A beret with splotches of paint on its rim

She is a different woman with all of them, yet with no shame she entertains her audience as she shares the secret blunders of each relationship as well as the comical confusions inherent between a man and a woman.

The Yankee Baseball Cap

WOMAN

(To the audience) George was a man of considerable height, about 6'2. His jaw was stern and his voice strong. His eyes were the kind of blue that made you forget everything i.e. forget the world has billions of people, that we're killing some two thousand species a day and dumping six billion tons of carbon into the atmosphere a year. Those eyes! I couldn't stop gazing into them. I liked the woman I was in those eyes.

Georgie, as I called him—he spoke in more of a yell than anything. By day he was a social worker, by night a pot smoker and beer drinker. A family man looking to start a family. But taking his time 'cause men can do that. Women, we can take our time too but if we're too slow we have to be able to sprint at the end.

I met him when I was weighting tables at this shit hole in Philly. Right after I met him they closed the place down. I swear I never saw so many rats come out of a drain at once. It would be months before I didn't have a nightmare where rats were crawling all over me.

It's funny. George was a kind of rat in the end. He always sniffed around and once he was gone I could still feel the tingles from his wiry body as if a rat tail had just slid across my skin.

GEORGE

Hey baby you know what I need right now? I need a woman to take care of me so I can take care of her. It's a 50/50 relationship. I've lived lonesome and I've lived with women and neither has worked out. It's all about finding the right balance. That's what its all about. Finding a balance.

WOMAN

(A bit disgusted) How many women have you been with?

GEORGE

The first woman I was with was ten years my senior. She was always at the bodega I used to go to bum a cig every now and then. That was before I was eighteen. She would wander around the neighborhood with nothing to do. And we got to know each other. She was like a mother to me. Givin' me my cigs and beer. She provided for me. And then she taught me to make love. Course it was painful when she called it off because I got used to her but you know what she said to me? She told me that everything ends, alls we gotta do it enjoy the moment. Live to the fullest. Love with an open heart and let go without looking back. A good motto but easier said than done.

After Linda, I experimented with some girls my age but they were like a 2-foot deep kitty pool. I could see right through 'em ya know? Straight to the bottom. Wasn't any mystery, wasn't any excitement. Course they put me on a pedestal immediately because I made them so comfortable like they was in their own

bedroom. I knew what to do with 'em, how to make 'em purr. But a woman needs more than that. Especially you baby.

WOMAN

How do you know what I need? And answer my question, how many women have you been with?

GEORGE

Cause I know you. I know you better than you know yourself. I know what you need before you can even put words to it. I am your telepathic man baby.

(He rolls up his sleeves) It's like this—when I met you I was in a bad place and you reminded me of what I had forgotten. Shit I need you more than anyone I've ever known. And I would do anything, anything to keep you.

(He shakes his head) Women are like money baby. Some men work really hard for them and others just have them. Me, I've always had women but not many of them satisfy me. Just the card I was dealt. I am a specific type of guy and I need one woman to be everything for me. And that's you baby.

WOMAN

(To the audience) George was stupid for wanting what he did with me. He was passionate in his laziness and I knew that 50/50 rant was bullshit. He was a man who needed a woman to be the mother of his kids and a mother to him. And that was not going to be me.

GEORGE

How does this feel baby? Does that feel good? (*Moans are exaggerated. He makes disgusting sexual expressions with his face*)

WOMAN

(*To the audience*) This that. That this. What a way to drive a woman insane. The thrill is gone when a man repeatedly asks if he is pleasing you. He should be able to tell. A real lover can understand without words.

There were times when he was everything I wanted and I saw my future in his eyes. I can see it now—a small white picket fenced house in the suburbs. Two kids running around with the dog on the lawn. Calling them in for supper. George would come home from work and find me fitting a newly made dress on little Annalee. He'd tell me all about the season tickets he scored with his boss for the family. And I'd be happy. I'd be happy if I was dumb to anything other than a family and a man obsessed with baseball.

GEORGE

What were you doing last night?

WOMAN

I went out for a drink after work to take a load off. What? Am I breaking some sort of law here? You know we've talked about this before. I need my independence. I can't have you worried all the time.

GEORGE

Who were you with?

