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### Afterlives

Joel Sherman

*Washington University in St. Louis*

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

Department of English  
Writing Program

Afterlives  
by  
Joel Sherman

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2017  
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## Hiems

Having earned his freedom, Hiems felt it a likely time to find a wife. Providence led him to the island that he knew as Saint Domingue, where he lived outside the town of Petit Goave, which at the time was a town of pirates and privateers. These men went by different names: boucaniers, after their tradition of coming ashore to hunt wild cattle and swine, and then building a boucan, a smokehouse. Or else they were called flibustiers, a funny-looking word from the Dutch. These men were colorful and loud like the island's birds, and they sounded like those birds especially when they called out the town's name: *petty gwav! petty gwav!* Our man Hiems had been one of these flibustiers; but, by the time he went looking for a wife, he no longer thought of himself as such.

Hiems wrote the word 'planter' next to his name on the marriage contract. Next to that, his new wife's name, Madeleine, written in a controlled curving script, probably the Governor General's intendant. Hiems' own signature is composed of short erratic strokes. He was educated, but by this time not much used to writing. The contract dates from sixteen eighty-three and is the first document we have that officially records his existence. And so, let's begin Hiems'

story with his marriage.

We can picture him standing with forty or fifty other men on the beach. Hiems presses into the wet, coarse sand with the toe of his boot. He feels it compress with a slight crunch, like snow, something he hasn't seen since his youth.

The Governor General of the Islands has arranged for one hundred women volunteers of marriageable age to sail from France to Petit Goave, well-known as a "Sanctuary and Asylum of all People of desperate Fortunes." The Governor General does not want these women to step onto the island unmarried.

A freshly built wooden pier juts into the turtle-green water. The men wait, restless on the shoreside, shifting their weight onto one foot and then back. Many do not wear shoes. Many wear clothes that have been stolen. Hiems notices more than one piece of linen that has a former owner's blood still stained around a hole or a tear.

First one rowboat and then a second tie up at the far end of the pier. Women clamber from the boats but stay huddled together over the water. Hiems can tell from the way they sway side to side that their Crossing saw rough seas.

The rowboats crawl back across the bay to the ship anchored there. They return with more women. Two Capuchin fathers, overseers of the whitewashed church, stand in their brown robes like gateposts between the women and the men who wait ashore. Tropical clouds press down, balanced atop the green hills, like ships run aground on a bottom of rotten boulders.

Hiems listens to men around him speak in French, Spanish, English. The man nearest Hiems holds forth to no one in particular. Hiems thinks at first the man is speaking a language he does not know, but then, looking at the man's mouth, he realizes the man is missing most of his tongue.

The women form a line along one side of the pier. A man whom Hiems takes to be one of the Governor General's intendants, marked by his clean, fitted coat of green velvet, walks down the line. He speaks to the women in a quiet voice, inaudible above the surf.

The men have slowly formed a sort of queue before the Capuchin fathers. The intendant addresses them from the top of the steps that lead to the pier. The purpose of the day is marriage, he says. The women have the right of refusal. Once a match is agreed upon, the fathers will bless the union. Before man and wife can take their leave, a fee must be paid—a livre or escudo or an equivalent coin. The intendant will not accept pearls or precious stones or unminted metal.

Hiems thumbs the gold coin in his palm. It fits perfectly into the calloused flesh, as if by design. The Mistress Wright gave him the coin, and encouraged him, just short of an order, to come here this morning.

The first man in the queue makes his way up the steps. He walks along the pier's edge opposite the women. He is just far enough away that if he raised his arm perpendicular to his body, and the women did the same, their fingertips might touch.

The man reaches the pier's far end. He turns around. He stops in front of a woman. A moment later and the low tones of a Latin blessing hum in the heavy air. The man and the woman stop before the intendant, who now sits at a small table on the pier. The man hands over his gold coin and the intendant records the union in his book.

The queue ebbs. Some of the men walk quickly down the pier, some slowly. Some look straight at the women, some look only down. Some walk all the way to the pier's end, where two posts rise up like two more gateposts framing the bay. Some men walk only part way down before they stop and take a woman from the line.

One man stops before a woman and reaches out and takes her face in his hand as he



might handle an orange on the branch. Hiems has seen men like this before, at the stews, at the auctions. He has seen men reach for other men's throats with almost the same gesture, the same curve of the hand.

The man without a tongue mounts the steps. Hiems can see him worrying the gold between his fingers. Hiems wonders how the tongueless man came into the gold. Not for the first time Hiems thinks about the difficulty of determining who might have wealth.

The tongueless man stops before one woman and then another. He pauses and keeps walking. He reaches the end and turns around. His steps are heavy on the boards, and he is saying something in his garbled voice, his face pointed upward at the low clouds.

He stops before a third woman. Hiems sees her lower her head. The tongueless man steps forward and pushes her bodily off the pier and into the clear water. Her skirts spread like an oil slick. Two men wade out and help her to shore. Two other men rush onto the pier and drag the tongueless man away.

And now Hiems is at the front of the queue. He walks past the two priests, who stand calm and erect, unshaken by the commotion. They examine Hiems with expressions between disdain and boredom.

The intendant still sits at his table, quill in hand. He will not tolerate such outbursts, he says. Hiems can't tell if the intendant is speaking directly to him, but he nods his head in acknowledgement and hesitates until the intendant says to move along.

Hiems feels utterly exposed as soon as he sets out on the pier. He tries to keep his head up to look at each woman, but when his gaze meets theirs, all the blood rises to his face, and he cannot help but look down at his feet for long stretches instead.

He has to compel himself to keep walking. He focuses his eyes past the women onto the

water, which now glints and flashes as some few patches of light have unfurled through the clouds. His mind perceives blurredly the shapes and colors of the women till halfway down the line he is able to see them more clearly—how some proffer smiles and some seem on the verge of speaking, some have yellowed eyes and some shiver despite the warmth.

Would he have wondered, marveled even, at how they looked, and how they looked at him? He had seen women before, of course, despite the dearth of them in Petit Goave, and we might presume he had even visited the stews—the loose consortium of brothels. Yet he must have felt that this strange and subtle exchange on the pier was something different. He was not simply paying for sex, as he had probably done before; though some thoughts of sex must have occurred to him.

He knew the act only in the context of the stews. He knew only warrens of windowless rooms, only following the dim shape that held his hand—a hand that had hardly felt a woman's touch since his mother's. He found himself in a small, close room with a woman, very young, taking the hand she had led him by and pressing it against her rouged cheek, then upon her breast, part of a dance that had become ritual for her. He unclothed and reclined on a soft pallet and watched by candlelight as she gathered the petticoat she wore and pulled it over her head, over her tangled pile of hair. She kneeled between his legs and spit on her hands, spit with contempt masked only partially by feigned excitement. She took him in her hands and continued to spit. She moved only a few times and he came, his back lifting up on the pallet.

This was perhaps everything he knew of sex. It frightened him and it embarrassed him. But since he gained his freedom and the most basic concerns of survival had become somewhat less pressing he found that sex filled his thoughts once more as it had during his cloistered adolescence many years ago, before he made his own Crossing.

A face stops him. Why this face? She is neither smiling nor mouthing any words, and neither is her lip curled nor her eyes narrowed. There is nothing in her expression that leads him to pause in front of her. She is impassive. And yet he is stopped as surely as if she had reached out and taken hold of his hand.

She has light hair, the color of hay. Her skin is light and she has a mole just above her ear, right on the line of her hair. Her eyes are olive, almost the same color as the water but a little muddier. Faint pockmarks cover her cheeks. Something about the face feels familiar, and perhaps it is this that arrests him.

He asks her if she speaks any English and she nods her head yes but says *oui* in a very small voice. Before he can think of any more to say she has stepped out of the line and they are walking toward the intendant and the fathers.

And so we might imagine their marriage. All we have is a solitary line in a book of records. The name he signed, Hiems, was not in fact his given name. In his later writings we learn that his father was a Spaniard who named his son Jaime. The father left Spain as a young man and went north to fight the so-called reformists, married into a family of burghers near Stuttgart, and grew wealthy.

Hiems remembers very little from his youth. The red tiled roofs of Stuttgart. Hay bales that steamed of a cold morning, as if they contained some life, some vital heat. A water wheel, a crossroads. He retains no memory of his mother's face, though on some mornings he feels he has seen it in his sleep. He wonders that he cannot remember her face and yet he can see those red roofs, the same color as this island's groves of annatto at dusk.

How did Hiems go from Stuttgart to Petit Goave? We know he studied with the Jesuits. Perhaps his father arranged for Hiems to travel to Madrid, receive the best education available,

which would have been from the Jesuits, that vast enginery of zealots. The Jesuits had already established themselves as far away as the Orient, though as a student Hiems would not have been suffered to see himself as more than one cog of one wheel of the machine. Perhaps, to fulfill his function, he was sent to New Spain after taking his first vows. It would seem he never arrived in New Spain. We can imagine the circumstances.

Hiems' ship carried passengers, no cargo of value—no gold or silver, cocoa or tobacco. The passenger ship signaled surrender before a shot was fired. They might have been able to outrun the privateers had they had better wind, but as many sails as they let out, Providence did not provide for them.

A ragged assortment of men climbed aboard, some armed with knives and pistols, others only with a maul or a sharpened gaff. The privateer captain divided the prisoners by sex. First his men took the nine young Spanish women and put them on a skiff. The captain then arranged the men according to age and also clothing. Through a combination of rough Spanish and threatening gestures, he ordered any prisoner wearing shoes or a jacket to remove them, and prisoners wearing linen shirts to remove those as well.

The two robed Jesuits were ignored during this accounting, until the captain noticed the one priest's youth and pulled him aside.

Do you speak any English? the captain asked.

Hiems remained silent.

I will either take you with me, or shoot you. If you understand what I say, speak now.

I understand. My English is small, but I can speak.

Excellent. Take off that robe.

The captain was disappointed to learn the ship carried no valuables. The younger

prisoners brought up the salt pork and wine, as well as the cooking pots. They loaded what they could fit onto the skiffs. Fourteen of the men, those who looked most fit and still growing, were ordered on the skiffs as well. Hiems was the last to descend the rope ladder.

He spent eight years impressed aboard Captain Wright's ship. Wright was English, and during this time Hiems learned the language and was called James. (The name we know him as was actually his third name, given to him later by the French; a portmanteau, we assume, of Jaime and James.)

Wright treated Hiems favorably, admired his education. Of the thirteen other men with whom Hiems had been captured, five were sold as *engagés* to a Huguenot captain on the Isle of Tortue, and the remaining eight died of malnourishment within the year.

Hiems proved his worth by knowing some things about the Spanish merchants upon whom they preyed. He knew the merchants sometimes smuggled their own bullion to avoid tariffs, and in this way he found a hundred pounds of silver ingots suspended in marmalade.

Hiems became one of the ship's crew. He learned to sleek down his hair with tar so that it wouldn't become caught in the lines. He pricked into his forearm with gunpowder the Jerusalem cross, which over time bled into an indistinct lattice and then faded beneath his skin. He was disabused of his northern paleness, and also of his innocent belief that the components of the world were twofold, spirit and flesh.

Hiems earned a small share of the spoils, but for years the ship did not profit much. They took captives, food and snuff. They captured a turtling sloop whose hold was filled with sea turtles, stacked waist-high, belly to shell, fins moving in a slow rhythm through the darkness.

Then, in the late summer of sixteen eighty, Wright's ship happened upon an unguarded fleet of pearling boats at the mouth of the Rio de Hacha. The privateers captured a bounty of

such size that even Hiems' portion was enough to pay the balance on his service and still leave a sum with which he could settle in Petit Goave.

Captain Wright settled there as well. Wright, with his stolen fortune, became a seigneur, a sort of feudal lord, tending a plantation that spread across the lee of the hills in patchwork terraces as might be found in the true Orient. The hills looked down upon the town and the ships in the Bay of Petit Goave—a notch on the southern edge of the Gulf of Gonave, and that in turn one small stretch of sea, a glittering coin among many in the Antilles.

Hiems paid his former captain a yearly acknowledgment to live on and work a piece of land, profit it from it as he could. With the help of Wright's slaves, Hiems built a modest house of wooden posts and clay walls. It was to this house that he would have brought Madeleine, after they departed the beach on the day of their marriage, after they walked the dirt lanes of the town, past the church with its open belfry, past the fine houses of stone and brick.

We might imagine that the Captain and Mistress Wright received Madeleine and Hiems in the plantation's manse, built of boards and decorated with filigreed shutters and carved corbels. Inside, the seats have plush tapestried backs and the long table is brightly polished walnut. The Captain is only a decade or so older than Hiems and already entirely bald. He is not especially tall, and though he has grown heavier since taking on the life of a seigneur, neither is he fat, and yet his presence is expansive, a wide sail stretched tight by the wind. The Mistress Wright is younger—younger than Hiems even. She is the daughter of another seigneur, and she has darkly tanned skin and even darker hair. Her family is French, and when she meets Madeleine the women begin speaking their native tongue, shyly at first, but soon with such speed neither Wright nor Hiems can follow.

The foursome eats fowl cooked in a sauce of sour oranges. They are waited on by the

house servants, mestizos purchased from the Spanish. The Captain gestures frequently for more wine, and all four feel its effects. Madeleine and Mistress Wright speak of Paris, where Madeleine was born. The Mistress has never left the island, but as a girl her mother told her of the city's brilliant and festive boulevards. Taking a long drink of wine, the Captain puts his hand on Hiems' forearm and wishes him happy returns on his wedding night. The Captain's lips are stained dark blue by the wine, and he has become morose. The Mistress has already lost two children still in her womb.

Madeleine and Hiems bid their hosts good night. They walk a narrow path along a field of big-leafed tobacco. Below the field, to their left, they can see the thatched homes of the slaves, the smoke of cook fires rising into the evening blue air. Madeleine and Hiems walk together in silence, both somewhat frightened, both thankful for the generous portions of wine.

Hiems' dwelling is small. The floor is swept dirt, but the roof is shingled. His few material possessions are under this roof. Madeleine's are entirely contained in a single chest, delivered from the ship by a porter. In just a year, Hiems will abandon this home. He will depart on a ship called the *Aimable*, bound for a region designated on the maps of the day as a *Costa Deserta*. The ship will depart with favorable winds around one o'clock after midnight, and Hiems will watch as the faint constellation of lanterns around the pier diminishes; the shape of the church, a quicklime glow, barely visible against the black hills.

Madeleine will not accompany him. For her, the marriage contract is the first and last record of her life. It is likely that soon after her marriage she succumbed to a fever, as did so many others new to the tropics. Perhaps the Mistress Wright would have paid to have Madeleine buried in the town's churchyard, the burial overseen by the same Capuchin father who witnessed her arrival, who blessed the union. No gravestones from that time persist to this day, of course.

We cannot know. She is a blind spot.

It is equally likely she died in childbirth. Wright's wish for a happy return may well have been a curse.

Madeleine and Hiems lie side by side on his small pallet. Madeleine feels herself in a dream. She cannot believe she is here, on the other side of an ocean from the only world she has known. From what has she fled, that took her this far? Now she finds herself next to a man she has only just met and already married. What must she have felt as he reached across to her?

Hiems discovers, as he reaches for her, that the desire he is so familiar with is now suddenly intertwined with thoughts of family. He thinks of his own mother, and though he still cannot picture her face, he wonders whether he might see it in the eyes of a daughter, or even a son. Were he to have a son, perhaps he would someday send the boy back to Europe, as the seigneurs do—back to the lands of his own youth. As for himself, he knows he could never make the return Crossing. He feels the world differently. He could return to the land from which he came just as easily as he could return to his childhood—wake up and find himself in his mother's arms. It cannot happen. Perhaps it is not until he loses Madeleine and his child that he considers the other direction, fleeing farther.





## Silver City

After his wife died, Henry Grudgings sold his family's land in Iowa and left to file claim on a quarter-section homestead in the New Mexico Territory, taking his daughter Charlie and his brother William with him. William, six years Henry's junior, was a drinker and a fighter. Henry took Charlie because he loved his daughter. He took William to protect his brother from himself.

Henry bought Charlie a new sidesaddle for the journey, but on the second night she suffered back spasms. Afterward he let her use his spare saddle. Still Charlie preferred to walk, and she spent much time playing teamster for the wagon. In the evenings Charlie collected drinking water for the party. At the river, air gurgling from a canteen's mouth, silver bubbles and a sound like the turning of a wheel—fast at first, then slower, slower and with a final burp, stilled. The surface returned to glass under a bright, off-balance moon.

To William's dismay their liquor ran dry. He sat by the dying fire and listened to Henry's stories about old battles. Once, Henry had hidden facedown in the mud amongst the dead, breathing out the side of his mouth. Henry expected he would die, trampled by the cavalry, but not even a man passed over him. Henry found no trouble walking back to camp that evening, his clothes so muddy he couldn't be identified as belonging to one side or the other. William had

been too young to fight in the war.

Some other things they remember from the trip: cloud shadows on the prairie, dark and fast like enormous sea creatures; a tightness in the chest after so many days without seeing a tree; the noise of the wagon, like a ship straining its moorings; watery light seeping through canvas in the mornings; the way a horse's body will twitch, autonomous from its general motion; a different sort of tightness, the first time they saw a horizon of mountains.

The journey lasted one hundred days, during which time Charlie celebrated her fifteenth birthday. William made her a pinewood carving of a mouse, the pet name he had for her when she was a small child. Henry gave her a photograph album—celluloid cover painted like brick and ivy, a collection of cabinet cards and tintypes.

The trio arrived in August at a mining town in the foothills. The Land Office was small, poorly ventilated, run by a former prospector turned land agent. Charts and patents lay scattered across his desk. Henry paid the twelve dollars and filed for 160 acres in a section upriver, near other homesteaders and small-time ranches.

Charlie lived in town while her father and uncle cleared land. The hotel was called the Palace though the decor was austere. The Palace was run by an elderly woman from Texas who spoke with a thick German accent. Mrs. Kreische often came to Charlie's room in the evenings to talk, mostly of her husband and four sons, all dead.

Some days Charlie ran errands for the hotel. She went to the Post Office, the mercantile or the bank. The railroad depot was under construction. On the unfinished platform a salesman with a waxed mustache hawked bars of soap. The salesman called out from behind a table and a pyramid of bars, shuffling them around like a child playing with blocks. A boy carrying a roll of deerskins propped on his shoulder told Charlie that the soap racket was a flimflam for

newcomers.

The boy with the deerskins was the same age as Charlie Grudgings, and he was also called Charley, Charley Wood. When he realized they shared a first name he felt a sharp embarrassment. But she said *she* was embarrassed to have a boy's name. Then she laughed, and the boy Charley thought she ought never to be embarrassed of anything.

Charley Wood lived with his mother and father in a cabin even farther upriver than the Grudgings' homestead. Charley's father, Tom, was considered an eccentric. Tom's main income was hunting bears for the ten-dollar bounty the ranches paid. Charley's mother, Louisa, was from Mexico and had performed with a traveling circus before she married Tom Wood.

Charlie left the Palace and moved to the cabin that her father and uncle built. The boy Charley Wood began to call on her there. He felt himself in love with the girl Charlie almost immediately—with her dark, straight hair, with the freckles below her eyes and especially with her lips, which were dry and cracked and vulnerable in the mountain air.

It took Charlie a little time to reciprocate his feelings. First she allowed him to accompany her on errands to other neighbors. Then she allowed him to ride to town with her when she could convince her father they needed some fabric or baking soda or other item. Charley would show her his favorite places—a wide spot in the river where the water hissed over the riverbed like nails on a banjo skin, or a canyon that was too narrow for them to ride two abreast, the high walls leaving only a river of sky overhead. He showed her the paintings hidden on the rocks. Reds and oranges, mostly geometric shapes. One might almost mistake them for water stains or natural variations, but scattered among the cryptic signs were human figures, no mistaking them. He brought her to the hot spring above the North Fork where the water was blue-green and clear as glass. They sat on the edge and soaked their bare feet. It was here, the

second time he took her, that she leaned over and kissed him with her rough lips.

Charley told her about his dreams of travel. In his dreams he saw cityscapes, a train car ascending on a fantastic railway like a spiral staircase, and from the top he could see building after building into the distance. He dreamed about seeing the ocean, seeing a ship. He didn't tell Charlie, but since meeting her these dreams had taken on a new dimension, like the picture in a stereoscope.

Charley started to appear at the Grudgings' homestead most days. Henry liked the Wood boy. Henry paid Charley to split rails or dig postholes, and Henry admired the boy's youth and eagerness. Henry could see what was developing between the boy and his daughter, and he approved. Henry knew that his daughter would only be content living with him for so much longer. Henry knew that she would leave him eventually, perhaps soon, and he liked the thought that if his daughter left with Charley Wood she would have that much stronger a connection back to this land, where Henry meant to live out his days.

To Henry's surprise William didn't mind Charley's presence. Sometimes his brother even seemed to like the boy. The work of clearing and building, leveling and planting, which had so consumed Henry and William, began to slow as the weather began to turn cooler. Charley once took William fishing, to one of the deepest pools beneath a high rock face, and the two returned with a string of fat trout. But Henry sensed that such excursions could not satisfy his brother's restlessness.

William had thrown himself into the land with a flush-faced desperation. The brothers were finally ready to put some cattle on the property. The first time William rode to town and visited the Elkhorn he told himself it was only for a small celebration, nothing more. That night William stayed quiet, like he told himself he would, and he felt proud. He often had trouble

doing what he told himself—he recognized this. There weren't many women, and the miners all kept to themselves, but the proprietor was a good conversationalist, and the man didn't mind leaving the bottle.

Charlie would sometimes wake to an empty cabin, her uncle having stayed in town and her father having departed early. One such morning, Charlie opened her eyes, felt the chill on her nose and her cheeks, and she suspected the true cold was settling in. She thought about Charley and felt a desire to be near his body, his warmth.

Later that day she met Charley at the gristmill. They sat beside the river in a nice bit of sun and tossed smooth pebbles into water that was the color of flint while they waited for their turn of corn. They could hear the grinding of the millstones, a noise like chewing sand.

Charlie and Charley left the gristmill with Mr. Díaz, an itinerant weaver and an old friend of Charley's mother. Mr. Díaz was headed to the Woods' place and the three of them walked upriver together. Charlie had never met Mr. Díaz but she immediately liked the man. He was short and colorfully dressed, and he had a way of projecting his deep voice when he spoke. He had been part of the traveling circus with Louisa, and he told Charlie and Charley how Louisa used to win the crowd by juggling torches. The spin, the arc! Behind her back! Through her legs! She held out a torch while an assistant blew a stream of fire—*thwoosh!*—over the crowd's head.

Charley had seen his mother juggle. Stones, small squash, even eggs, once; never anything lit on fire.

The trio rode beneath bald rock ledges, and Mr. Díaz pointed out the variety of lichens. The man loved colors. He made them stop to pick a bunch of sweet four o'clock. From the center of each flower purple filaments reached up like the arms of supplicants. A true purple, Mr. Díaz declared. Mr. Díaz told Charlie and Charley how the Romans had used sea snails to make this

color.

Charley pictured the small greenish snails that lived in the river. He imagined them a perfect shade a purple and the size of his fist.

It was almost evening by the time they arrived at the Grudgings'. Mr. Díaz and Charley decided to make camp nearby and continue on to the Woods' in the morning. The Grudgings' cabin was still empty. Charlie thought her father must be out hunting. She offered the boy and the weaver a supper of leftover biscuits and venison stew. Charlie apologized for the meal not being flavorful enough, but Mr. Díaz praised the food loudly. Charley just grinned and spooned himself another bowl, helped himself to another biscuit.

•

William supped early at the Elkhorn. He sat for some time with a tall brown-glass bottle, and poured his drinks himself. He poured a last one and then one more after that. He lifted the shot glass to the mirrored scone and admired the color of the liquid, the little sap-colored jewel. He tried to sip it slowly.

William felt himself glowing the same color as the whiskey when he left town. The sun was already low over the mountains. He passed through the mining encampment—haphazard tents, trails of smoke rising up like the ghosts of all the trees recently felled. He passed the meadow where a fire had raged some years back. The grass grew thick, dotted with yellow marigolds and red-orange paintbrushes. New-growth pine had emerged, and over these towered a few black trunks left standing, whittled narrow by the fire, charcoal scales shiny and cracked like the skin on a crow's foot.

Night fell and William's eyes grew heavy but when he closed them he felt sick to his stomach. He decided to lead his horse for a stretch. He felt somewhat better with his feet on the

ground.

It seemed to William that he had been walking for hours when he noticed an unnatural green light flickering in a stand of oaks. He dropped the reins and pulled the revolver from where he kept it under his pants. He walked quietly to the edge of the trees. Sparks wheeled up and around from the green flames, making William dizzy. Two silhouetted figures sat before the fire with their backs to him. William's pulse raced and his mouth was dry and he felt himself paralyzed by the unexpected sight. He didn't know for how long he stared into the fire, but the flames, which had been as green as absinthe, began to fade. William thought for a moment the whole vision might simply dissolve.

With a blast the flames rose again into the trees, whooshing up in a bright green column. William fired a shot into one of the seated figures. As the second figure stood, William pulled back the hammer and fired again.

He dragged the two bodies into the pale green firelight.

•

Charlie found herself in the Woods' home. Evening was coming on and the space was warmly lit by the fireplace and kerosene lamps—glass chimneys filmed in soot. The room felt filled without feeling cluttered. A sewing machine at one end, across from two bentwood rockers covered in deerskin throws. The farmhouse table was cleared, nicked wood revealing its age.

Charlie extended a small bunch of flowers she'd collected. Louisa found a ceramic jar, emptied it, ladled in some water and put the arrangement in the middle of the big table. Then she dragged a chair closer to where Charlie sat. The woman held one of the girl's hands between her soft palms. I am sorry, Charlotte, said Louisa. The girl looked down, embarrassed.

Louisa explained that Mr. Díaz was a good man, but a poor man and a debtor. Louisa said



she could only assume that someone collecting on a debt had tracked him down. She said, It is all I can do not to blame myself, and my only gladness is that you are safe.

The wood floor was burnished with age and in the center was a beautiful wool rug, concentric shapes of red and brown. Charlie looked up. That's not right, Mrs. Wood, she said.

The words rushed out. It was William. It was my uncle. I saw him that same night. There's no doubt in my mind.

A darkness overcame Louisa's expression. Charlie had to look away. Fine antlers, artfully mounted on the wall, threw strange shadows. Louisa sat quietly for a long time. She let go of Charlie's hand and took one of the daisies from the jar. She felt each petal one by one between her index finger and her thumb.

Finally, as if it pained her, Louisa said, I know this, dear. But it has taken much effort, on my part, and on your father's part as well, to convince my husband that it could be otherwise.

Louisa went on: Charlotte, if my husband Tom knew, as I know, then Tom would kill your uncle, surely, and Tom would go to jail and he would be hanged. There is no doubt in *my* mind. It will be hard. Trust me, I know. But you must not speak of this.

Charlie was crying. Louisa stood up and held the girl's face in her hands and kissed the top of her head. I will make tea, Louisa said, and you will sleep here tonight.

•

Charlie heard different versions of the story Louisa had tried to tell her. Sometimes Díaz was a debtor, sometimes a gambler, sometimes a thief. Louisa had been convincing. People accepted that Mr. Díaz had gotten what was coming to him. And, Oh poor Charley Wood, they said, as if he had been the victim of some accident.

Charlie never spoke to Tom Wood. She was careful what she said and to whom she said

it. Now she wonders how careful she was, what did she say and to whom. Did she scribble notes on the backs of leaves and scatter them in the river, where they made their way, quiet and persistent. Maybe. She waited. A sense of weightlessness came over her.

Through the spring and summer Tom Wood never spoke of his son's death, or of any ill will toward the Grudgings.

In June, Charlie had her sixteenth birthday. She received nothing from William. Her father ordered for her an extravagance of dresses and promised to investigate finishing schools on the East Coast, or maybe somewhere closer like California or New Orleans.

Almost one year after Charley's death, Tom Wood found himself at the Grudgings' place on a day when William was by himself. As he would later describe it, Tom felt himself in a sort of stupor, sick with grief and darker thoughts. For reasons unknown even to himself, he scooped thick handfuls of mud from a turned-up pasture and plastered them over his face, leaving just his eyes clear. He applied a heavy cake over his hair and into this he stuck pine needles, slender branches, stalks of long grass.

His mask completed, Tom called out to William from the snake-rail fence, and then he shot him down with a rifle as William looked out the barn door. The same day, Tom turned himself in to the sheriff.

Henry buried his brother with his boots on, outside the barn, not far from where he had fallen. Although he hadn't proved up on the land, Henry managed to arrange a sale. Tom was still awaiting news of his fate when Henry and Charlie boarded a train bound East.

Some of what she remembers from that trip: the opulence of the dining car—mahogany tables and crystal decanters; a mackerel sky at sunset, clouds as red as warpaint; the observation car, with all its glass, where she watched the mountains recede, diminish and become lost;

walking the narrow hall outside their coach, gripping the Persian runner with her toes; the unshakeable sense that the train was alive beneath her feet as it strained up hills and down hills and finally onto the open plains.

## Counterclaims

In the early, still-dark hours of a cold January morning in the year 1893, Anna Seward sat up in bed. A draft of air rushed under the heavy wool blanket she shared with her husband, Tom. He muttered a low curse as he felt her crawl out. When the door to their bedroom opened, Tom called Anna's name. She didn't answer. Tom muttered another curse and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. This wasn't the first time his young wife had gone sleepwalking.

Tom slipped his feet into moccasins and pulled his overcoat from the wardrobe. In the window he could see spiderwebs of frost across the panes. He would have to rebuild the fire in the stove, after he had Anna back in bed, he thought. In the hallway Tom could hear Anna's footsteps strain the floorboards.

The last time she woke him like this, about a month ago, she made it halfway down the stairs before he caught her. He'd said her name several times, but she hadn't responded. When he reached her on the stairs, he put his hand on her shoulder. He could feel her skin's heat under her flannel nightgown. She turned, and even in the dark he could see the whites of her eyes flash like polished silver before she focused on him and said, "Oh, Tom, thank God it's *you*."

He hadn't asked her who else it might've been. That night he simply guided her back to bed and they resumed sleeping without another word. In the morning he'd asked her what she'd been dreaming of, but she said she didn't remember. She said she couldn't even remember him finding her on the stairs.

Not so, tonight, Tom thought. He would question Anna before they went back to sleep; if need be, they would stay up till dawn to get to the root of what was troubling her dreams. Tom prided himself on being a man who faced trouble head-on. He liked, whenever possible, to confront his problems and cross them off, the way he meticulously took inventory at his store. It wasn't enough to check the total number of boxes against the bill of order; for every shipment from back East, Tom would open one, sometimes two of the boxes and count each item—each lucifer match, clothespin, or nail.

Tom was approaching a half century of life, though his hair was still dark, nearly black, and he wore it long, almost to his shoulders. His nightclothes and overcoat were dark as well, and in all that darkness the pale oblong of his face floated in the dresser mirror like a chunk of river ice. He prided himself on his appearance—a pride he recognized as sinful. He had seen, over the last several months, the angles of his face grow more numerous, his eyes grow narrower. But in the dim reflection he could still picture himself a young man, with a gentler face, an easier laugh—a boy's laugh, even.

His parents had brought him West when he was a child, but the family never made it across the Divide. Tom grew to love the mountains; he had been known to say that the mountain air kept him young. He had lived in one part of the Colorado Territory, then another, and here in Creede he'd found good fortune—opening his store just before the silver boom. It was here, also, that he had found his second wife, Anna.

Tom listened to her slow, creaking steps in the hall. He took the brass candleholder from the nightstand. But before he could open the stove and dig up an ember, he heard the whine of the hinges on the front door. He set the candleholder down and hurried after her.

Outside he could see her kneeling in the flowerbed along the front of the house. He stopped on the porch and called down to her, “Anna!” a little louder than he meant to. Her face was lowered and her back slightly arched, and in the clear moonlight the rounded curve of her back, covered in smooth grey flannel, glimmered, pearlescent. The sound of her name seemed to hang in the still air. She didn’t turn, or say anything in response, but her head began to shake back and forth, and as Tom walked down the steps she began to scrape gently at the hard ground of the flowerbed, as if she were searching for eggs in a downy coop. Before he reached her, she stood up and screamed a long, grating scream. The houses along the lane, the frozen earth, the dark shapes of the evergreens—reverberated with the sound.

“Anna!” he called again. He ran to her and gripped her arms, just below her shoulders, felt her unnatural heat, and saw her eyes blink open. Looking directly at him she released another scream. Her hair, so dark as to shimmer in the sun, an attribute she claimed as Mediterranean heritage, was now disheveled from sleep, and long skeins reached out in all directions, as if buoyed by her screams.

He couldn’t help but step back; all he could think was how cold she must be. Her feet looked blue, flecked with mulch. Her nightgown hung straight and flat, two dark spots where her knees had pressed into the ground. Her hands and her face looked red—flushed or fever-burnt or both possibly. Her breath rose up like smoke.

Anna was nearly two decades younger than Tom, and even when she was not so distressed she had an inner fire that burned brighter than his own. Theirs was, for Anna too, a

second marriage. Her first husband, also much older, had survived Antietam and the war only to be sent to fight the Cheyenne and Arapaho in Colorado, where he died after being thrown from his horse.

Tom looked in Anna's eyes, and he saw that she was awake, and he saw furthermore some glint of recognition. He reached out to her and she fell against his chest, crying, "I saw her, I saw her." He thought to ask who she had seen, but he already knew; he had known all along, as if she had somehow shared the knowledge tacitly while they slept.

"Marie?" Tom felt Anna's nod, her forehead pressed against his sternum.

"She came to me," said Anna, into the buttons of his overcoat.

He turned to lead her inside and gave a start at the sight of their neighbor, Henry Hale, standing beside the low fir that grew between their lawns. Tom made eye contact and Hale looked down, embarrassed for not having announced himself sooner.

"Good night, Thomas. Mrs. Seward." Hale's tone put the words somewhere between a greeting and a leave-taking, but he didn't move.

"Thank you, Henry, and a good night to you as well. Seems Anna's had a night terror. She's been asleep, if you can believe it. Walking around, digging in the garden, yelling like a painter, I'm afraid. All the while—asleep! Until just now."

"Well then," said Hale, "I suppose there's nothing—"

"We'll need someone to accompany as witness," said Anna.

She turned away from Tom and said, "Henry, gather your boots, please, and meet us back here directly."

Hale looked at Tom, who was stricken with confusion. Anna kept her eyes on Hale until he turned and walked through the shadows to his door.

“Anna, what is this?” asked Tom.

She looked at him with something like pity.

“Marie’s in Denver,” he said.

Marie was Tom’s daughter from his first marriage. She had lived in her father’s house as recently as the past fall. It was several months since Tom had seen or heard from her. The man she’d left with had sent one letter, only a note, really: “Dear Mr. Seward, I am sorry for what happened with me and Marie. All’s well in Denver. —Wm. Giles”

Back in their bedroom, Anna and Tom found a cluster of white waxen discs surrounding the stove like a fairy ring; the candle had slumped over, melted on the cast iron and dripped down only to solidify once more against the cold floorboards.

“Never mind that now,” said Anna.

•

Edith Hale awoke, frightened, from a dream in which she’d been playing ducks and drakes with her brother. It was something they had done often on a hot day, their feet sunk into cool mud. It was their grandfather who taught them, she believed, though she didn’t remember learning, just the hours spent with her brother, the soft *pat-pat-pat* of the stones hitting the water, the competition to see whose would go the farthest.

In the dream her brother had been a child, his hair long, freckles across his nose, underneath his eyes. She had been the age she was now—past childbearing though no children. Calm, black water stretched before them, and her brother’s stones leapt across the surface, leaving no ripple, no impression, simply leapt into the distance, over the horizon of the dream.

Edith sat up to find her husband, Henry, pulling his boots on. She supposed she might as well see what the matter was.



A gibbous moon in a clear sky lit up the lawn. Edith followed Henry outside to find the Swards and the Wards from across the lane. Anna Seward was speaking in low tones. Edith could pick out the words, *trust*, and *never*, and *reason*. Tom Seward kept his eyes on the ground, as if he had dropped something.

Then old Mrs. Ward took Tom by the elbow and led him toward his home. “There’s tea in the cupboard,” Anna called after Mrs. Ward and Tom.

Anna lifted the lantern she was holding and turned to face Edith, Henry and Mr. Ward. “I’m afraid this cannot wait till morning,” she said.

They walked east down the lane. The hard-packed earth might have been solid rock underfoot. They passed houses like their own—clapboard siding, wooden shingles, some with whitewashed fences, others with slate paths leading to the doorstep. Edith knew who slept behind each door. Behind that one Dr. Ross, that one the young Methodist preacher and his wife, and that one a Scotsman, an investor, she thought, arrived after the mines opened. At the end of the row they came upon a couple acres of cleared field, where, the summer past, a traveling theater company had built a stage under a tent, surrounded by wild primrose and Indian blanket. All that remained of the stage was the framework.