WOMAN

My gosh! Am I some sort of prisoner of yours? I was with some friends; you probably know all of them. And you probably don't like any of them. (*Laughs*) Good god this is miserable. Come here baby let me show you what your doing to me. (*She pulls down the top of her shirt on her left side to reveal her chest, but does not expose her breast*) You are sucking all the love and hope from my heart. You are pushing me further and further away from you. Do you want to do this to me?

GEORGE

No. I don't. I just want you to be honest with me. I want you all for myself.

WOMAN

Honest? Honest? Now I am being told that I am lying to you? Well this is impossible.

(*To the audience*) I left him without saying goodbye. It was raining in the middle of the night. I woke up, slipped out of bed, and hailed a cab. I left a lot of my stuff there. But less is more. And it all would have reminded me of him anyway.

(*BREAK*)

The Furry Explorer's Hat

WOMAN

Rudolf was of Scandinavian descent. I was so in love. He looked like a prince with his long golden hair. His features were so delicate at times he looked like a woman, a big tall strong woman that is.

He was genetically designed to withstand cold weather. His beard, as yellow and bright as sunlight, was thick and protective. His arms were muscular and supportive, a perfect pillow for my head. He gave me warmth during those frigid winter months we were together.

He was never cold! It was shocking. On more than one occasion he would wake up sweating underneath the down comforter. We came upon a sleeping arrangement where I was covered with the blanket and he was exposed, but we always slept touching somewhere: my pinky toe against his big toe, my hand on his back, his arm slouched over my raised hip, my head nestled in his armpit or lost in his hairy chest. I think that tiny bit of connection spread fire into my blood. I had never felt so warm and happy.

When spring came he was eager to head north. He told me it had nothing to do with me; he was simply not a hot weather type of guy. So I told him I would go with him. I had never been north of Bar Harbor, Maine.

RUDOLF

My darling you have no place up there. Besides you'd be cold and miserable the whole time.

When I was a boy, my father always told me women had no place among the wolves of our family. My mother was a hearty woman, but even she could not have survived the trips he took to the Arctic—

WOMAN

But women have more body fat than men. It seems like women should be the ones to venture up north. It's mean of you to say I wouldn't survive and besides I would have you to keep me warm!

(To the audience) Oh how I loved him. He took me to another place, a place where fairies really exist, where waterfalls curtain their hidden kingdoms, and flowers close to hide them from a seeking human.

But he did not want me to follow him. Perhaps he would have left me to die if I had.

It would have happened something like this—I fall behind because I realize I left my sunglasses in the igloo we stayed in the night before. I scream ahead to Rudy but he cannot hear me. My eyes begin to water from the sun reflecting off the snow. I can no longer see where I am going. It becomes harder and harder to

follow him. I hit a bump and my sleigh suddenly flips over. I am flung off course, knocked unconscious, and remain so for a few hours. Rudy comes to look for me but the impending snow has covered my tracks. The dogs find him eventually but cannot lead him to me, and even if he did find me I would have already be dead. Rudolf would shed a tear but continue northwards.

He thought I understood why he was leaving.

RUDOLF

I seek another world, a world beyond the northern lights. It's out there I tell you. Men have always let beauty distract them. But what is behind the beauty? I will find whatever it is that lays beyond the beyond.

(He whispers) My grandfather spoke of portals. He told me his greatest secret once. He had fallen in love with an Inuit on one of his early expeditions. He tried to marry her for a year until her father took her from him by forcing her to enter another world. He gave up his search for her and returned south. He made me swear not to tell anyone. All he left me was one piece of advice: beware when the full moon shines bright upon the snow, not all portals will lead you to another world, some may guide you to your death.

Oh it's a search for the devil and his brother but I have to go. I will not be able to survive a journey like the one I am craving when I am an old man. Darling, look

at me. Please. I have shared my heart with you and you have shared yours with me but a sure way to kill something is to hold on to it too tightly.

The truth is I have already let you go. I said goodbye after we first met because I knew I would have to leave once the frosts melted and the birds began to sing.

For generations my family has explored the farthest corners of the northern world. It's in my blood. Don't think for a second this has anything to do with you. It's plain and simple. I just have to get out of here.

WOMAN

(To the audience) If I pleaded suicide or a surprise pregnancy he would not have stayed. Nothing could have made him stay. His will was too strong, his spirit too nomadic.