Edith recognized in Anna’s bearing a determination of the sort belonging to someone who has a difficult task ahead but is nonetheless pleased at having a purpose. Anna walked ahead, holding the lantern out before her, her step with a lightness to it that made Edith think of both fear and elation.

The four turned to cross the field. Frozen grass crackled. Washed-out wheel ruts led to the abandoned stage, and in those depressions long patches of thin ice had formed like veins of silver. They continued past the stage, to the edge of the field, and into a copse of aspens. Anna

paused within the trees, where the lantern was finally necessary to pick their way over the ground. She looked about her, started one way, then turned in the opposite direction. As she turned, she gripped the white bark of a slender trunk and wheeled around it, her outstretched arm the radius of her circular path.

Henry asked, "Will you tell us where we're going, Mrs. Seward?"

"Just a little ways further. I can see where we are now."

Indeed she took them directly to a faint trail, a switchback that led out of the trees and up to a field of scree. The path appeared to be no longer in use, or perhaps only by deer. Henry looked at Edith, but she motioned him forward with her hands. She pulled her woolen scarf up over her nose. Mr. Ward was similarly bundled, and the heavysset old man looked to be only partially awake.

Soon they came to the base of a sheer cliff. The moon was low in the west, behind them, and it threw their shadows ahead. Edith couldn't see how high the cliff reached, but she could make out the shape of Campbell Peak in the distance, a dark mass over an aubergine backdrop that wouldn't begin to lighten yet for some hours.

The trail ended at a small shack abutting the cliff. The shack was similar to those that marked mines throughout the region. Even in the dark Edith could tell it was old timber, roofed with moldering planks.

"This would have been connected to the Commodore claim," said Mr. Ward. "No silver up here, and not for a lack of looking." His voice was almost cheery—a man glad to show his use. Mr. Ward knew the mines well, though all his interests were in the newer, lucrative claims over on Bachelor Mountain.

Anna pushed at the door and the bottom edge scraped loudly against the ground as it

opened. She looked back at Edith and said, “You may want to wait here, Mrs. Hale.”

Edith didn’t know with certainty why they were there. Now the suspicions she harbored grew stronger. “She keeps saying she has to take us to her,” Henry had said. “She won’t say anymore,” and he’d grown quiet, for they both had some idea this was about Marie, but they wouldn’t speak it. Edith had thought that perhaps a woman’s presence would ease Anna’s mind, give her some comfort. When she had seen Anna standing in her thin coat, seemingly untouched by the cold, Edith had felt a pang of maternal protectiveness. Now she could see that Anna had no need of protection.

Edith walked through the door, saying to Anna, “Thank you, dear, but I’ll be fine.”

The room inside was about the size of Edith’s kitchen. It was empty except for two rotting benches and a second door, opposite the first, that led straight into the cliff wall. A pile of rocks held the door.

Anna placed her lantern on one of the benches. The lantern now seemed extraordinarily bright in the confined space. The flickering oilflames cast shadows that darted back and forth like crayfish.

Anna addressed the group: “I pray that my dream tonight was nothing more than the product of my overwhelming worry I have felt these past months.” Anna’s gaze traveled over the faces of the other three. “But I have a sickening faith,” she continued, “that what I saw in my dream was true, that Marie led me to this place for a reason, that her spirit, if it is already freed from her body, is seeking rest which it has not found.”

Anna turned and lifted one of the rocks that sat before the door and handed it to Mr. Ward, who looked for a moment like he wasn’t sure what to do with it. He looked at Anna and then pitched the rock out into the moonlight.

A few minutes later the pile of rocks was dispatched. Anna used the rusty latch as a handle to pull the door open. The space had been warmed by their bodies and their labor, but now a draft of cool dry air rushed in from the mine shaft.

Anna lifted the lantern. There, in a shallow alcove, lay the body, curled up as if it were asleep. It was both more and less than what Edith might have expected, had she truly expected them to find anything. It was more than a skeleton; tatters of cloth clung to desiccated flesh. In the warm light from the lantern it looked a grey-brown color, the color of a cypress tree. She never could have recognized it as a particular person, if not for the towy blonde hair in a thick plait, still intact, wrapped below the jawbone like a scarf.

•

This is what we knew about Billy Giles: he appeared in Creede in 1892 as a member of the Soap Gang, and he claimed the age of twenty, though who knows, considering the Soap Gang, and the sorts of riff-raff what occupied it; he probably didn't know his own self. Billy had a certain largeness to him—tall, wide shoulders, neck thick as an oak—and yet also, at the same time, a particular compactness to his person, an attribute you wouldn't be able discern in pictures of him, but, if you met him, you knew it at once. Maybe it was economy of movement, or a stillness of the face, or the slenderness of his extremities, delicate wrists like a girl's, but whatever it was, we got the sense there might be more than what we could see.

We did talk about him quite a good bit, after everything that occurred, but when he first appeared, he didn't make much of an impression on any of us, except for maybe Marie. So many people flooded into the town around that time. Some can remember the quiet before, nights with an almost religious quietness to them. Then, Holy Moses, and that was it for us. All the prospectors, sure, and if it had only been them, that would have been one thing, but it was the

secondary rush, the prospectors of the prospectors—bunco men, snake oil doctors, whores and charlatans, following silver as sure as iron follows a lodestone.

Billy was one of these sorts, as was the whole of the Soap Gang, though Billy was far from the most colorful. That claim probably belonged to the gang's boss, a man named Soapy, who had made his money in Denver running the soap racket he is said to have invented. What he used to do was sell bars of soap, one by one, and he would individually wrap each bar up in butcher paper and twine, easy as if he were rolling a cigarette, and then he would make a show of wrapping a big banknote or silver certificate around certain bars, to gin up the crowd. Nothing but a rigged lottery, but apparently plenty fell for it, fell for some cheeky line about cleanliness being next to wealthiness. When he showed up in Creede, he was past running these sorts of schemes himself and instead took over a three-story building on Main and opened "a fair and honest saloon" called the Orleans Club. They had your standards, like faro and three-card monte, but then they also had a certified expert in precious metals, an ordained priest who'd bless the deed to your claim, and a petrified man named McGinty unearthed from Willow Creek on display. Cost ten cents to see him, and another ten to touch his one intact toe, assured to be the most potent and proven source of good fortune.

Billy Giles operated a shell game out of the Orleans. He stood behind a red felt tabletop and shuffled an ivory marble between three oversized silver thimbles. He probably ran other games too, but that was what people mentioned—after—him moving those thimbles around on the red felt, fast as a gunslinger or a concert pianist. Nobody knows how it was Billy became involved with Marie Seward. So many things happened in ninety-two: Robert Ford got himself shot and killed right here, bringing yet more notoriety; a fire burned down half of Main Street, including the Orleans, and Soapy disappeared less than a year after he'd arrived; and during all

this the price of silver was falling, till by ninety-three it was a bona fide panic, and the miners, and the investors, and the prostitutes and the saloon proprietors started to clear out as quick as they'd come in. During all this, Billy Giles's courting of Marie Seward went mostly unremarked upon, and even after they both disappeared, sometime that fall, it didn't attract much notice, though of course we all felt bad for Tom, and happy that Anna was there to look after him.

•

Billy Giles woke with the word "lies" on his tongue, speaking it aloud: "Lies, Billy lies, Billy lies awake, lies in wait, lies out his fate, lice on his pate..."

He'd ridden back into Creede with his hands tied to his pommel. Cap Light, a deputy sheriff, had tracked him down in Durango after the discovery of Marie's body. Light had locked up Billy in Creede's one jail cell, where Billy had slept fitfully for the past three nights. Sometimes he woke himself with his own gibberish. On the first morning he'd woken when she came. Two days later he couldn't be sure if that had been a dream or not.

On the third morning Light walked into the cell saying, "Time to say your piece, Billy."

"Send me to Denver for a trial."

"Appreciate the chance I'm givin you. Don't act simple."

Because the courthouse and the assembly hall both had burned down, Light decided to hold the trial outside, under a tent, due to the crowd it'd draw. Light would conduct the proceedings himself, along with a jury, of sorts, a handful of trusted men.

The morning was cold. A sheet of low clouds hung over Campbell Peak. Wind snapped the canvas tent, making a sound like a child's rattle. The tent had been set up in the field below where Marie's body had been found. Spectators sat on long wooden benches, wrapped in heavy coats, and watched as Billy was led to a chair in the front, hands shackled. Tom and Anna

Seward, both wearing black wool coats, sat on the foremost bench, only a few yards from Billy.

Light began: “Billy Giles, what do you say to the charges that you murdered Marie Seward?”

“I admit that I was wrong to run away how I did, but I don’t know nothing about, nor had nothing, I mean anything to do with what happened to Marie.” Billy’s voice shook, but his expression, to those who could see it, looked unafraid.

“Why did you run?” asked Light.

“We made plans to go to Chicago, Marie and me, to see the Exposition. I saved enough for train fare, and we were going to find work and settle there, at least for a time. Marie figured her father, Mr. Seward,” his eyes flicked to Tom for an instant, “wouldn’t allow her to leave, so we decided to go at night. We had it planned to meet, but Marie never came.”

“So you just left, by yourself?”

“I went to the Seward’s home, to see if Marie perhaps had been waylaid, but the windows were all dark, and I became frightened, thinking maybe she’d changed her mind. I knew if she’d told anyone, I might be in some trouble.”

“Where did you go?”

“I went to Denver, where I had a brother. But he was gone.”

“And you wrote a letter to Mr. Seward from Denver?”

Billy nodded his head.

“Speak up,” said Light.

“Yes I did. I worried he might have thought I’d tried to steal his daughter. And I wanted Marie to know I was well and not too far away. I was going to wait for a reply, but I ran into some trouble and had to move down to Durango. I wrote a letter to Anna, Mrs. Seward that is,

from Durango, thinking she might be a trustworthy advocate.”

Billy looked at Anna now, his eyes wide. His voice had evened out as he spoke, and his expression had gone from composed to hopeful. His cheeks had flushed with color.

Anna stared at him, her mouth set and her face drawn. As he spoke her name, he could see tears begin to well in her eyes, and then she lowered her face until it was almost to her knees, till she was almost doubled over. Billy could see the ridge of her spine even through her coat. He continued to look at her, while Tom’s gaze was fixed on him. Anna shuddered, without making a sound.

Light seemed to be at a loss for what to say. After a long moment of quiet, other than the rustling tent, someone in the crowd said, “Confess what you done, coward.” The voice seemed to be no one and everyone.

Sheriff Light raised a hand to the assembly. “Enough of that,” he said.

Tom walked over to Light and the two conversed in whispers. After a few moments he went back to his seat and spoke something in Anna’s ear. Another long stretch of quiet. No one knew quite what to do, as though everyone might just sit there for hours, until the cold became unbearable and the crowd slowly, silently dispersed. They’d all just leave Billy shackled there in the field, until he was the same as a tree, or a boulder, or any other feature of the place, something that people saw but didn’t really notice.

Anna sat up on the bench, looking straight ahead, avoiding Billy’s eyes. She stood and walked toward Light, now in closer proximity to Billy, but facing the sheriff. She addressed Light in a voice just loud enough for the crowd to hear.

“In the dream I wake in my bed. The air is very cold. My husband is next to me but he does not stir. He lies with his back turned. I hear a sound from downstairs. I can see the bedroom



perfectly in the moonlight. Everything is so real. I walk down and the sound is coming from outside, so I open the door. There on the porch is Marie. Her back is to me and I cannot see her face but I know it's her, and on her shoulder rests a child's head, an infant with the same bright, golden hair as Marie's. Marie wears a long gown, so white it is luminous, and I am drawn behind it like a moth. She leads me through the fields and into the aspen grove. Among the white trees she is one more white shape. And then I see him, Billy, dark and crouched, dragging something across the ground. I cannot see what it is. Ahead of me I see Marie, and the child's eyes are closed now, and across her back a red stain is growing, though I can see no wound.

"We follow Billy to the old mine, and he is gone, disappeared among the shadows. Marie is gone as well, but I hear a sound from the mine, a child crying, but there are so many stones before the door. I start to move them away, pulling at them, cutting my hands, but there are always more stones blocking the door. The sound of the child grows louder, insistent, and at this point, always, I am awakened.

"You must believe me," Anna finished, "that my husband's daughter *did* visit me. So that we could give her a proper burial. So that he," she pointed to Billy, "could face his reckoning, and so that all would know the truth about what happened, and not be left forever to wonder."

She resumed her place next to Tom and sat without expression, her eyes on the ground, her back upright.

"Billy Giles, what do you say?" Light asked.

Billy's eyes closed and his teeth began to chatter violently.

"Billy," Light said, but elicited no response. Light turned to the crowd and asked if any other person had testimony for or against the accused. Again, no response. Only the wind, and now a pair of crows, arguing as they circled above. The sheriff announced they would reconvene

the following day at noon.

•

It came to none of us as a surprise. Light announced that they could reach no conclusion other than that Billy Giles was guilty of the murder of Marie Seward. We were gathered again under the tent. Friends and neighbors of the Swards, women and men who had known Marie since she was a girl.

After announcing the verdict, almost as an afterthought, Light added, “Do you wish to confess and ask forgiveness?”

Billy said, “It won’t do me any good now, but I confess that I lied.”

He paused, as if he might be finished, but then continued, in a very quiet voice. Some thought they heard him say, “I might tell you it was her hand that swung the stone. I might say, even, that it was an accident. But what good would it do me?”

Tom Seward stood and walked away, across the windswept field. Before anyone else could speak, Anna cried out, “He always was a slanderous liar.” Her words seemed to echo under the tent. Then she followed her husband.

This is what we remembered about Billy Giles: he was hanged by the neck in the year 1893. He never confessed, exactly, to the murder for which he was hanged. He was not buried in a graveyard, but, as was deemed appropriate to his crime, in an unmarked grave, the location of which has been lost, forgotten, hardly ever known in the first place—somewhere remote, somewhere no one could desecrate it, or even disturb it unwittingly. It’s said that Anna was present at the hanging, though Tom did not accompany her. It’s also said that she was the only person, other than Light and the gravediggers, to witness the interment.



## James A. Garfield

When James A. Garfield was seven years old a raven told him he would die on September 19, 1881. The raven didn't speak to him aloud, it simply flew down from the branch of an evergreen, took three hops through the snow to stand beneath his feet, looked up at him, and he knew. He looked back at the bird, examined its heavy, curved beak and its messy collar of neck feathers. It looked a little hunchbacked, very old. They faced each other, breath visible in the cold sunlight, until the wind picked up off Lake Erie and the bird flew back into the forest without a sound.

In 1862, when he was thirty years old, Garfield commanded the Forty-Second Brigade of Ohio. Every evening, after they set up camp along the road, troops near his tent would hear the *clank-clank-clank* as he hammered an iron stake past the loam to the bedrock. Later, the softer, more sporadic *clink* of iron on iron, when the mule shoe caught the stake. He took mules' shoes from the hostler, as they were more abundant and expendable than the horses'.

"Horseshoes is a game of consistency and persistence," he told the infantry. "As is marching. Focus on what's in front of you."

He played horseshoes nearly every day for the remainder of his life. After he became President, he had clay from the shores of Lake Erie delivered to the White House and installed in the lawn to more properly secure the stakes.

They marched into Tennessee, to a small shack of a church called Shiloh, and bivouacked there for three days before the Confederates finally attacked. Fog had rolled off the Tennessee River over the encampment. The percussive clap of gunfire reached them before the enemy could be seen. Soldiers more seasoned than he could barely clasp the buttons of their coats for their shaking hands. But Garfield, riding at the fore, led his brigade into battle with what his troops, those who survived the day, would later recall as “maniacal assuredness.”

He was elected president in 1880, by which time Garfield had decided that the prophesied date, just less than a year hence, was no more than a detail from a childhood dream. Nevertheless, he befriended one of the most renowned doctors in Washington, one Dr. Doctor Bliss, who had both the title and Christian name of Doctor.

On July 2, 1881, Garfield stood on a railway platform, listening to the blast of exhaust steam and the howl of the whistle. The cacophony reminded him of distant battles. The wooden slats beneath his feet began to shake. He stared ahead, toward the light of the approaching train.

He never saw his assassin’s face. Without warning, two short cracks behind him, almost drowned in the din. The pain bloomed in his abdomen.

Garfield stumbled forward. His gaze dropped and he gripped the front of his shirt. There was no exit wound.

“My God. What is this?”

The train pulled into the station as he fell facedown. Brake levers clanged, the sound of iron on iron, and his last lucid thought was of pitching mule shoes, on the banks of the

Tennessee, as the setting sun bled across the river and swallows skimmed over the surface, like shadows of their own reflections.

He would spend the following weeks in and out of consciousness, the bullet tucked behind his ruined pancreas, before he finally died on September 19, 1881.



## The Butcher

The meat locker was small, about the size of an elevator car. I was on my hands and knees, peeling congealed blood from the floor when the butcher hollered my name from the front of the shop. I had to push past plucked chickens and a pork leg to make my way out of the confined space. The backroom was all metal—the meat locker, the lipped table with the drain in its center, the deep basin, the shelving. His voice boomed as it came through the door.

The butcher, a huge man, stood at the counter still wearing his bloody apron even though we had closed. In front of him was his biggest cleaver, standing on its edge, the blade sunk into the wood. I had cleaned the countertop myself, but now there was purple-red blood around the cleaver. A black tail, the length of my hand, snaked from underneath the blade. The tail was shiny with blood and fine little hairs stuck out at intervals.

“A rat!” the butcher cried, staring at me with bulging eyes. “A rat in my shop!” I was stunned, as much by the fact that he was yelling at me as by what he was saying. My feet were stuck to the tiled floor.

“It escaped!” the butcher lamented. “But—I got the tail.” He pinched it between two meaty fingers and lifted it to his mouth. “In some places, this is a delicacy, you know?” He bit



into the thick end as if it were a carrot. He stared at me while he chewed, and then slapped his hand on the countertop.

“It’s a beet! Only a beet, Jack!” he said, laughing. He pulled a dark purple bulb from a pocket of his apron. “I’m making borscht.”

“Oh,” I said. I exhaled and managed a smile. “You got me, Mr. W.”

“I will bring you borscht when it’s ready,” he said.

“Sounds good,” I said, although it didn’t.

•

This was October, just before Halloween. I only worked there a few months, and the butcher was mostly a quiet man during the time I knew him, the other exception being the occasional phone call, after we closed, when he carried on loud, angry-sounding conversations in Polish.

Up till then the butcher and I talked almost exclusively about what I was to do at the shop. I was his sole employee. There was no shortage of tasks: clean the windows, calibrate the scales, spread the sawdust on the floor each morning. Clean the backroom and the meat locker, sweep up the sawdust each evening. During the day it was my job to keep the coolers stocked, pull this cut or that cut and bring it to the butcher, replace the roll of brown butcher paper when it ran low with one of the fresh, heavy cylinders from the back. I never used the cash register or prepared the meat, unless it was something as simple as weighing ground beef. The butcher said soon he would teach me how to break down a side of pig into the primals.

•

The butcher shop was an unassuming brick building; not like the big, chaotic places on Division—storefronts that occupy half a block, window after window of feet pickling in jars,

kielbasa strung up like tinsel. Mr. Wojciechowski's place had two windows. The left one said, "Butcher Shop." The right one, in an arc, *Rzeznictwo*, and under the arc, *Miesa, Drobiu, Zwierzyny*.

He lived above the shop, in an apartment I hadn't seen. His wife had died—quite a while ago, I think. Behind the cash register he had a framed picture of her. She hardly looked older than me, and I don't know if I felt more astonished or envious that *she* had been the butcher's wife. She'd died of influenza. They hadn't had any children, at least that I knew of.

•

After he rinsed the beet juice off his hands, the butcher opened the register and, as it was Friday, took out a ten-dollar bill. I thanked him and plucked the bill gingerly by the corner. I still had cold flecks of cow on my hands. I laid my money on the counter where it was clean, washed up, and then rolled the bill in a tight cylinder and stuck it behind my ear, where I'd kept my pencil when I was in school.

I finished tenth grade back in Indiana. My older brother had already fought in Europe and come back. He said I was lucky I hadn't been born a few years earlier and that made me want to enlist all the more. I had just reached 130 pounds, so I took a train to Chicago, but at the Merchant Marine's office they told me my birth certificate had been doctored. I thought I'd done a decent job of it. Then—just as I was ready to try my luck with some better-forged documentation—we dropped the bomb and before I knew it the war was over.

•

I left the side streets and turned on Armitage. At this time of day there were always cars lined up, rolling slowly past like cattle down a chute. I stopped for a moment to look into a dry cleaners. Clothes on a conveyor belt. My mother had made her own clothespins with two tongues

of wood and some twine. My roommate Teddy and I took our clothes to a Chinese laundry; we didn't get them back on hangers, but it was very economical.

Something hit me on the side of the face. My first thought, just for a moment, was that someone had hit me with a snowball. It was the same feeling—a soft, stinging scrape on my cheek. But this was October and there was no snow. A figure raced away from me down the sidewalk. I raised my hand to feel behind my ear.

I started running before I had time to think. It didn't occur to me to yell or solicit help. At the end of the block, the boy turned. We were running past houses now, and I thought maybe I could tackle him into a hedgerow.

My older brother used to put me in an arm lock, or sometimes just give me a bear hug, and he'd say, I'm going to count to ten and if you can get out before I get to ten, I'll give you a silver dollar. I never did. And then of course I did the same thing to my younger brother.

Once I caught the boy it wouldn't be too hard to get my money back. He was small. He looked like he was eighty pounds with his shoes on.

He was close enough that I could hear his breath—he was panting like a dog—but each time I stretched to grab his arm it felt like he sped up just enough to put himself out of reach, as if he were a toy at the end of a string. I found a reserve and accelerated alongside his churning body. Not trusting myself to grab hold, I simply shoved him with both hands.

My momentum took me past him. I walked back, tense in case he tried to take off again. He had hit some steps and lay with his arms outstretched. His eyes were closed and I could tell he was in pain. People walked past on the sidewalk and I heard some gasps but no one stopped or said anything.

Both his lips were split and bloody, and one cheekbone below his eye was already

swollen. A gash on his forehead bled into his hair. Red beads were scattered like chicken scratch on his left palm. His right hand remained clenched around my ten dollars.

I thought maybe he'd passed out, but as I considered what to say, he groaned and sat on the steps. We looked at each other.

"Don't run," I said. I leaned down and put my hand out. "Let's go with the money."

He snarled and sprayed some spittle at me.

Worried he would bolt I reached down and grabbed his right wrist. He stayed seated but tried to twist his arm away and spat curses. I couldn't understand him.

I held onto his arm and started to pry his fingers open. I could see the bill there, dark with sweat.

An arm looped under mine, then another. I felt myself being lifted up before I was slammed onto the sidewalk, facedown.

My eyes were inches from the kid's shoes. Someone took my arms and folded them behind me. I heard the kid chattering in whatever language he spoke. A flurry, and the shoes were gone.

I rolled over and saw the cop shuffle in the kid's direction but the kid hit the corner and disappeared. The cop turned back. The streetlights switched on. I lifted myself up and sat on the steps.

"What did you do to that boy, boy?" the cop asked. He was probably about the butcher's age, with cobweb veins on his cheeks.

"He stole ten dollars from me! I was trying to get my money back."

"Do you know him?"

"He's a thief!"

“Well, if you don’t know him, there’s not much I can do. Count yourself lucky I don’t take you in for disturbing the peace.”

He started to walk away and said absentmindedly over his shoulder, “Take better care of your money, kid.”

•

The butcher had been born in New Jersey. His father had worked as a fishmonger there, switching to butchery when the family moved to Chicago. The butcher told me about the tiny room where the family lived when he was a child. He could only remember small things. On the back of the door a web of ribbons his father had nailed there to serve as a letter rack. The noisy door on the cast iron stove. The smell of fish.

There had been a pond nearby, where he and his younger brother would catch frogs and leave them in the mailboxes of neighbors they didn’t like. Both the butcher and his brother had jobs selling newspapers before they could read. The butcher used to sell the clothes he had outgrown to his younger brother, pants and shirts for a penny-a-piece.

Later, his younger brother had been arrested. He had taken one of their father’s old fishhooks and was using it in restrooms to pull coats from the backs of the stall doors, selling the coats to a pawnbroker. This was all before the family moved. Later still, his brother died in the first war, while he, the butcher, stayed to care for their dying parents. They both passed in the apartment above the butcher shop.

•

I never told the butcher about losing that week’s pay. I worried he would try to replace the money, and I didn’t want that. Maybe he could sense something had changed, though, because he started talking to me more. He would tell me things about his past, mostly

unprompted. I could feel him searching for something when he spoke, reaching for a tendon that might connect us.

Something had changed. I was letting myself wonder, more seriously, if I ought to go home, back to my family. It wasn't just the money, although that was a serious matter, considering my finances. But it was more than that, too.

•

Teddy and I lived at the Lawson YMCA, where we paid eighteen dollars a month to share a room. We each had a dresser, and the closet was large enough for the both of us. There was one chair and one reading lamp, one washbasin. We had our beds made, and fresh towels delivered each day by maids, young black women in starched, white uniforms. When I wrote to my family I didn't bother mentioning this; they'd never have believed me.

We shared a shower and toilet with the hall's other occupants—veterans, runaways and other recent arrivals to the city. I didn't think of myself as a runaway. I started writing my family letters as soon as I could. My father had written back, saying he forgave me for leaving. He quoted scripture: "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace."

•

Before I left, the butcher told me how his parents, in their old age, blamed the Czarists for everything. His mother told him how, before they left their country, the Czarists had hanged his father by his thumbs as punishment for protesting the Imperial Army. She told him this was why his father's arthritis was so severe.

The butcher told me how, at the pond in New Jersey where he and his brother would catch frogs, there were two older boys who would bring a length of metal pipe with a looped rope through it. These boys would use the device to catch snakes. They would drop the loop

around the snakes and pull the rope, trapping them in the noose. Once, they caught a particularly large snake, the length of a child's arm. To kill it, the boy holding the pipe swung the snake like a whip against the bole of a tree. As he struck the snake, it opened its mouth in death and milky white unborn snakes emerged, maybe not even dead themselves, but not long for the world.

"And these were a sign, my mother would have said, a curse on those boys. She used to say, there are curses everywhere in the world," the butcher opened one hand, and then the other. "Curses and blessings, if we can see them."

•

I stood behind the counter, sprinkling sawdust on the floor by the handful. The butcher was across the counter, writing down prices on a slate board.

"Come to the back with me," the butcher said, "I want to show you something."

He set down his chalk, I set down the bucket of sawdust, and I followed him to the backroom. In a corner, on a metal shelf near the radiator, sat a white ceramic bowl with a clean white towel laid over the top. The butcher walked to the bowl and gestured for me to follow.

"I haven't taught you much while you've been here," said the butcher, "but I can show you this at least."

He lifted the towel to reveal a pinkish-white foam. He took a wooden spoon and skimmed the foam off in several spoonfuls, tossing it into the deep metal basin. In the bowl was a clear, dark-red liquid. He stirred the liquid gently, and I could see disks of solid matter and also something more porous, partially dissolved.

"This is how you make a borscht," he said. "This is the most important part. You slice the beet," he lifted one of the dark purple disks to display a cross-section of beet. "You put in water, and you add a slice of rye," he lifted part of the soggy mass, no longer recognizable as bread.

“And you wait. Later you add beef stock, fish stock, meat, vegetables, anything you like.” He waved the spoon over the bowl. “This is the important part, though.” He dipped the spoon back in the liquid and slurped some.

“You try,” he offered. It smelled sour and musty. The taste was sweet, though not appealing. It hurt my teeth. I must have made a face, and the butcher said, “This is only the *kvas*. You have to wait four, five days. It will be ready soon.”

•

The butcher told me how he would like, some day, to visit the towns where each of his parents were born. He had found them, the towns, in an atlas at the library. Such a trip is as good as impossible, now, the towns being where they are.

He never spoke much about his wife. The picture showed her from the shoulders up, in black and white, but with some red color added on her cheeks like blush. She had a solemn face, long and delicate, with lovely features—eyes that stared out from the picture, not right at you but past you, as if she were looking at something in the distance.

He didn’t tell me much of anything about his more recent past—nothing after the deaths of his parents. Maybe it was my own youth that inspired the tales from his childhood; or maybe he just preferred talking about the things that had had time to ferment.

There’s a part of me that feels ashamed, as if I abandoned him. He asked me to write, but I never did. I was seventeen when I returned home, and I had much else on my mind.





## Honeymoon

The couple traveled overseas for their honeymoon. They checked into a hotel near the center of an old city crouched on a rocky coastline. The city's inhabitants did not speak their language, but the hotel clerk did. He spoke it with a heavy accent, but enunciated his words as clearly as if he were a stage actor. The newly married man paid for the room. It was on the ninth floor. "I can't wait to see our view of the city," said his new wife.

The door of the elevator was of brass latticework. Their footsteps sank gently into the hallway's green carpet. The porter unloaded their luggage from his cart with care and efficiency of motion, and left the room before the man had the chance to offer him a tip. "I suppose they do things a bit differently around here," the man said. "Ha, look at this, honey," said the woman, delighted. On the wide bed atop the geometrically patterned bedspread were two downy white towels, folded and twisted in such a way as to resemble two swans, with their necks curved and their heads touching to form a window between them in the shape of a heart. Well, that's a little much, thought the man. To his wife he said, "That's a nice touch."

This was the first marriage for each of them. Neither was especially young, not nearly so

young as their parents had been when they were married. But also, neither of them was old—they were each as fit and hearty as they ever had been or ever would be. Both were rather plain looking. They both had brown hair, which no one ever thought to call auburn or chestnut. They were neither tall nor short. Both had good skin and meticulous oral hygiene. They were often mistaken for siblings.

“Honey, come and see,” said the woman, as she pulled aside a geometrically patterned curtain. But there wasn’t much to see. Their room faced the street, and across the street was a park, and around the perimeter of the park grew enormous towering trees. At this time of year the trees sported dense foliage. An especially enormous specimen reached its branches over the street toward their room, close enough that the man thought if he were to open the window and leap out he would be able to grab hold. I suppose then I would be extraordinarily stuck, thought the man. Darkness had fallen and gaslights burned along the sidewalk. They couldn’t see the skyline but they could make out lights here and there beyond the trees, and these lights made the woman think of fireflies.

The man pulled open the other curtain. The sky at the top of the window was the color of lapis. The woman took off her shoes and her socks and the man stood behind her and lifted her shirt over her head. She removed the rest of her clothes and waited for him next to the towel swans, while he leaned down to untie his shoelaces. He had recently trimmed his fingernails and he was having trouble with the knot. Finally he simply pulled his shoes off without untying them, though this left him feeling unsatisfied. He stood next to the bed and looked at his wife. Her eyes were closed and she had one hand between her legs and one hand resting on the back of a swan. They had made love countless times, having been together for several years, and they had even made love since the wedding—three times, he thought—and yet as he finished undressing he

was acutely aware that this was the first time they would make love on their honeymoon.

The woman was thinking how lush the towel felt to her fingers and how comfortable the mattress was underneath her. He had been on top of her for a couple of minutes, and she was just beginning to enjoy herself, when the phone rang. The ring was sharp and mechanical. She opened her eyes and looked up at the man. It seemed as though he wasn't going to answer the phone. Good for him, she thought. Another ring. He rolled away from her, saying he was going to tell whoever it was off.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the heavily accented voice when the man picked up the phone. He covered the receiver with his palm. "He wants to know if we're satisfied," he told the woman. "Not yet," she said. "The room will do just fine, thank you," the man said into the receiver. "Anything to make your stay more pleasurable," said the voice. For an instant the man thought he might detect the hint of a knowing smile. But it was only the accent, he told himself. He put the phone in its cradle.

The following day they ate a leisurely breakfast of ham and biscuits, with several cups of silty coffee, at an outdoor cafe in the park. They spent the entire afternoon walking the city center. They stopped at a museum, where they were struck more by the elaborate frames than by the artwork itself. In a grassy square they took a picture of themselves beneath an often-photographed statue, using the camera's self-timer. They went, on a whim, inside a distillery and took a tour, none of which they could understand, though they enjoyed letting their eyes wander over the gleaming copper and stainless steel, the profusion of pipes and coils, siphons and funnels. After the tour they purchased a brown-glass bottle with a label they couldn't decipher.

On the third day the woman suggested that they take a bus south down the coast. She had heard or read somewhere about a town that was known for the sailboats in its harbor. She wanted

to photograph the harbor. They gathered their luggage and purchased tickets at an underground station. The number of places and times on the table of fares was dizzying, but they found the town's name and the man wrote it down on a slip of paper to pass to the attendant, not trusting himself to pronounce it correctly. They navigated a series of tunnels and stairs until they emerged onto an unshaded parking lot with a lone bus. The woman somewhat expected the bus to be empty, as deserted as the parking lot, but when they approached the tall doors swished open and inside almost every seat was occupied. They made their way down the aisle and all the passengers glanced in their direction, as if the entire bus had been waiting just for them.

The bus stopped in the afternoon at an area with picnic tables and a view of the water. The man purchased food and drinks from a kiosk. Some of the passengers stayed on the bus, while some got out and began walking down the road in either direction. A few passengers stood beneath the kiosk's awning and conversed loudly with the old vendor, who seemed to be the only employee. "It must be lonely working here by himself," said the woman. The man looked at the kiosk and then out at the beach, where shorebirds were combing the rocks. "I wonder how he gets here," she said. Besides the bus, there were no other vehicles in sight. The stretch of road was bare, empty except for those passengers who had walked away, some now almost out of sight. "Maybe he takes a different bus," said the man.

When the man and the woman finished their drinks, the man took the plastic cups and poured the ice into the grass. He poured from the brown-glass bottle two fingers into each cup. He had expected the liquor to be brown, like the bottle, but instead it was clear. They both sniffed. Neither could place the scent. "Dill?" said the woman. "Maybe," said the man. "To me, it's more like pine tar, but not exactly." They raised the cups and downed the liquor. It tastes better than it smells, thought the man. His wife's face said she did not agree.

There were fewer occupied seats on the bus when they left the rest area. The man wondered where those people were walking to. The bus continued south, and he looked out the window for them but he never saw anyone. He didn't see anymore picnic areas, and he didn't see businesses, homes, crossroads or farmland. Just the ocean, the road, and the land, which in some places was a soft green morass, and in other places exposed yellow hardpan. There were no fences and no telephone lines. Occasionally a sign flickered past his window, though it meant nothing to him.

The sun had set by the time they reached the town. The end of the line, it was their only other stop—the route's destination. As they exited the bus the man looked at the driver. He didn't think it was the same driver. He thought it might be the old man from the kiosk. Had they switched? He almost said something to his wife, but decided it was better not to.

This was a town and not a city. The streets were cobbled and the doorways were low. The wife and husband checked into a one story inn next to the bus station. The clerk could not understand them but took their paper currency and let them into a room. No towel swans here, but the place could have been worse. The man said they could look for somewhere nicer, maybe a bed and breakfast, tomorrow, if they decided to stay. "This will work for me," said the woman. She was exhausted. Neither of them had been able to sleep during the ride, but now she felt she could hardly stand.

The man took a shower. He emptied his pockets and found the tickets he'd purchased for the bus and realized no one had ever asked for them. When he came out his wife was asleep on the floral bedspread. The man dressed in clean clothes, laid a blanket over his wife, and turned all the lights off except one. He wanted to go out for a drink. Before he left he said her name quietly in the room. She didn't respond. He checked that he had his wallet and the room key, and

he made sure the latch caught behind him. The air was heavier here than it had been in the city. Above his head clouds covered the moon. The buildings were all single-story. Homes of brick or stone, small windows with heavy shutters. He felt damp with sweat before he reached the end of the block. At the corner he found a bar. He couldn't read the signs but the neon was familiar, comforting.

Inside, the bar was crowded but not loud. The man put a coin on the scarred wood and the bartender, heavy-set with a deformed nose, poured a beer from the tap. The words he could see on posters and labels looked different. He thought they might be an entirely different language than the one for which he and his wife had purchased a pocket phrase book that they hadn't used. He tried to listen to the words being spoken around him. This was no help. He wanted to ask one of the old men where he was, but he didn't know how.

In the vacant parking lot of the inn he pulled out the room key with its red plastic fob. The fob had a number on it, but it wasn't a number he was familiar with, and no matter how he oriented the fob, the number didn't seem to match up to any of the numbers on the doors. He stood outside the door that he thought led to their room. He tried to look through the window, but the curtains were completely drawn. He slowly turned the key in the lock and the door swung open. The room was dark. His wife must have turned off the last light. He hoped she hadn't worried. He reached to his right, to turn on the light in the bathroom. His hand felt only rough stucco. He reached to his left and found the bathroom door. He flipped the light and saw that the room was empty.