After he left I was freezing. Even when summer rolled around and the air was as hot Hera's breath, I shivered as I made my way to and from my weekly errands. When I went to work I wore at least three layers. People thought I was one of those chronically sick people, with SARS or something. My breathing was shallow because my chest was weak from so much crying, I constantly had a tissue pressed against my nose and I could not control my sobs. I didn't want to scare people with a sudden out burst of snot!

My friends were all waiting for the day I would meet some hero to save me. They told me how horrible I looked, assured me he was not Rudolf the red nosed reindeer who would guide me in the dark; he was Rudolf who couldn't tell his own gonads from those of his sleigh dogs.

I know it's pathetic. And I was young, entirely too young to be so sad. Alas, time is the ultimate healer. Although she passes slowly, her steady hand did heal my emptiness.

(She pauses and then bursts out dramatically) What is love but the smoothing out of a crumbled piece of paper? It opens us up to be written on, imprinted and colored in.

(She shakes her head) Unjustly, ink fades just as love does. Nothing lasts forever.

(BREAK)

The Stovepipe Hat

MARC

Oh my love, my sweet everlasting beauty; I have your heart in my heart. Goodness how can love be hot with pleasure but burn with incredible pain? Ah, but the pain leaves me wanting more of you. You rip my soul from the world but

at the same time you give me such life. You fill me to the top and let me burst with a chance to love again. Oh I pray this cycle never ends.

(He lights a cigarette and inhales deeply) I used to be so afraid of that word. Never. Now I use it in all of poems. Never will I ever forsake such a word, ever no, not ever, never, never, never. Oh I love the shapes of the sounds in the word: the way the tongue curls at the top of the mouth right behind the teeth in the beginning and then collapses allowing the front teeth to rest gently on the bottom lip until the lips push out to end with gusto. Never. What a word!

I want to name my first child Never. He or she will be proud of such a name. When I call to her in the street people may think I am yelling the answer to a despicable question. The tone will help them sense it is a name. The calm question... Never? Where are you? Oh Never darling? Do you want to eat rigatoni for lunch Never?

Or discussing Never with friends in conversation: that all depends on how well Never is doing with his schoolwork, I will not be placing him in the tennis competition until I know his studies are solid or Never always listens to her father, sometimes she has trouble getting out of bed in the morning, but who doesn't as a child? Growing children need lots of sleep!

I also feel strongly about the name Love. Never and Love. They could be opposites or exactly the same thing. Think about it, Love and Never. These are my children, this is Love and this is Never.

Love is over used today as a word whereas Never rains fear wherever it is spoken. Love is the universal opener and Never is the black hole that sucks up chance and fate. To say "I will never this or never that" completely cuts off the possibility of manifesting anything close to everything associated with what the person has just said they would never do or never try.

I never expected to meet you that day in Hudson. I was entirely out of my element in the thrift store looking at suits with Harry. What a shock, on a trip with Harry in Hudson where I meet the woman of my wildest dreams! I know I scared you popping out between the rows of hanging clothes, but I wanted to leave an impressionable dent in your memory.

Marry me? (*pause*) No? Then marry me tomorrow? (*pause*) Marry me at some point along this miserable line of life? Good God I cannot sustain myself without you! Here I am, saying what every man swears he will never admit, but all know is true: love completes a man. Without a woman, without a lover, without someone to share in this misery, we are nothing. We might as well be an empty vessel sailing with the white flag of surrender waving above our heads, our guts

exposed, our swords blunt from poking at stone enemies. Oh it's all a game, the glories of a man. The chains he wears to pay for sins he has not committed.

(He lights another cigarette even if the other one is not finished) I spent years repenting for the mistakes of my father's generation. The disrespect and mistreatment my mother suffered was second handedly forced onto me as she raised me. Each time my father expected the impossible from her, I was the one who suffered the consequences. It is not fair of my father to have treated her so, but he could not help it. A wife is not a slave to be ordered around, expected to hold her tongue and obey all rules. She needs freedom as much as she needs air to breath.

In my first few relationships I hid behind the guilt I had built up over the years. I discarded my feelings because I thought if I honestly shared my thoughts I would dominate the atmosphere. My emotions and desires were a toxic gas that, if released, would ruin any chance of happiness. As a result of this, one relationship after another tumbled into disaster until I was so broken I began to see a therapist. I didn't think seeing a shrink was going to solve any of my problems. I thought if anything it would just distract me from getting over the lump I created in my personality.