He turned the key in the lock on the next door. It too swung open. In this room the bathroom was to his right. He felt a sense of relief. But when he turned on the light he saw the room was strewn with toys—puppets and dolls and painted wooden blocks—and two twin beds

were occupied by two children each. Their still, sleeping faces were cherubic and genderless. In the next room he found an old woman who could have been his grandmother, though his grandmother had been dead for almost a decade. The old woman lay widthwise on a queen bed and like the children she did not stir. In another room that smelled of cigarette smoke and antiseptic he found a young woman asleep with the television on. In yet another room he found a young woman who looked precisely like the woman he'd been dating before he met his wife. He almost called out to her but left her asleep like the others.

The key opened every door at the inn. The man checked every room, but he couldn't find his wife. Was it the right inn? It must be.

Across the street was a car parked by the curb. He walked over and tried his key. The door opened with a sound of rusty springs. He reached in, put the key in the ignition. The engine turned over. He killed it immediately, pulled out the key, closed the door. He stood in the street and looked up. The clouds had broken and a big moon was directly above him. He looked at the key in his hand. What was there to do? He decided to find the ocean, the harbor. His wife could find him, or perhaps she was already there. He looked around, turning in a circle, and he tried to remember the drive into town, to determine in what direction the water must be.





## Festival of Masks

On a far-flung island every year the islanders hold a one-day festival called the Festival of Masks. On this day, every islander wears a mask: either a black mask, made from the wood of the butterfruit tree; or a white mask, made from the shells of giant clams, which have to be harvested from the dark waters beyond the reef. Only the most skilled divers can retrieve the giant clams from their perilous depths, and only the most skilled carvers can shape the dense wood of the butterfruit tree. The masks are precious, passed down from generation to generation, the oldest so old and so smooth that the islanders say they were polished by the thumbs of the gods.

From sunrise to sunrise on the Festival of Masks, every islander must only address every other islander in the form of a question that can be answered by a simple yes or no. Those islanders wearing a black mask must answer every question with a yes. Those islanders wearing a white mask must answer every question with a no.

The decisions about who wears a black mask and who wears a white mask are made during the ten-day feast that precedes the festival, and the decisions are made through a complex

process that takes into account social and economic status, feats of strength and intelligence, both a secret ballot and an always contentious round of open votes, and, finally, a series of games ruled purely by chance. Masks are swapped, bartered for, or stolen during the feast, but at the end of the ten days everyone has a mask, and there is always an equal proportion of black masks to white masks.

The tradition during the Festival is that those wearing white masks boss around those wearing the black masks:

“Will you fetch the fresh water from the spring?”

“Yes.”

“Will you make my favorite coconut cream pie?”

“Yes.”

“Will you bite my toenails that are getting too long?”

“Ugh. Yes.”

“Will you dive from the diving rock wearing your smallclothes on your head?”

“Yes.”

“Will you fix our roof, and do it right this time?”

“Yes.”

Asking, “Will you rub my feet for an hour, every night for the rest of our lives?” goes against the spirit of the occasion. And, as all mothers remind their children who will wear the black masks, there is no rule in stone that just because one answers yes, one must carry through. But there is a good deal of social pressure. Younger children with black masks often try to get clever with questions formulated in the negative: “Will you *not* eat this sea slug?” But this is also against the spirit of the Festival and these sorts of tricks are abandoned by adolescence. Of

course, nothing prevents one black mask from bossing around another black mask, but this can escalate very quickly, so it is usually avoided.

Most Festivals pass by as they always have: children in white masks making embarrassing requests of children in black masks for the amusement of all; young men in white masks chasing the young women in black masks throughout the night across the more remote reaches of the island. For the most part, participants in the game will only request what is reasonable, and over the years everybody gets a fairly equal number of turns in the black mask to turns in the white mask. Ultimately, though, it comes down to luck. A certain young man spent year after year always drawing the black mask, year after year watching the object of his love be pursued by, or pursue, others. Finally, once again wearing the black mask, he fell at her feet and said, “Will you ask me something? Anything?”

“No,” she said.



## Habitat Suites

Sam and his mother moved into the Habitat Suites—an “extended stay residence.” They pulled into the semi-circle drive; large fronded plants shielded the street from view. In the lobby a young man wearing an ironed green polo greeted them. A clear water container—gleaming silver spigot, bright slices of lemon suspended in the ice—was perched on the front desk. Off the lobby was a fitness room, an office space, and a lounge area with complimentary muffins stacked in a pyramid. Look at this—the lap of luxury, said Sam’s mother. Sam looked away, embarrassed. But in his heart he agreed and in his blood he felt a pulsing energy that would stay with him long after he left the place.

Sliding glass doors opened from the back of the lobby onto the courtyard—big and brick and ivy. To the left a brick patio with a bbq pit and a cluster of tables and chairs. To the right a tropical hardwood and some ferns in clay pots. The atmosphere was oxygen-rich. In the center of the courtyard was the pool, kidney-shaped and the color of chlorine. On the far side, opposite the glass doors, stood eight feet of ivy-covered brick. Waxy leaved, emerald green jasmine. Below the shaggy wall, tucked into the curve of the pool, was a hot tub, the same color as the pool but

brighter.

One night, Sam met a girl in the hot tub. It was just the two of them. She was beautiful. She wore a lime green bikini and lots of eyeshadow, which he found exotic. Her hair was bright and smooth and straight; it was cut short—not as short as a boy's, but well above her shoulders—the cut stylish with its severe angles. He didn't know girls like this. And, she talked to to him. It just so happened that she liked basketball. He played on his high school's junior varsity team. The girl's favorite NBA player was Kobe Bryant. Sam respectfully disagreed. His favorite player was Tim Duncan. She thought Tim Duncan was boring. Sam almost argued with her, but stopped. He knew in his heart that maybe she was right. The girl looked at him like she could see the wheels clicking behind his eyes. Finally, Sam shrugged and said, He's the Big Fundamental. She said, You're funny, kid.

Here's Sam: 6'2" with light brown hair—unkempt but in a calculated way, which isn't to say stylish, just that he was trying hard without much success. His manner was slightly anxious but unaffected. His face was thin but still childlike, with eyes that were quick to trust. His freckles had mostly faded and he still couldn't tan. He weighed 145 pounds; his coach wanted him to gain weight—Sam would put whole milk, protein powder, raw eggs and Hershey's syrup in the blender, but it didn't make any difference. Sam wore unbranded clothes, not confident enough to adopt a particular style, no FUBUs or JNCOs, though he did buy his jeans a size too big and he was constantly having to haul them up.

The next night Sam found her again. Her bikini was royal purple. Her eyeshadow glittered. She told him her name was Lily. He asked her why she was there. She told him she worked as a nanny and she had the week off and her employer had put her up. Sam told Lily how a plumber had discovered black mold in the crawlspace beneath the bathroom of his house. Did

it make you sick? asked Lily. Sam had been to the doctor and the doctor pressed down Sam's tongue, shone a light down his throat, had him blow into a plastic tube, listened with a stethoscope and knocked against his chest with a rubber hammer. Fit as a flamingo, the doctor told Sam. That made Lily smile.

The next night Sam's mother asked why he wanted to go swimming before bed. Sam told her it felt like a good way to wind down after school, practice, homework. It seemed like she bought it. Sam and Lily talked about basketball again. Then they talked about music. They both liked *Dark Twisted Fantasy*. They talked about television. They both liked *American Horror Story*. She asked him if he liked to drink. He thought about telling her that he did, but he didn't think she'd buy it.

The next night was Friday. Sam sat alone in the hot tub. He was alone in the entire pool area. His gaze sat on the black iron gate that led through the brick wall. His body felt raw, twitchy, compressed like a spring. He waited, thrilled and afraid. Eventually he closed his eyes, inhaled the sharp steam through his nostrils, and tried to relax. He let his mind wander back over the day.

He stood in a crowded hallway. There was very little actual jostling; everyone was careful not to make contact with anyone other than friends. Sam hadn't been able to find Drew and he hadn't felt like going to the Field House, so he'd walked to the gym, shoved his lunch into his backpack and tossed it onto the pile. A couple of kids were already picking teams. Sam matched up on Leonard, a teammate from JV. Leonard immediately started posturing: you ready for this Sam? you ready for this? They both laughed. The older players dominated the ball through most of the game. Neither Sam nor Leonard got many touches. Toward the end Sam hit a three, and then drove to the basket on the next two possessions to score on Leonard. Someone



watching from the sideline yelled, Uh oh, white boy heatin' up!

School ended and Sam sat with Drew on the curb. Drew took out his phone while they waited for the bus, and he scrolled through the Missed Connections page on Craigslist. Sam looked over Drew's shoulder. This was something they often did. No one had ever "missed a connection" with either one of them, but they still found it fun. Drew moved on to the Casual Encounters page. Then the Adult Services page. Sam saw Lily's picture. He snatched the phone from Drew and clicked on the ad. She looked good. She wore clothes in the picture—more than he'd seen her in. Same eyeshadow. Same platinum hair and severe haircut. Same spotlight teeth. The name in the ad was "Delaney," and Sam briefly wondered whether this Delaney character had stolen Lily's photo. But he knew she hadn't. At the bottom of the ad was a phone number, emoji hearts in place of dashes, and below that 120 kisses for a hh, 200 kisses for the full h.

Sam rode the bus to work, bagging groceries, most weekdays after school. He made \$6.50 for the full h. It so happened that this Friday was payday. His boss, a red-faced man who went by "Sarge," handed him a white envelope with a check for \$207.33. Usually Sam would have given the check to his mother to deposit. He was saving up to buy a used car. This Friday he rode the bus to his bank and cashed the check. Later, he wrapped the cash in a towel and went out to the hot tub.

The chlorinated vapors stung his eyes when he finally opened them. Sam was still alone. Did he feel relief? He wasn't sure what he felt, but the night wore on and he could sense a slow comedown from the adrenaline. He walked over the pebbled concrete, dove into the pool, felt his skin tighten. He walked back to the hot tub, turned on the jets, and sat with his body angled so he could masturbate in the fast stream of bubbles. He watched the gate, scared and a little excited, but before he came he closed his eyes and thought about Lily, her eyeshadow, her aquamarine

eyes. At least that's how he imagined her eyes. It had been too dark to see their color.

Saturday evening he once again found Lily in the hot tub, earlier than the previous nights they'd met. Pink sherbet clouds lined up on one side of the rectangle of sky above them. In the waning light the jasmine leaves took on a gold tint.

Sam thought Lily looked happy to see him. Maybe that was just his imagination. He felt nervous, terrified that she would know he knew. But he had been nervous around her even before he knew, and after a few minutes he felt pretty sure she couldn't tell the difference.

A middle-aged mother and two young kids splashed in the pool. Sam and Lily were the only ones in the hot tub. She wore the green bikini. She had turned the jets on, and he felt the bubbles rush across his back, around his feet.

Lily asked him about the basketball team. He told her his coach had moved him up to be a starter. Sam worried he sounded too enthusiastic, but Lily smiled. He calmed down a little and asked her what her favorite movie was. Lily had to think about it. She held her hands, palms down, over the surface of the water, letting the steam rise around them. While she thought, Sam felt her foot brush against the hard knot of his ankle, just lightly, maybe pushed by the jets. He watched her face but she didn't register the contact. She didn't move her foot away. He held his leg still and focused on that little patch of connection, felt the sensation of her skin travel up his leg. Finally she said *Hoop Dreams*. That was what popped into her mind. She loved that documentary. Sam agreed.

Lily said she was dying for a smoke. Would he want to come over to her room to watch something? Sam's heart started rattling in his chest. His mind leaped forward. He was thankful for the bubbles on the surface of the water, hiding the erection in his bathing suit.

Sure, he said. Cool, she said, smiling. She lifted her body out of the water and the skin on

her thighs nubbled in the cool air. The family had left, and floodlights overhead had just turned on, though it wasn't fully dark.

Two gold rings, one above each hip, held her bathing suit bottom together. She had an apple-sized bruise on the side of her right leg, just above the knee. When she turned, he saw where one side of her suit was pushed up, past the perfect crease between her butt and thigh.

Sam worried about standing. He felt flushed all over. The pores on his face tingled with sweat. He waited till her back was to him before grabbing a towel and wrapping it loosely around his waist like a sarong.

He told her he just needed a second to change. She told him to knock on her door, room 207. They walked out of the pool area together and he rushed to his suite, one floor below and two doors over from hers.

His mother sat on the couch in the blue glow of the television. She asked him if everything was alright. Maybe she could smell his adrenaline. He said, Sure, everything's fine.

He hurried back to his room and pulled off his bathing suit. Fuck, he thought, looking down at his erection. He went to the bathroom, stood before the mirror and pointed himself into the sink. It was only a handful of seconds before he came. He pulled on some cargo shorts and an old soft t-shirt.

His mother asked where he was off to. He was going to the fitness room to ride the bike, he said. Oh! Maybe I'll go with you, said his mother. He groaned and did an annoyed shimmy. Okay, okay, god forbid I embarrass you. He skipped out the door.

He could feel the pair of hundreds in his right cargo pocket as hotly as he had felt Lily's skin against his ankle. Two flat crisp bills pulling at his shorts like lead plumbs, and yet he bounded up the concrete stairway with legs like piston rods, full of potential.

Sam's teeth started to chatter when he walked up to the door of 207. He chomped down on his tongue and knocked.

Lily answered with one white hotel towel around her torso and another wrapped turban-style around her hair. Come on in, she said. Sam's individual limbs worked in concert, despite his brain, and walked him through the door.

Lily stepped aside to let him in and closed the door behind him. And then she was standing right in front of him. Sam hadn't realized how short she was; the white coil of the towel-turban barely reached the height of his chin.

He didn't know what to do. He could feel the proximity of her body like a faintly buzzing electric fence—frightening but impossible not to want to touch. She tilted her head up and said, You're cute, kid, really, and she laughed to herself.

She glided back into the room and unwound the towel from her head. It fell to the floor, wet and heavy. She opened the other towel, as calmly as if she was opening a kitchen cabinet, and laid it on the bed behind her. She stood there wearing nothing, the shapes of the bikini bright on her otherwise tan skin. He wanted badly to let his eyes linger, but he didn't want to ruin things staring at her like an oaf.

He compromised by looking at her eyes. The shades were drawn, sealing out what twilight was left of the evening, but the lamp next to the bed was on, and it cast enough light for him to see that her eyes were brown—dark and reflective.

He took a step forward, but before he reached out, or she reached out, he opened his cargo pocket and withdrew the two bills, flat and folded in half. As far as he remembers, he just did it without thinking. It seemed like the thing to do.

The sound of the pocket's velcro tearing broke the spell. There was a moment of

confusion, and then she was staring at the flat green square that he held out to her like a sacred offering.

She processed the gesture and her smile tightened, quivered away. She took a step back and raised one hand to her mouth and the other up to him, palm up, a motion to stop. In her palm he could read his mistake, realized he had made a mess of it all.

He might have whispered or choked out an apology, he can't remember now, but he knows he dropped the money, or maybe it fell from his hand, onto the beige carpet, and he turned and fled the room.

On the balcony he shut the door behind him, making sure not to slam it but also that the latch caught. He gripped the black metal railing and looked down at the courtyard, lit up by the floodlights, a cloud of insects around each humming bulb. Did he think about what she must have been feeling, fifteen feet away, behind the closed door? He's thought about it a lot in the years since, but in that moment he might have simply lamented an opportunity squandered, a test failed.

He wouldn't see her again, wouldn't have the courage to go back to the hot tub. Not that he would have expected her there. He would pass through the courtyard with hope and fear until, Tuesday morning, he would look up to see a blue and yellow maid's cart propped in the open door to room 207.

Her ad was still up, though, and that same evening he went to the empty office space off the lobby, next to the fitness room, and opened the ad on one of the computers. There was her picture, and her phone number, or a phone number, right in front of him. But of course he couldn't bring himself to call or text. He wonders now what might have happened if he had. How much, if anything, even a paltry apology might have meant to her at the time.

Instead he copied the ad and emailed it to himself. From time to time he would pull it up, create fantasies about what could have been, till he switched email addresses and forgot the password to his old account.

At some point, he's not sure how or why exactly, he started thinking about Lily again. At first he wasn't even sure the whole episode had actually happened, or if it was some conflation of a memory and a story. It felt more like a dream, or something that had happened to someone else. He wouldn't recognize her if she served him a drink in a bar, or approved his loan at the bank, or made small talk with him while she cut his hair, staring at him through the mirror, her eyeshadow only slightly subdued.

But even though he has no witnesses, no way to verify events, he's decided nonetheless that it did happen. And what he thinks about, now, is not: What if he had done this, and what if they had done that? No, what he wonders is: Why has it got to be so hard for a person to understand what it is another person wants; and how has he managed to keep making the same mistake over and over in all its many guises?



## Gulf Coast

They could crash on the sleeper sofa, Peter told them, but only for a couple of days. His daughter Laurel was coming on Friday for the weekend, so they had to be out by then. Laurel was like seven or eight or something. There were a couple of those wallet-sized school portrait-type pictures of her magnetized to the fridge. Laurel was cute. Poor Laurel, thought Emmy, having to spend weekends in this apartment.

“Oh, do me a favor while you’re here,” Peter went on. “That’s where my daughter sleeps. Don’t fool around.”

Carl shook his head like that thought couldn’t possibly occur to him. Carl was a disingenuous shit. The first thing Carl did that night, after he and Emmy crawled into their sleeping bags on the pull-out mattress, was reach over and try to feel her up. She felt his hand on her chest, over the sleeping bag.

“No, Carl,” she said. “Do you want to get us kicked out of here?”

Carl tried to play it off, like he was just trying to grab his phone or something. He was an idiot. Harmless though, which was why Emmy liked him. She figured a lot of guys would have kept at it.



The next morning Peter told them he didn't have an extra key to the apartment, and he didn't want them there all day, so they'd have to go find something to occupy their time. He offered to drive them downtown on his way to work. Peter had been a family friend of Carl's parents, Emmy gathered. He was a little older than them, though she couldn't say by how much exactly. She would be twenty that year.

She and Carl walked around downtown for a bit and Emmy bummed a few smokes from a pair of tourists. She figured they were tourists by the way they talked. Maybe they were from Europe or something? Eventually they ended up on this street with a bunch of bars and people sleeping in doorways. Carl had been talking about finding a job fixing bikes, which was funny because Carl didn't own a bike. But maybe Carl knew a thing or two about bikes. Emmy didn't know Carl *that* well, really.

They sat down and started asking people for change. It was early, none of the bars were open, but some business-looking people were walking by and they made a few bucks. It made Emmy feel a little sick how easy it was to fall back into, asking people for money. She'd told herself when they left Florida that she wouldn't end up back on the street. She figured everyone who was on the street had probably told themselves that. But she wasn't on the street, exactly, she just needed some money. They decided to get enough for food.

Later they sat around a park bench with a few other people and ate some fries. The ground was mostly bare, hard dirt covered in acorns. Little birds hopped beneath the trashcan, which was made of the same green metal slats as the bench.

Carl had met this guy Gerry outside a bike shop. Everyone listened to Gerry scream about Starbucks.

"I just had to take a piss, I told them, I just have to pee, and the motherfuckers want me to

walk all the way down the hill. Well fuck them!”

Emmy looked at Gerry. He was a real homeless man’s homeless man. And he was missing an eye. Like they’d let him use the bathroom at Starbucks.

Most of the others she hadn’t met. One guy asked her name a couple of times, but she pretended like she didn’t hear him. Carl sat next to her, talking to the only other girl there. Emmy thought the girl’s name was Kat, and Kat was telling Carl about her walk this morning:

“So I hear him say, ‘Ain’t no shame in this game, dog.’ He says that to his buddy, and I’m thinking, Oh God, I know what’s coming, so as I walk past him he’s like, ‘Hey beautiful, let me ask you something,’ and I keep walking, and he’s like, ‘Are you married?’ and I’m like, ‘No, but I have a boyfriend, dude.’ And he goes, ‘Of course you do, baby, you’re so beautiful, let me tell you, if you have a guy, I respect that, that’s just how I do, but let me tell you, if you were single, *ooh* girl!’” Kat did a pretty good impression of an older black man’s voice. Carl laughed.

“Do you even have a boyfriend?” Carl asked Kat. He was such an idiot.

Finally this guy who’d been trying to talk to her reached out and shook her boot and she couldn’t really ignore him anymore. He was dirty and had a shirt on that said something about zombies and he had a tattoo on his face, some sort of cross-thing, from the middle of his forehead down his nose and then horizontal above his eyebrows. Was it a cross? A target? His hair was buzzed really short. She hoped he wasn’t a skinhead. He had kind-looking, blue eyes and remarkably good teeth.

“Where are y’all from?” he asked.

He had a nicer voice than she expected; she supposed the tattoo threw her off. His voice was kind of a lilt-y drawl, not like the rednecks in Florida.

“Huh? Hey, Emmy. I mean, we just got here from Jacksonville.”

The guy smiled, flashing his teeth. “Emmy? What are you, twelve or something?”

“Fuck you,” she said, smiling back. “My name’s Emily, but nobody calls me that.”

Before tattoo guy could say anything, everybody’s attention shifted to these cops who were walking toward them. When they were still pretty far away, Gerry jumped up and spat in the direction of the cops, though it was more like a spray that came out, and he screamed, “Coffee is for fascists!” and started to shamle-run in the opposite direction.

“Gerry’s kind of a whacko,” Kat told Carl. “He’ll come back, probably. The cops don’t give a shit if we’re just sitting here.”

Sure enough, the cops just laughed at Gerry and walked past them, over to this guy who was laid out, where there was grass, a quarter handle of bourbon next to his head. Emmy couldn’t hear what they said to him. She’d jump off an overpass before she’d end up like that, she thought. She remembered being younger and finding her dad passed out on their front lawn. Emmy had never known her mother, and she didn’t have any siblings, and her relationship with her dad had swung back and forth, between trying to take care of him, as in make sure he didn’t drink himself to death, and trying to escape from her life with him.

Earlier, while Carl had been doing whatever he was doing in the bathroom, Peter sat down at the little folding table, which was covered in papers. Emmy sat on the sleeper-sofa eating some Honey Nut Cheerios.

“Hey, Emmy,” Peter said, “I wanted to tell you, I can’t just give you the boot if you don’t have anywhere to go.” She didn’t say anything and he went on, “Laurel usually ends up sleeping in the bedroom with me most nights, so if you want, you can stay. I mean I don’t want you sleeping on the street, you know. But Carl has to go. I just don’t really feel comfortable with him around, and I think he would make Laurel uncomfortable.”

He's totally serious, Emmy thought. How did he know she wasn't just as dangerous as Carl? In fact, she was positive she was more dangerous than Carl. She should kill them both in their sleep just to teach this asshole a lesson.

Instead of saying anything, though, she just nodded and kept chomping. Peter continued to stare at her and it became clear he wanted more of an answer. She said, "That's cool. Thanks, Peter." She might as well not burn any bridges just yet.

The face tattoo guy was trying to talk to her again. "My name is Abe, by the way."

Emmy looked at him and laughed. She said, "Really, and you're giving me shit? Abe is a grandpa name."

"Well, I was named after my grandpa, so I guess you're right. Do you smoke?" Abe asked. He mimed pinching a roach and made short sucking sounds.

Emmy didn't really like smoking weed, but she shrugged at Abe like, sure, whatever. He stood up and motioned her to follow him. Kat and Carl were still talking. Kat was kind of overweight, and she had purple hair, and one of those ugly type of nose rings—septum piercings—and she had way too much eyeshadow on, but otherwise she was not all that unattractive. Maybe Carl would have better luck with Kat.

Emmy followed Abe down a slope toward a pond, or maybe it was a river, she couldn't tell. They passed by a couple sitting on the lawn. The guy was a redhead, the girl blonde, kind of attractive. She sat there with this gigantic orange tabby cat on a leash. Abe nodded at them. The leash was black leather with rhinestones. The guy's hair and the cat were almost the same color.

Abe led her to a tree whose branches formed this closed-in dome near the edge of the water. He sat down on a dead log that looked like it'd been dragged under there for just this purpose. Over the zombie shirt he had on a jean jacket, and he rooted around and pulled out a

small pipe and baggie. The pipe was clear glass with rainbow colors—the sort you find at head shops and outdoor markets and certain gas stations. Emmy sat down beside him on the log, not too close.

She didn't want to smoke, but she couldn't think of any good reason why not to, except that weed always made her feel detached and self-conscious, somehow both at the same time. She remembered being fourteen and sitting in health class and listening to her health teacher, this chunky Latina, go on about how marijuana was dangerous because it was a gateway drug. Emmy hadn't really paid attention, she mostly just watched the boys in the back of the class play a card game called Presidents. But she remembered the term, "gateway drug," and she thought it was bullshit, because she had smoked enough weed in high school, and she figured maybe if she'd just liked it a little more she'd have been happy sitting around getting high, like so many people she knew, instead of getting into all that other shit she wouldn't tell Abe about—scrip bottles and pawnshops, central booking and then begging for a sleeping bag. All that shit, she knew well enough, being the main reason why she was sitting there.

Abe filled the pipe absentmindedly and handed it to her along with a lighter. She took a hit and started coughing and felt the resin-y sensation in the back of her throat.

"So you're from Jacksonville...Florida?" Abe asked, turning and straddling the log so he faced her. She angled her body toward him and crossed her legs.

"Yeah. Are you from here?"

"No, I'm from this little town, you probably wouldn't have heard of it, in Texas. But I've been here for a while now. It's a pretty cool place, I guess."

"Oh, cool."

"Where are you staying?"

“With a friend of that guy Carl. We took the bus here together, Carl and me.”

Abe took a hit and offered the pipe to her and this time she was able to hold it in a little longer before coughing.

They were both silent and she felt nervous but she wasn't going to say anything. Finally Abe asked, “So, like, what sort of stuff are you into?”

What a stupid question. What kind of answer was he looking for? Did he want her to say that she's into guys with face tattoos? Maybe he was one of those faux-intellectuals and he wanted to talk about political stuff, fuck-the-man or whatever. Of course, she knew if that was the case it'd just be a way to try to impress her.

Abe was still looking at her, and she realized she had been sitting there for too long without answering.

“Ummm, you know, I like, whatever. I was working as a waitress, then a bartender in Florida for a couple of years after high school. Honestly, I don't really know what I'm doing here.”

Abe laughed. “That's cool, I don't know what I'm doing either. Just living the dream, right?” She couldn't tell how sarcastic he meant that to be.

She went on, “I was living with this guy in Jacksonville and it was pretty cool at first, but then it seemed like he wanted me to become this housewife, or some shit, and I had to get the fuck out of there.”

She started to think about all the parts she wouldn't tell him. Like when she started pawning Aaron's things—an old watch, some of his ex-wife's jewelry, a set of golf clubs. The golf clubs were how she got caught. Aaron wouldn't have noticed them gone for years, probably, but his phone number must have been in the bag somewhere. Aaron really had wanted to marry

her. It was easy now for Emmy to be dismissive of him. It hadn't been so easy back then. Things between them had been such a mess, but she didn't know whether she made them a mess because she didn't love him, or whether she only stopped loving him after the mess had been made. Aaron had bailed her out and she didn't see him again after that. She spent almost a month bouncing between various apartments and rooms, or sleeping outside (she spent a few bad nights in a tent city), and finally staying at Carl's parents and selling a bunch of their nice silver.

Abe was giving her this look and she thought she'd zoned out again. So she went on, "Some guys can just be so fucking submissive, and they want you to be too, you know?"

Abe laughed again, and started going off about how his parents wanted him to get a job after he graduated but he wasn't just going to be another cog, or some shit like that. Emmy started thinking about the log they were sitting on and got anxious about falling off.

"I'm going to go check on Carl," she said.

"Hey, listen, there's this party on Friday night, if you want to come."

Emmy gave a sure-I-guess-whatever shrug. Abe took out his phone—an iPhone, she noted—and she tried to tell him her number but she had trouble spitting it out, so finally she dug out her flip phone and handed it to him. She told him to put his number under "Grandpa Abe" and he laughed, though only politely. When she looked later he had indeed labeled it like she'd asked, only he spelled it "Grampa" which gave her a small feeling of superiority.

She walked, feeling slightly dizzy, back to the bench where Carl was still sitting with Kat. Some more folks had joined them. Gerry, though, still hadn't returned. A few minutes later Abe came and sat at the opposite end of the bench. She didn't know if it was just the weed, but she felt self-conscious, like they'd just hooked up and now they were back in the crowd hoping it wasn't too obvious. He did have nice eyes. He only invited you to a party, she reminded herself.

She lost track of time—maybe that was the weed too—and before she realized it they were back in Peter’s crummy car. When they got back to Peter’s apartment she and Carl both ate a bowl of cereal and watched TV, sitting on the sleeper-sofa mattress, which felt as if, at any minute, it might buckle in the middle and swallow them. Peter sat at the little folding table and shuffled papers around. Emmy wondered if he was actually busy or just trying to look busy. He didn’t say much to them. In fact, both he and Carl seemed content pretending they were alone in the apartment.

She washed her cereal bowl and left them to their own devices. Walking through Peter’s bedroom to the shower she noticed that his bed was made up, quite neatly, which didn’t fit the overall aesthetic of the apartment. She had to use toilet paper to clear out the disgusting drain in the shower before she turned on the water. The water was nice and hot, though—no problem with that, thank God. This is what she had missed most, the times she really was on the street, even more than sleeping on a bed. She turned the hot water up until she could barely stand it.

The next day was Friday, and it rained a heavy, Gulf-Coast-type rain. Peter dropped them off at a coffee shop and gave them a ten for breakfast. Carl assured him they’d pay it back, which was obviously untrue and made the whole situation more awkward than it already was.

Emmy called Abe and he met them outside the coffee shop, under the awning. All three of them pulled up their hoods and they ran through the driving rain three blocks to a bus station shelter. They took the bus to the apartment of some friend of Abe’s named Mark. Emmy could feel the eyes of the people on the bus. At least she didn’t smell as bad as these folks. The bus’s air had a moist, sour milk smell that made her nauseous.

The apartment they went to made Peter’s place seem like a palace. So much shit on the floor—clothes, junk mail, fast-food bags, stuff she couldn’t identify. It was obvious where this



guy Mark walked because he'd kicked little paths clear. There were dirty dishes everywhere and fruit flies swarming in the kitchen and a line of black ants leading across a windowsill. Emmy sat down in a chair with burns on the upholstered arms. She sat on top of a pile of Mark's clothes; this seemed more polite than putting the clothes anywhere else. Despite his apartment, Mark generally looked more put together than Abe, though far less attractive. He did seem like he was in good shape. His biceps were as big around as her thighs. The boys all sat on the couch and smoked weed out of a plastic bong. Today she felt okay declining the offer and fell asleep instead while they played video games. She hadn't been sleeping well. Carl was a snorer.

She woke up sometime in the afternoon and went to use the bathroom. Abe and Carl and Mark were still playing games and hardly acknowledged her presence. The bathroom was surprisingly clean, at least compared to the rest of the apartment. Emmy wasn't going to lick the floor or anything. After she peed she opened the medicine cabinet. Her habit of snooping around other people's medicine went back so far that when she first started she usually had to crawl up on the sink to reach the cabinet. Peter's had been a disappointment—just Tylenol, cough syrup, Pepto, and so on. But Mark had a goldmine of orange scrip bottles. Emmy didn't recognize a lot of the drug names, but she found a bottle that said alprazolam and grabbed it. The label said it had been prescribed to someone named Sydney, which made her feel less bad about stealing it. She stuffed some toilet paper into the top of the bottle so it wouldn't rattle and put it in her jacket pocket.

The four of them sat around Mark's apartment all afternoon. At one point Mark went into his bedroom for a while. She could hear him doing something back there, eventually she decided it was pull-ups. Carl had fallen asleep and was snoring softly. She looked at Abe and studied his tattoo more closely. Both arms of the cross were of equal length and had little bars on each end,

and there was a circle inside a circle where the lines intersected, just above and between his eyebrows.

Drowsily, Emmy asked, “Do you ever regret getting your tattoo?”

“Do you ever regret being born such a fuckup?” Abe asked.

She flipped him off but they both laughed. “No, to be honest,” he went on, “you might be the first person to ask me that to my face. The way I look at it is, it’s done, so there’s not really any point in talking about regret, right? But the thing I like about it is, I can tell when people dismiss me right away because they can’t look me in the eyes, they just look at my face, you know? I mean, I don’t mind if people stare. I’m not an idiot, I have a tattoo on my face,” they both laughed again, “but I guess one way to put it would be that since I got it, it’s easier to tell when people are looking at me and when they’re looking past me, know what I mean?” Emmy nodded and she was sincere—she did understand, or at least she thought she did.

Later on in the afternoon Abe volunteered Mark’s couch for Carl to sleep on that night. Abe also told her vaguely that he could figure out somewhere for her to crash if she needed. Emmy said that she was going to keep staying at Peter’s place, at least for tonight. Carl called Peter and asked him to bring his backpack over when he picked her up. Apparently Peter griped on the phone about having to drive all over town, but relented in the end.

An hour passed and Peter called Carl to tell him he was downstairs. She, Carl and Abe walked down to the parking lot together. While Carl was pulling his bag out of the trunk, Abe reminded her about the party that night.

“Yeah, I don’t really know,” Emmy said.

“Well, if you want, I can probably borrow a car and come pick you up. Just text me later. It’ll be a fun time, I promise.”

When she sat down in the front seat, she could tell Peter was pretty uncomfortable. Laurel was sitting in the seat behind hers. He didn't say anything until they'd pulled away from the apartment complex and then he visibly relaxed a little.

He glanced up into the rearview mirror and said, "This is daddy's friend; her name is Emmy. She's visiting from out of town and she needs a place to stay, so she's going to sleep in your bed tonight, ok?" Emmy turned around and smiled at Laurel but didn't say anything.

Laurel said, "Does that mean I get to sleep in your bed?" and when Peter nodded she made a happy sound. Laurel really was a cute kid. In the picture Emmy had seen on the fridge Laurel had looked older, but now she saw that she was probably closer to four or five and still in one of those booster seat things. Peter had cracked his window and Emmy realized that it wasn't raining anymore. It wasn't dark yet, but the sun was down, and the streetlights and storefronts made pretty reflections in the puddles. She rolled her window down too and breathed in that after-rain smell; it was what she imagined when people talked about "mountain air"—she'd never seen any real mountains.

Peter stopped at McDonald's and bought her and him each a burger and Laurel some McNuggets. They waited until they were back at the apartment to eat. When they walked in, Emmy was amazed at the transformation. For a moment she stupidly thought they'd somehow walked in the wrong door. No papers on the table, no dishes on the counter, the sleeper sofa made up with sheets and real pillows, her backpack and sleeping bag arranged neatly in a corner next to a floor lamp she hadn't noticed, that threw a warm light up to the ceiling. They all sat down at the little folding table and Peter distributed paper napkins to everyone. As Laurel ate her nuggets, she ceremoniously dipped each bite, like the bite was a host and the plastic container of

ranch sauce the chalice. After she finished the last nugget, she licked the inside of the ranch container until Peter told her to stop.

“I love, I mean really love, ranch,” Laurel said in a serious tone. “If there was a swimming pool with ranch and not water, I would swim in it.”

Emmy laughed and Peter said, “I think you’ve had enough ranch for tonight,” as he wiped Laurel’s face with a napkin.

After dinner Peter went to the bathroom and ran a bath for Laurel. Emmy sat down on the mattress and turned on the TV. Peter came out and started clearing the table, and she turned down the volume so they could hear Laurel splashing around and talking to herself. Peter went back there eventually, and Emmy heard what sounded like an argument about Laurel having to wash her hair. A few minutes later she heard a blow drier and then Laurel came out in a yellow onesie, her hair still damp.

“Good night, Emmy,” she said. When Laurel said her name, it sounded like she was saying the letters, “M-E.” The little girl half turned, like she was going back into the bedroom, then stopped abruptly, and jumped onto the bed to give Emmy a hug.

“Goodnight,” said Emmy, laughing.

With her damp head pressed against Emmy’s shoulder, Laurel said, “You smell funny.” Emmy realized she probably still smelled like weed and felt a tinge of guilt. Still, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Go get in bed,” she said.

Peter came out once more and told her goodnight, and then closed the door to the bedroom, though he left it open a crack, which hadn’t been the case the last few nights. She turned the lamp off and left the volume on the TV low and lay down on top of the sheets. She felt

the cylinder in her jacket pocket and it took her a minute to remember what it was. She thought about calling Abe and seeing if he really would pick her up. She reached over to the coffee table to check if he'd texted, but he hadn't. She put the phone back and closed her eyes.