But as humans we need to share experiences. Classification is a tool we can use to spur a realization to take place. After a year or so of therapy I came to

understand that I was not the first to suffer from what was defined as “Withdrawal Syndrome”. It is basically any form of clinging to past traumas and using them as a rock to be crushed under instead of using the rock to push off of in order move on. We become so attached to our suffering; so comfortable in our misery that when we shed the shell we feel exposed and want to crawl back to that darkness we know so well.

Enough of this—I am no longer willing to hide. Now that I have a kind-hearted woman I no longer fear being exposed. I am free now.

WOMAN

(To the audience) Free. I guess.

If Marc had really freed himself he would have realized he was admitting total attachment to another kind of suffering. He was so attached to the idea of being free that the idea of being free was the closest he would ever get to actually being free. But it’s true for all of us. The more we cling to truth the less we have of it. The more we cling to freedom the less free we are. The more I thought I loved Marc, the less I actually loved him. It is a complicated conundrum.

It really ticked me off how modern the proposal was. No getting down on one knee. He didn’t even have a ring! It was more of a spontaneous question than an offering of a lifelong commitment. I considered marrying him only because I was tired of dating. Tired of being left or waiting for the right moment to leave and

then having to start all over again. You know what I am talking about. Its all been said before. After years with the same person it is hard to remember who you were before him.

(Speaking angry and fast) The dating world is miserable but on the other hand being single is like walking down the street naked with a sign above your buttocks that reads, “Imagine what I’ll look like when I am post-menopausal”. It makes you wish you could deal with all the dull moments it takes to become intimate with someone, the silences that are necessary to be really comfortable with a person, the patience required to shed the layers we build up to protect ourselves.

I hated going to the grocery store, shopping and cooking for one, not having anyone to go the movies with, not having anyone to take to my cousin’s wedding, the questions, the horrifying looks on my relative’s faces when I told them I was alone and just focusing on myself. It gets to a certain point when all your friends are either getting over a horrible separation, in the middle of a mediocre relationship, or single and checking their match.com accounts five times a day.

Marc was too passionate. His emotions were overwhelming. There was a voice in the back of my mind ordering me to run before I tripped over my own foot, before I made an irrevocable mistake. I told myself—whoa there little firecracker, there

is no such thing as a mistake that can't be reversed, feel it out a bit, don't be rash, and love yourself and the process.

Love the process, hah. What a joke. Marc *was* a post-menopausal woman. He knew himself better than most men his age. He wasn't an alcoholic or a sexaholic. He spent hours reading the latest diet research to improve not only his body, but the health and speed of his sperm. He really wanted Never and Love to be born sooner than later because to him the advantages of being a young father far surpassed those of being a financially stable older father.

The bottom line was that I just wasn't ready for marriage. Or maybe it was that Marc wasn't the right man for me. As much as I hated the feeling I get when I know I am about to make a big decision—punching my pillow to get my anger out, crying alone in my car to NPR— I did not want to be the mother of this lunatic's kids. Marc was the worst kind of lover because he thought he was the best. He was blind to my feelings because he was so in touch with his own. He glossed over mine to the point where I started to think he had some mental disorder.

I heard he found a nice country girl and knocked her up. I am sure he's happy with Never, Love and his wife.

(*BREAK*)

The Beret

WOMAN

(To the audience) The innocent relationships are the simplest ones.

Jack and I, we watched things together. Sat on benches, ate in restaurants, went to high school drama shows, farmers markets, gallery openings, fashion shows, bonfires, vegan cookouts, sweat lodges, cult information sessions, played bridge in old folk's homes, attended preschool graduations, you name it, we did it.

Jack was always running into friends unexpectedly. They were interesting people. When I asked him about them later he would shrug it off and say he didn't know them well, they were just acquaintances of his from living in New York for so long.

But I knew what they saw in him. Jack had an eye to absorb and recreate what he saw with visual perfection. If he were a chef who tasted a dish he would be able to turn around and recreate it with the exact same ingredients. His steady brush was equipped with the shape, colors, and mood of a situation so well that he could paint anything and did. Jack was a master artist of his time, still young, and incredibly humble.