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Sometime in the night she wakes up, still on top of the sheets and still in her clothes. The TV is still on too, making a funny blue light show on the ceiling. She stands up and turns it off and lets her eyes readjust to the dark. She pulls off her boots and notices a dim reddish glow coming through the crack in the bedroom door. She pads across the carpet in her socks. A tiny jolt of static flashes when she reaches out and touches the handle. She slowly pulls the door open wide enough to slip through. She's not really sure what she's doing; she's nervous and ready to give a vague explanation about needing something from the bathroom but Peter is dead asleep. Laurel is sprawled out next to him with an arm hanging off the bed. The light is coming from an glass fishbowl filled with a bundle of rainbow Christmas lights. Just inside the door, she stands there watching them for a full minute. The sound of their breathing seems ridiculously loud, though she knows it's really just the rest of the world being so quiet around them.

Emmy used to have asthma attacks as a child, and her dad didn't always have her inhaler refilled on time. The weight she feels on her chest now is something like the way that used to feel—like there's something blocking her airway, when it's really just her own throat seizing up on her.

They look so peaceful and yet all Emmy can feel is this overwhelming sense of dread. She's not sure if it's jealousy or rage or both. Her own father never did anything terrible to her, but she never slept in his bed with him, or would have wanted to, and now looking at Peter and

Laurel she feels this gulf, and she wants to crawl in between them, or scream at them, or never see them again.

She steps back into the other room and quietly pushes the door closed.

After she calms down, she picks up her phone and sees she's missed several texts. She opens the door to the breezeway and a blast of muggy air hits her, and she considers one last time crawling into the clean sheets, but the living room feels too foreign to her now. When she was back in Florida and it was so hot outside, she would go to the mall by herself just to walk in the air conditioning and smell all the new clothes and the cinnamon rolls and see people buying things. She would sit near people on the green-tiled wall around the fountain, listen to them having things to say to each other, or she would trail a short distance behind the families that walked around in packs.

She locks the door handle and hesitates one more time before pulling it closed, hearing the latch catch. She puts her hands in her pockets, feels her phone, the scrip bottle. Her feet rasp against the bare concrete. The lights in the breezeway throw shadows of her in different directions.



## Intracoastal

I feel a little nervous on my way to pick up Ally. For one, she has never been to Corpus Christi before. We met six months ago when I was up in Austin for some work, and I'd been going back every few weeks, sometimes under the pretense of my job, sometimes just so I could see her. She has never travelled to see me, never even mentioned the idea until recently. I understand. There's more to do there—better restaurants, better bars. I feel let down sometimes coming back to Corpus. I don't blame her for not jumping at the chance to visit.

The other reason I'm nervous is that I wasn't planning on having my daughter with me when I picked up Ally. She knows I have a daughter—it's not like it's some surprise—but I was hoping to introduce them on Saturday, at dinner, not today at the airport. But my ex-wife begged off at the last second. So I have Gretchen with me. And Gretchen isn't helping to calm my nerves, sitting in the backseat, needling me with questions while we crawl through traffic.

“Dad, is Ally your girlfriend?”

She says “girl” with about eight extra r's. All the r's sound like they're being pan-fried. Such an obvious question. Gretchen made several feints toward it after I stupidly mentioned a



while back that I was going to Austin to see a friend. Feints like, “Is your friend a girl?” With which I had parried, “No, sweetie, she’s a woman.”

I don’t quite know how to answer the girlfriend question. On the one hand, I don’t think Ally thinks about our relationship that way. So telling Gretchen, No, Ally isn’t my girlfriend would be honest and maybe the right thing to do. But Gretchen is thirteen and I don’t want to wade into the nuances of how my relationship with Ally isn’t easily categorizable.

I tell her, “Yes, Ally is my girlfriend.”

This is what she wants to hear.

We idle past the old mall. The Sears is still open, but the other businesses are shuttered. Retirees power-walk through wide, empty halls. Less than a mile down the freeway is the new mall, where pretzel stands and rhinestone kiosks and teenagers now congregate. Gretchen’s mother drives the two hours to San Antonio, so they can shop at Neiman Marcus or Saks.

“Dad, is Ally going to stay with us?”

Yes, I tell her.

Then she asks, “Why is it that only males are colorblind?” Followed by, “Are you colorblind?” then, “What color is that sign?” and just when she thinks she has me disarmed, she throws in, “Why didn’t Ally drive a car here? Is she old enough to drive?”

Did her mother put her up to that question, or is my daughter this devious?

It’s true that Ally is a bit younger than me. I told my ex-wife, She’s a mature twenty-three. We both laughed. We didn’t laugh because it wasn’t true. We laughed because it was such obvious thing to say, because I was so obvious.

“Very funny,” I say. “Yes, she can drive, but her car isn’t working right now, so she decided to take a plane. Flying is fun, right?”

“Mom let me order Bloody Mary mix when we flew to Denver,” says Gretchen.

“That’s fun,” I say.

“I’ve never had anything so disgusting in my life.”

The freeway lifts off and becomes an overpass. A personal injury lawyer looks at me from a billboard with his one eye. The eyepatch conveys both a fighting spirit and personal experience with injury, I think. Seagulls float around the billboard like patrons at a gallery. The sky is virgin blue, not a single cloud.

It’s true that Ally’s car broke down. Or that’s what she told me. Something about her windshield. After a few drinks I texted her back: If you want, I’ll get you a plane ticket, I have a bunch of points saved up. Not true about the points. I didn’t really think she’d accept.

Ally’s out on the sidewalk, a dark green duffel at her feet. Above her the sunlight bounces off the big terminal windows and hits me in the face. She wears sandals and denim shorts, a black tank under an oversized flannel. Her hair has been cut since the last time I saw her. It’s above her shoulders now, a short black curtain.

I pull to the curb and reach across to open the door for her. She throws the duffel in and smiles as we say hello. Gretchen is staring at her. She has been quiet since we exited the freeway. She has a withdrawn expression but can’t take her eyes off Ally.

Ally sits in the passenger seat with her legs folded so she can reach back and extend a hand to Gretchen.

“I’m Ally. You must be Gretchen,” she says.

Gretchen takes her hand weakly and nods. Ally turns and gives me a hug around my neck. She brings a nice smell, like vanilla or sandalwood—something not too flowery—into the car.

“The flight was horrible,” she says. She adjusts into the seat and takes off the flannel. She places it in her lap and begins to play with a corner of fabric like she’s praying a rosary.

“The man in the seat next to me, the smell,” she goes on. “I kept thinking about the time I had to climb up and look for a dead rat in my grandmother’s attic. And get this, halfway through the flight, he takes out the bag, you know the one in case you have to throw up, clears his throat and spits into it! And then he just puts it back in the seat pocket!”

“What a nightmare,” I say.

“Why didn’t you drive?” Gretchen asks her.

I look at Gretchen in the rearview mirror. She’s staring straight ahead, into Ally’s seat.

Ally twists her torso so she can look back. “That’s a weird thing. Two weeks ago I drove to Dallas to visit my mom. I drive there a lot. My car isn’t fancy, like this,” Ally brushes her hand across the leather headrest, “but it gets me from A to B. So I spend the weekend in Dallas and I’m driving back to Austin, and somewhere in between, where there aren’t any other cars around, without any kind of warning,” Ally claps her hands, “my windshield shatters!”

Ally turns to me. “It fucking shattered!” Then she winces and looks apologetic.

“It’s *not* even a big deal,” says Gretchen.

“You’re right, it’s not. Just no more at school, okay?” I tell Gretchen.

“So anyways,” Ally continues, “it was like somebody had thrown an invisible brick through my windshield. Glass everywhere. I was screaming, but still going seventy, and there’s so much wind I can’t hear myself, so it was like screaming underwater. I pull over, obviously, and there’s chunks of glass, little Jolly Ranchers, on the dash and in my lap and caught in my hair. I look in the mirror and there’s blood running down my face.” Ally lifts up her bangs, carefully, like she’s peeling back a bandage. The cut is closed now, but still visible above her

right eye, about an inch long. It's at an angle to her eyebrow, and it gives the geometry of her face a quizzical aspect. She drops her bangs.

"That is the most terrifying thing," says Gretchen, "but don't worry about the scar. I saw in a magazine that scars are attractive. As long as it's not huge or hideous—which yours isn't, and don't worry, I'd tell you—you should think of it like a beauty mark."

Ally laughs. "Thanks," she says.

I reach over and squeeze Ally's shoulder. "God, I'm sorry," I say.

"I never figured out what happened," Ally went on. "I got my windshield replaced, but it makes me nervous to drive on the highway now. I wasn't sure if I could make it down here."

"That's completely understandable," says Gretchen. "Do you believe there might have been other forces at work?"

"How do you mean?" says Ally.

"Oh, religious, paranormal, karmic, something like that. I've read some fantastic things online about spontaneous combustion. Not to compare apples and oranges," says Gretchen.

"How about dinner?" I say.

"Can we go to Charlie's?" Gretchen asks.

We drive southeast. I try to orient Ally a bit. The freeway we're on is South Padre Island Drive, which everyone calls S-P-I-D. The city has a little downtown along the Bay though we can't see it. We're about to take a bridge called the Causeway. The Causeway will take us over the Intracoastal Waterway, a two-mile wide channel that separates the mainland from Padre Island; people here only ever say, the Island. The Island is only two miles wide itself, though over one hundred miles long, stretching south almost all the way to the border—a slender saber of land between the Intracoastal and the Gulf. The better beaches are on the far side of the Island.

Gretchen perks up at the mention of beaches and asks Ally if she's ever been windsurfing.

"I've never been any sort of surfing," says Ally.

"We should go," Gretchen says, and then resumes staring out the window.

Traffic is just beginning to subside. The sky is still clear, and the light has that quality it often has here—not hazy, exactly, but diffuse—a quality I associate in my mind with the ever-present salt tang in the air. All around is concrete white. Freeway pylons, parking lots and shopping centers, punctuated by signs in reds and oranges and yellows—a Red Lobster, a Whataburger, a McDonald's.

It's five o'clock. I switch on the radio to catch the headlines. The hum of news in the background is comforting. I let my hand fall across the console to take Ally's, still fidgeting with the flannel shirt in her lap. She looks at me and smiles.

The freeway opens and as we gain speed the development thins out, turns into motels and storage units and car lots. We pass through Flour Bluff, where the naval base is located, and then we're on the Causeway. Over the first mile the bridge is low, and you almost feel level with the water. It reflects the light obliquely, that same shade of concrete white, as if some ancient development here had become molten and settled into flatness.

The last section of the Causeway rises high over the shipping channel. Up here I feel some separation from the city. Looking down at the water I can make out some greens and blues. Light moves across the water's surface.

Charlie's Restaurant sits along the channel, on a small breakwater just off the Island. The restaurant itself is almost directly beneath the high arch of the Causeway. To get there we have to make a u-turn and drive underneath the bridge, through the film-reel shadows of the tall support

pillars. The breakwater is barren other than Charlie's and a marina next to it.

Gretchen tells us she's positively starving. Gretchen has a matchstick frame and a voracious appetite these days. I tell her not to be melodramatic.

Gretchen asks, "Are you aware that a six-person crew is living in complete isolation on the high desert of Hawaii, in preparation for a spaceflight to Mars?"

"Yes, sweet pea," I say. "They just talked about it on the news. And the scientists aren't actually going to Mars, they're just doing experiments."

"Hmmm," says Gretchen.

Here's the sort of place Charlie's is: you order at the counter, cash only. The choices are simple: choice one, fried fish, fried shrimp or fried oysters; choice two, fries or hush puppies; choice three, American beer in a bottle, or Mexican beer in a bottle (soda or lemonade, for Gretchen). Ally and Gretchen both go for the shrimp. I get the fish. They both choose fries and I get hush puppies, for variety's sake. Ally says she doesn't care what kind of beer, so I get us both a Tecate, and Gretchen gets a lemonade.

The restaurant's interior is tight and dingy. Low ceilings, lots of unfinished wood, polaroids and trophy fish on the walls. Outside there's an open deck, picnic tables with shade umbrellas and a view across the Intracoastal. The Causeway stretches away from us, its evenly spaced pillars like some colossal gateway across the water.

We sit down at a table next to the railing. Below us fish move through the water in quick, synchronized bursts. Before she eats each shrimp, Gretchen picks off a bit of breading and flicks it over the rail, sending the little fish into a flurry.

"If you had to go on a spaceship with only five other people, who would you choose?" Gretchen asks.

“You mean like those scientists?” asks Ally.

“Exactly,” Gretchen says.

“That’s a tough one,” says Ally. “I’d want some sort of engineer, in case our spaceship malfunctioned.” She starts to count on her fingers, “Someone funny, to keep me entertained, a world-renowned chef, a masseuse, and my dog, Candace.”

“Your dog’s name is Candace?”

Ally nods, but Gretchen has already turned to me. “Who would you take, dad?”

“I don’t know, I’d have to think about it,” I say. “But don’t worry, sweetie, you’re probably in my top five.”

I wink at Gretchen and reach across the table to steal a fry. Gretchen doesn’t wait for one of us to ask her.

“I would take mom, and you, and Bruce, and Ally, you can come, and of course Katie—that’s my best friend,” Gretchen says.

I stare out at the water where the lowering sun has stretched out like a silver ingot. From nearby, I hear someone call my name. The only other people on the deck are two elderly couples, not talking to each other, let alone to me. Gretchen points to where Bruce, my ex-wife’s husband, is waving to us from beside the sail of his red-hulled Laser. As if by mentioning his name, Gretchen had conjured him, summoned him to board the spaceship.

Bruce tacks the boat toward us, and is able to maneuver so that he’s close enough to talk without shouting.

“I’m guessing you’re Ally,” Bruce says and waves.

“Nice to meet you,” she says, laughing at the awkward distance.

“Will you take me and Ally windsurfing?” Gretchen asks him.

“I don’t know, Gretch. We’ll have to see if we can to make that happen,” Bruce says.

“What great weather,” he goes on, looking up at the sky. “What do you guys have planned?” he asks me.

“Just trying to enjoy the sun,” I say, “hit the beach, maybe drop a line or two if I can talk her into it.”

“That’s great,” says Bruce, smiling.

The sail begins to luff, and I tell him he better get moving while he’s got the wind. He keeps waving as he glides off. I like Bruce. I’m happy he said hi, but also glad for the enforced distance.

“I like Bruce,” Gretchen says, “but I’ve been thinking. Maybe I’ll leave him behind.”

I look over at Ally, who’s watching the sailboat diminish. Ally asks me what kind of fish we might catch. I tell her, redbfish, maybe speckled trout. She says she’s never been fishing before.

“Six people might be too many,” Gretchen says. “Maybe five is too many. I might just want us and mom.”

I look across the table at Gretchen, trying to decipher her words, wondering if she is being devious bringing up me and her mother. I don’t think she is. Her eyes are half closed and she’s not really talking to anyone in particular. She’s staring out across the water, like Ally.

“Yeah,” Gretchen says, “maybe the fewer the better.”

Ally nods, somewhat slowly.

The sun is on the horizon. Now the reflection is long and thin and orange and seemingly points right toward us. Ally’s dark hair picks up the deeper light and the crown of her head glows like a cinder.



Without looking Ally reaches over to touch my leg. Then she brushes back her bangs, a thoughtless gesture. She reveals the slick pink scar tissue above her eye.

“I could never do it,” Ally says. “I would miss people too much.”

The sun falls below our line of sight. A raft of pelicans, stark against the water, is visible now in the direction of the bridge. Gretchen’s chin rests on the wood railing, and her eyes are closed.

“Would you go to Mars, dad?” Gretchen asks.

“I don’t think I’m cut out for it,” I say.

But what I mean by this is: of course I would go—of course fewer social obligations and a clear objective in life sound appealing. Only, I feel it’s necessary to give a bland answer, to avoid those other questions that might follow the truth. Questions like: why I’d want to go, and, once again, who I’d want to take. I wonder whether Gretchen has any idea of this. I think maybe she does.

Gretchen says, “I would absolutely go.”

## Afterlife

Jim wakes with a slight headache. For just a moment he forgets where he is. Those two glasses of wine last night—twice as much as he’s become used to. The clock reads still another two hours till morning check-in. The particular cruelty of late night drinking—to wake early after a poor sleep.

The sound of Vanessa’s breathing, slow and rhythmic, rises from the bunk below. The room is small, beds to one side, storage modules opposite. The Ship was designed with a bias toward communal space.

Jim pushes the heel of his palm against his forehead to relieve the pain. He glances again at the clock. The numbers glow, pale green above the door to the hall. He feels a hint of longing for his past life, when time had some meaning; when an idea like “morning” was more than just a delusion agreed upon by the six of them.

These little stabs of nostalgia have grown less and less frequent. For the most part, he feels content with his lot in life, which, for the most part, is the Ship. He has spent the last two years onboard, and he is now thirty-one years old. He will be a couple months shy of his sixty-

second birthday when they land; if they land.

Jim reaches his hand to the ceiling and spreads his fingers over the dense, warm foam there—the same material that covers the walls and floor. The foam is smooth and slowly springy, holding the indentation of his hand for a second before flattening again, regaining its right shape.

In Jim's mind the Ship isn't an object hurtling through space, anymore than the Earth seemed that way when he lived there. He's never seen the Ship from the outside. He thinks of it as a great honeycomb of foamy membrane, passageways and soft steps, blind nooks and the big vaulted Rec Room.

He rolls over and drops to the floor, lands soundlessly on the squishy foam. Besides regulating the temperature, the foam also has something to do with the artificial gravity; Jim doesn't understand the science. His training is in "interpersonal dynamics."

He puts on sweatpants and a soft t-shirt. One aspect of his past life that he doesn't miss is the necessity of wearing shoes. Even the floors in the showers are foam—which Jim at first found disconcerting—designed to absorb the water and move it along to wherever it gets filtered.

Parallel rows of lights—two in the floor and two in the ceiling—blink on when he steps into the hall. The lights stretch in either direction and create the illusion of a rectangular passage, though the hall is a cylinder. The Ship's designers avoided sharp angles whenever possible.

Whether that was an aesthetic or functional choice, he has no idea.

The door to the galley slides open with a quiet swish. The lights are already on. Jim can smell coffee and bananas even before he walks in. Laura sits at one of the tables—thick solid discs of blonde wood—in front of her a blue mug, some green bananas, a couple empty peels in a heap. Suspended above each table are bare bulbs emitting warmth in wide-spectrum rays to jumpstart their circadian rhythm.

“You have trouble sleeping too?” Jim asks.

Laura nods with squinted eyes.

Jim opens a cabinet of matching blonde wood, takes another blue mug and fills it from a gleaming coffee urn. He sits at the table and mimes shaking open a newspaper.

“Let’s see about the weather,” he says. “Yup, going to be another cold, dark, and empty day out there.”

Laura smiles and sips from her coffee. A look moves across her face. Her big eyes are open wide now, and she’s staring intently into her mug as if she can see something swirling in the dark liquid there.

“I have this memory of me and my brother,” she says, “when we were kids; we built a snow fort and we kept yelling, ‘Remember the Alamo!’”

Jim reaches across the table and takes one of her hands.

“That was the last time I felt really cold,” Laura says. “I suppose I could turn the temperature way down, but it wouldn’t be the same. Not that I miss it. I hated being cold.”

“I never got to see snow,” Jim says.

“There were a lot of things I never saw that I would’ve liked to,” Laura says. “A leopard, or a stained glass window, or the Golden Gate Bridge. I’d swap snow for any of that.”

“Do you think we’ll dream while we’re in the Cold Tanks?” Jim asks.

“We’re not just taking a nap. But who knows? Dreams are your territory.”

The door swishes open, and Jim draws his hand back. Mike and Karen walk into the galley like they’re in a hurry to get somewhere. They always have this sort of air about them.

“Aren’t you two a couple of early birds?” Mike says.

Mike and Karen are always up well before the alarm. Karen is the Ship’s captain,

although the Ship does just about everything—maps its course, collects data, generates energy and food—with almost complete autonomy. A giant living organism. As captain, Karen would have final say if any critical decisions were to be made, but so far the Ship’s crew hasn’t encountered any. The Ship, it seems, has been designed to eliminate those.

Karen, nevertheless, bears herself like a captain, with a tight efficient ponytail and a confident disposition. Mike, her partner, is an astrophysicist. He spends an hour or two each day doing “interpretive analysis,” as he calls it, on the data the Ship collects. Mike confessed to Jim that the work was meaningless. Jim is the crew’s counselor, who, for his part, struggled with how he was supposed to mediate or resolve conflict; until, maybe a year or so into the trip, he realized that the jobs were just play-acting, designed to give a sense of structure and purpose, but never truly important to the Mission.

“Are those fresh bananas?” Karen asks.

“I picked them last night,” Laura says, breaking off two bananas to hand to Jim before tossing the bunch to Karen.

The night before, Jim went with Laura to the Greenhouse. He held the ladder while she searched the heavy clusters for any bunches ripe enough to eat. One tree’s fruit was just far enough along—Jim and Laura agreed they liked it that way, tart with a chalky texture. Jim loved spending time in the Greenhouse, whether or not there was anything to harvest. He loved the orange buzz of the lamps, the heat and the humidity, the constantly running water, the hoses and misters always dripping somewhere, the smell of wet soil and the tang of wet metal, row after row of mesh steel tables. And underfoot the damp foam like bleached sphagnum.

The Greenhouse is Laura’s purview, as the biologist among the crew. None of the food grown there is crucial to their survival. Somewhere in the Ship is an enormous aquaponics

system, the Farm, that provides the bulk of their food. The Farm is almost entirely automated. Laura tests every couple of weeks to confirm that it is running smoothly, which it always is. Jim has long since come to take for granted the blue gill or yellow perch, eggplant or arugula, as well as all the other food that the Ship provides them from its unseen depths. Always along with instructions for cleaning, steaming, roasting or sautéing.

“What’s going to happen in the Greenhouse while we’re under?” Mike asks.

“Everything will die,” Laura says, “but we’ll have seeds to start over with, for when we’re back.”

“What about the fish?” Mike asks.

“Hopefully nothing changes in the Farm,” Laura says. “Everything should continue running as usual down there.”

Laura paused. “But if the Farm were to fail,” she said, her smile fading, “which it won’t, then I suppose we’d all starve to death after we came out of Suspension.”

“Would you rather,” Jim asks, to no one in particular, “the Farm fails while we’re in the Tanks; or, not to come out of the Cold Tanks at all, just float off into oblivion?”

“God, don’t be morbid,” Karen says, taking a plastic pitcher from the refrigerator and pouring herself a green smoothie. “Nothing’s going to fail.”

Jim finishes his coffee and says he’s going to shower before check-in. Laura stands up to leave as well. Jim and Laura step into the hall and walk in opposite directions. Jim heads toward his room. He rounds a curve, and rows of lights blink on, creating the illusion that the passage is lengthening, stretching out to accommodate him or propel him forward.

The washroom near Jim’s bunk is cramped, just a sink next to two doors. The sink is a bright, hollow hemisphere, the faucet gracefully arched over the basin like a line of longitude.

Above the sink his toothbrush sits next to Vanessa's. He studies his face in the mirror. In so many ways he is the same as Mike, the same as Steve, the same as almost every man he has ever known. Same height; same build; same dark hair, shiny with just a slight wave to it; same skin, somewhere between copper and terracotta.

It feels good to see his face, remind himself that it's his own. The genetic changes came after the Population Crisis. He's not sure whether the changes that made everyone so similar were the solution to the Crisis, or more a byproduct of the solution; it didn't really matter. The uniformity doesn't bother him, but he feels glad that whoever or whatever designed the way everyone looks recognized the importance of being able to distinguish faces.

Jim's eyes trace a familiar path from feature to feature, the ones that are different from Mike, different from Steve. The lines on his forehead are unique, like the lines on a palm. The relationship between his eyes and nose and mouth is like a code, a constellation only he can see. He runs a finger down the bridge of his nose, feels the notch there, an accident in adolescence, an errant elbow.

He brushes his teeth. He steps behind one door to use the toilet, steps behind the second door and takes a towel from a wooden peg. Behind yet another door is the shower stall. Modules. Compartments. Division. The glass door to the stall is frosted, but Jim can faintly make out the scatter of warm lights that have blinked on, in the floor, walls, ceiling. He walks out of the room and the lights blink out.

In the large hall of the Rec Room, only the lights around the perimeter of the dome turn on. The highest vault of the dome is left in shadow, giving the impression that the room has no ceiling. Jim skirts the perimeter and enters a swishing door that leads to another washroom. This one is larger, with several sinks, a floor-to-ceiling mirror, and two long teakwood benches. He

sets his towel on a bench and takes his clothes off. He passes through a sauna where more benches are arranged in ascending, nested arcs, like a miniature colosseum. The lights here remain dim, as they always do. One more door and he is in a brighter room, three showerheads built into one wall and a raised copper tub opposite. Laura is underneath one of the showerheads, which are as big as dinner plates.

They warned him during training that this would inevitably happen. He wishes, as the one trained in “interpersonal dynamics,” that he wasn’t the first to stray. Maybe, having been warned, it was bound to be like this, a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Neither one says anything as Jim walks through the steam to stand behind Laura. He moves the wet hair from her shoulders and leans down to kiss the bump of her vertebra. They’ve met like this three times now, always here.

Why is he doing this? Despite being here with Laura, he *had* grown to care about Vanessa over the past couple of years. How could he not?

Jim didn’t know Vanessa before they left the planet. None of the crew knew one another. An algorithm assigned the six of them to the Ship. The assignment was not exactly a privilege. If they had been lucky, had more success earlier, distinguished themselves in some way from the masses, then they wouldn’t be here. As it was, they were each guided by their own unique desperation onto the Ship.

After takeoff, Karen and Mike were the first crew members to pair up. Their compatibility was clear even in the first few days of the voyage. Jim and Vanessa, as well as Laura and Steve were slower to form partnerships, but considering the duration it was only natural. Soon enough the couples fell into an easy rhythm, as though lulled by the Ship.

And now here he is with Laura. Laura and Vanessa look the same. Same height, same



skin, same hair. Same legs, same waist, same stomach, same breasts. There are small differences: Laura's fingernails are rounder, she has a mole on her collarbone, she doesn't shave as often under her arms. And her face is different. But not more attractive, he thinks. There is something about her face that draws him to her, something unidentifiable that punctures him. Perhaps it's partly the novelty—he recognizes that possibility.

Laura is more selfish when it comes to sex and this is another part of his attraction. She is not as giving of herself, she demands more from him, and he finds this makes him want her all the more.

In the end, he thinks—or he believes—that what is happening with him and Laura has as much to do with his feelings about the Mission as anything else. He can talk to her in a way that he can't with Vanessa.

Afterward they stand with their bodies pressed together under the warm spill of water. His lips are pressed against her forehead and he works his fingers under the heavy curtain of her hair, massages her scalp. Her hands are wrapped around him and she runs her fingertips down his spine. His mind follows the motion downward—through his legs to his feet, planted in the warm foam, and down still, through all the strange machinery, reactors and circuitboards, green growth and bright bubbling pools, and down still, until he can feel the big, azoic nothingness where there is no more down, only distance, outwardness.

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At morning check-in the crew discusses the procedure for the Cold Tanks. This will be the first of three stints. For each stint they will spend five years in Suspension. They will not age. After they come out of the Tanks, they will spend ten years on the Ship, doing what they've been doing—play-acting to pass the time—and then five more years in Suspension. And repeat. A

final ten year stretch, and then they arrive at their destination. All told, the trip will take them nearly fifty years, but they will be in Suspension for fifteen of these. Were it possible, they would spend more of the trip in the Tank—squirrel away more years for after they arrive—but their three stints already slightly exceed the maximum deemed medically safe.

Jim sits next to Vanessa during the meeting. He tries to read anything in her face, but she barely glances at him. He looks at her from across the gap that separates them, narrow but deep as a crevasse, at least from his perspective. He wonders whether she can sense it and to what extent. All he can see for sure is that she looks tired, typical at morning check-in. He feels tired. They all do, except Karen and Mike, annoyingly alert.

Karen leads them to examine the Tanks. The crew has only just gained access. Until yesterday this whole section of the Ship was closed off. Steve came to run some diagnostics but no one else has seen the Tanks before.

Jim worried they would look like coffins, that he would feel like a vampire crawling into one, but what he sees first look more like easy chairs. The crew will simply sit down, make themselves comfortable, and they'll go under. He can see where the floor will open up in order for the Ship to whisk them away.

They make their way down a long passage and enter a space almost as big as the Rec Room. Six corrugated metal ducts lead from the ceiling to six spherical metal vats, the Tanks themselves. Each sphere is ten feet across. Each has a console and a display that currently shows only the time.

Jim isn't sure whether, having seen them, his fear of going into Suspension is heightened or soothed. It's different, now that he knows what they look like. He wonders what the others think, but no one is saying anything as they make their way back to the familiar Habitation

section.

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The afternoon passes like most others. The crew spends a couple hours at their assigned tasks. Karen and Mike retreat to the Command Bay, where they needlessly double-check navigational charts and astronomical readouts. Laura and Vanessa—who is a chemist—each have their own laboratories that they keep in working order for potential analysis of materials collected by the Ship’s probes. Steve is a programmer and Jim is pretty sure he mostly spends his work time playing video games versus the Ship’s artificial intelligence. For Jim, this time is spent logging a status report on Ship-wide morale. Jim chooses “Copacetic” from a list that also includes “Concordant,” “Prickly” and “Fractious.” He confirms that there have been no injuries, illnesses or physical altercations in the past week.

The mandatory group exercise activity for the day is a game of dodgeball in the Rec Room. A string of lights in the floor divides the activity court, and the gravity in the Rec Room is adjusted so that everyone can jump a little higher and throw the foam balls a little farther. The Ship randomly selects teams, and today Jim finds himself paired with Karen and Mike, who always take these games the most seriously. Jim doesn’t try very hard but his team wins every match because Karen and Mike play like their lives are at stake.

Jim takes a nap, alone in his bunk, before the crew eats dinner. They are uncharacteristically quiet at the meal. He attributes this to the collective anxiety about going into Suspension for the first time tomorrow.

After dinner the crew again parts ways. Jim goes to his favorite spot for contemplation: a catwalk that leads to one of the rarely used Control Rooms in a remote stretch of the Ship. The catwalk is a narrow ledge in a high foam wall that overlooks several cylinders the size of grain

silos. For all Jim knows they might be storage containers or they might be nuclear reactors. He dangles his feet over the ledge and looks down at them half-covered in shadow.

He thinks about the question he and Laura discussed the night before: whether to tell Vanessa and Steve before or after their stint in the Tanks. He thinks about all that time in Suspension. It's not a nap, Laura said. It's not sleep, and it's not dying. His mind can't really hold on to the fact that even though five years will pass, he won't grow any older. Will coming out of Suspension be like waking up, or will it be something unknown? Will he feel any different? There's a part of him that feels like he must, after five years, but logically he knows that he probably won't. A part of him can't help but hope, despite logic, that things will be different, hope that Vanessa might be able to forgive him, hope that his faith in the Mission might be changed.

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A little later he meets Laura in the Greenhouse. They sit next to each other on the foam floor, their backs against the wall. They are in the succulents room, one of the side rooms off the main Greenhouse. The orange lights glare fiercely in the hot, dry air. They sit close to one another, but not touching.

"Did you and Steve ever talk about Afterlife?" Jim asks her.

"We did, but never seriously," Laura says. "You know, the things I assume everyone talks about: being back on Earth, spending time outside, mountain air, sleeping next to a beach, red steak for dinner every night, doing all the drugs we could ever want."

Jim laughs.

"For a while Vanessa would talk about raising a family," he says. "But what does it mean to raise children there? Who would they be?"

He reaches up and takes a small plastic pot holding a button cactus from one of the mesh tables. He taps the pad of his index finger lightly against the starburst array of spines covering the little globe.

“What does it mean?” Laura says. “Nothing, I guess, just another role to play. They would be characters, algorithms or something. Still, I can see the appeal.”

Afterlife is the reason for their Mission. Afterlife is a simulated reality where a consciousness, freed after death, can experience the Earth as it was—a reincarnation of sorts. They explained to Jim how, after consciousness is restored, it gets to choose a new form, a vessel. “Be whoever—or whatever—you want to be!” And that’s just the first choice. The possibilities are endless. The template is Earth, before the Crisis, and they assured him that the attention to detail is exquisite.

Jim learned most of this in a promotional video he watched years earlier. The voiceovers, cinematography and special effects made quite an impression on him. In a roundabout way, the video led him here, traveling at a healthy fraction of the speed of light, toward a potentially habitable planet at the farthest reach of space currently accessible in the span of a lifetime.

Afterlife created a renewed imperative for expansion. Humankind discovered the ability to build digital heavens, and then they discovered a moral obligation to provide them to as many people as possible. This obligation required resources, outposts, excavation, construction on a scale unseen for centuries. For reasons of economy, still only about half of all people are currently able to earn access.

Jim is on the Ship because he wants access to Afterlife. Everyone does. But back on Earth, Jim was, conventionally, a failure. He was a social worker and also fancied himself an artist—a poet, primarily, though he dabbled in painting and sculpture. In his art and in his job he

was unsuccessful. He had no hope for Afterlife until he was accepted for the Mission.

The Mission, in one sense, is no sure thing. If conditions on the planet aren't as expected they will spend their final years in orbit. If the planet is habitable, they will assist the Ship in making the necessary preparations for future travelers. But they aren't colonists themselves; they are not the Adams and Eves of a distant world; procreation is not in their genes. The crew members are just canaries in the coal mine. Needed for efficiency, but in the big picture incidental. And Jim is happy being a canary: it means he will have met the required burden. When he dies, some part of him, the essential part, will be uploaded and transmitted—a light beam achieving its full and proper speed, at which it will still spend forty years in the void—to a bank of servers where Afterlife awaits.

He sets aside the button cactus and stands up, flexes his knees, spreads his toes out on the foam. He grasps both of Laura's hands and helps her to her feet.

"What are we going to do?" she asks.

"Put it off for five years?"

"I suppose now we've waited too long. We'll have to tell them after."

"From our perspective, we're only putting it off another day. Less than a day."

"Do you think we'll be different, feel differently, after we come out of the Tanks?"

"I don't think so." He looks into her eyes, dark brown, little discs of jasper. He stays there holding onto her hands.

"No, I don't either."

"Assuming we even make it out of the Tanks," he says, smiling.

"Don't be so morbid!"

"Let's have some wine."

Wine is one of the few items that is rationed somewhat strictly on the Ship. Each crew member is allotted one glass per night, but Laura discovered that Mike and Karen never drank their glasses and that the Ship would give them to her.

Laura and Jim sit in the galley, sipping their first glass of wine, then their second over the wide wooden table. It's late and they don't see anyone else. The wine is a malbec, spicy and good on its own. Laura puts her hair up in a ponytail and does an impression of Karen on the dodgeball court, and Jim laughs until he gets the hiccups.

For a while he is able to forget the anxiety he feels about the next day. Eventually they finish the wine and say goodnight. Before they leave the galley she kisses him, and he puts his hands on the sides of her face. Her skin, the mound of her cheekbone, the edges of her jawbone, he tries to remember these by touch, tries to trace the smooth outline of her self with his fingertips.

In the room Vanessa is already asleep, her breath once again slow and rhythmic. Jim has to concentrate when climbing to the top bunk, feeling the effects of the wine. He looks over at the dim, green numbers of the clock. Less than twelve hours.

Often when he has trouble sleeping, when he feels anxious about something, he'll resort to thinking about death. He doesn't see it as being morbid. It's comforting to him. He thinks about the emptiness that surrounds him and becoming a part of it.

He also likes to imagine waking up to circumstances completely different from those he fell asleep to. This is something he has done since he was a child. He wonders whether this is what dying and waking up in Afterlife might be like.

Eventually, Jim can't help but cast his thoughts toward the day ahead. The few remaining preparations for going into Suspension will pass with a nervous, automated swiftness. Before the

day is half done, the crew will go under. And then, as though on the very same day, they will come up again.

He can picture them coming up from Suspension. He will turn his head from left to right, prompting a satisfying pop in his neck. Everyone is stretching and shifting, testing their muscles and cracking their joints. Jim peels away the medical tape and gingerly removes the IV from the back of his hand. No one is ready to try out their vocal chords just yet, but Karen gives a theatrical thumbs up, and pretty soon all six of them are nodding and waving their thumbs like a bunch of hitchhikers.

Jim can picture the scene, but he doesn't know how he might feel. Probably the same. He will have to face the hurt and the awkwardness.

Lying there in the bunk, he feels as if he is on the edge of a precipice. Although he likes to imagine waking up a different person, he knows that he will not. He has fallen asleep more than 10,000 times and always woken up still himself.

He is ever slightly less sure about Suspension. He believes he will be the same person afterward. But he doesn't know it, and in truth this frightens him.

And at his core he is even less sure about Afterlife. He does—he has to—believe. But he doesn't know, not in his bones.

He falls asleep to the barely perceptible thrum of the Ship. Somewhere below, a reactor shudders to life.