He was one intimidating guy no doubt. Women were always coming up to him to greet him rubbing his back asking him how he was faring with his new opening

coming up. I knew they all had had him or wanted him or maybe both. I didn't stand by his side and bark at them to get off or spray them with my defense mechanistic stink. I just wandered around talking to complete strangers to try and make myself comfortable. Sometimes I just pretended what they said was funny. Other times I pretended to be funny to try to get a second chance to impress them. It was shit show. In the end I just wasn't cool enough for Jack

Or so *I* thought.

JACK

I am not a Picasso or a Lucian Freud. I don't paint women and then enjoy them the next moment in some sort of celebration of artistic achievement! All those women may think I am that type of artist but I am not.

I am just a guy who is in love with the colors of our world.

When we were children—in the prime of our innocence—we put colors and shapes together before we named things. The whole world is up for interpretation if you don't rush to name everything. If a child points to the sky and asks, "what is that?" referring to a bird, and you say, "that's a bird," then for the rest of his childhood he will look at a bird just as a bird, nothing else. As he learns more about the world, he will see a bird and say, "oh I know what that is, that's a bird" and move on.

When people look at things all they see is what they want to see, their eyes are clogged with judgment. That's why our country is obsessed with hearing about bad news on CNN. They get some sick enjoyment out of being exposed to other people's misfortunes. They like knowing their security systems are beeping and their dishwashers are scrubbing their grime off for them. CNN gives them a break from their own reality. I think the solution to the prejudice, the hate, and the suffrage born from white man's supremacy is for a person to focus on their surroundings. If white men were ever content with all that their native landscape offered them the world would be a much better place.

That's what art is; it's an understanding of one's immediate surroundings. It is an effort to reach out to others to express an interpretation of that truth. When I paint I try to share what I've learned as I wander down the road of this lifetime.

It took a lot of patience to learn how to mix paints to make a desired color. Adding just the tiniest amount of the wrong color can ruin the purity of a certain shade. Just like love, the balance can easily tip to the wrong side. Day after day, month after month, a painting can have hundreds of layers. This too is true of love. The older I become the more I grow to understand both painting and love. Both are slow, arduous journeys that leave me feeling unprotected and vulnerable. The more I sacrifice for a painting the better it becomes and the more I sacrifice for a relationship the stronger it becomes.

WOMAN

(To the audience) Jack and I were totally satisfied in every scope of our relationship: how much time we spent with each other, who did what both in the bedroom and out of the bedroom, who we chose to spend time with when we weren't together, how we talked about the relationship to other people, how we talked about the relationship with one another, how we settled disagreements and difficult decisions. Everything was perfect until...

One day he comes home, announces he is moving to a Catholic monastery in Florence, tells me I have to deal with the apartment and the two kittens we decided to take in together, and informs me he is on a different path.

(To Jack) What path Jack? Are you gonna paint the yellow brick road and see where it takes you?

JACK

Listen, despite everything I have accomplished, none of it, none of it, is worth anything. There is a hollow space within me, I am sure you can feel it, an emptiness that I need to feel out. *(pause)*

WOMAN

(To the audience) Jack on Jack. Jack all about Jack. Jack and who? Oh Jack and Jack. Jack Jack Jack Jack yap yap yap yap yap yap yap. Ugh he was entirely nuts. Jack out of the box insane! I could not believe he had found Jesus at thirty some years old, at the height of his artistic career, women throwing themselves

at him, me at his side, two adorable tabby kittens, money in the bank! He threw it all away to worship the religion that persecuted women for thousands of years for being just as awesome as men? (*deep breath*) Okay that whole feminist point may have been pushing it a bit.

My mother was right—life changes as much as the world does, and the world can change pretty fast. From the times when men worshiped fat little Venus of Willendorfs to nowadays as they hide away in Monasteries failing to satisfy their women. It's just as well I suppose. Jack followed his heart and I eventually found mine.

(*A phone rings in her pocket*)

Hey honey. I am picking June up at day care and then I'll meet you at home? Would you mind grabbing some bell peppers for the stir-fry? (*She walks off talking*) It slipped my mind to pick them up. Oh and also Katie wanted you to...

CURTAIN

