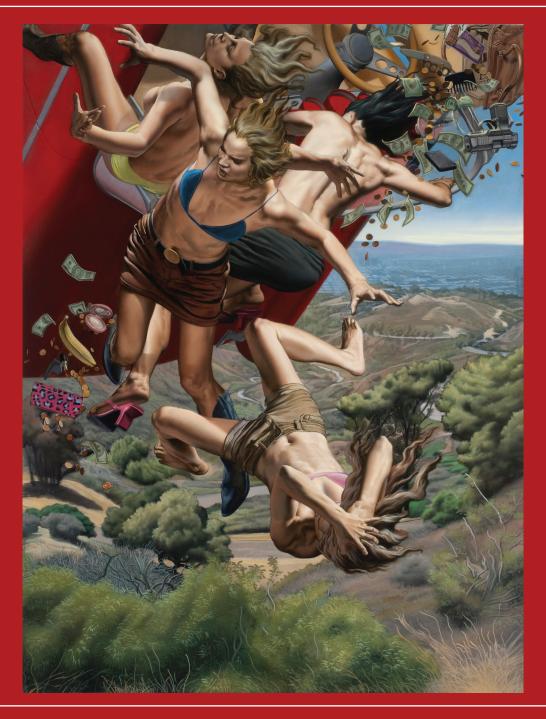
Printer's Devil Review







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Volume 4, Number 2 (Fall 2014)

Cover: Nicola Verlato. Crash 5. 2012. Oil on canvas, 36 in. x 48 in.

Printer's Devil Review (ISSN 2160-2948) is an independent, open-access journal of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and the visual arts. We are an online and print-on-demand journal and publish two issues per year, in spring and fall. Issues are available for free on our website in PDF format. Print editions are available for purchase from Lulu.com.

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We do not accept postal submissions. Please see the submission guidelines on our website.

Duly Noted

Congratulations to *PDR* contributors Emma Bolden and Candice Wuehle. Bolden won *Prime Number Magazine*'s flash nonfiction contest with her piece "About My Tenth Year as a Human Being." Wuehle's latest chapbook of poetry, *Curse Words*, was recently published by Dancing Girl Press.

We're pleased to welcome Emily Carroll as the new editor for our nonfiction section. Emily is a freelance writer, editor, graphic designer, and sometime waitress based in Boston. She is a co-curator of Moonlighting, the Boston Poetry Slam's LGBTQ reading series, and a producer of the New Sh!t Show Boston, a monthly performance event celebrating new work in a variety of genres. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Umbrella Factory* and *Guernica*.

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Lucy Alexander is a neurologist and writer who lives outside Boston. Her previous publications include the flash fiction piece "Raindrop Prelude" in the May 28, 2014 *Camroc Press Review* and the creative nonfiction piece "Cord" in the April 10, 2002 *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

KATHLEEN BOYLE recently received her MFA from San Francisco State University. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Zyzzyva*, *Poet Lore*, and the *Bellingham Review*.

JEREMY CANTOR's debut poetry collection, *Wisteria from Seed*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books. His poem "The Nietzsche Contrapositive" was awarded first prize in the *Grey Sparrow Journal*'s 2014 Poetry and Flash Competition. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Convergence*, *Heyday*, *Poetalk*, *The Bicycle Review*, *The Naugatuck River Review*, *Glassworks*, *Forge*, and *Prospectus*. Also forthcoming is a Leaf Press (Vancouver, Canada) "Leaflet" edition of his haiku and senryu, *The Owl at Sunset*. He began writing poetry shortly before retiring from a career in laboratory chemistry.

Jennifer Chadourne's fiction and nonfiction has appeared in numerous publications, such as *Hawk and Handsaw*, *Motif*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Lost*, *New Southerner*, and *Work*, and one of her essays was nominated for a 2013 Pushcart Prize. She completed her MFA at the New School in New York City in 2007, and currently tutors writing in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Caitlin Corrigan earned her MFA from Rutgers-Newark in 2014. Her fiction has appeared in *Word Riot, Monkeybicycle, NANO Fiction, Bartleby Snopes, Literary Orphans*, and the *Tin House* "Flash Fridays" feature. Caitlin also writes essays, poetry, and reviews, and is at work on her first novel. Reach her at www.caitlincorrigan.com.

SOPHIA HOLTZ is a writer, performer, and sometimes illustrator. She has performed her poetry in bars, colleges, and the occasional basement throughout the United States. Her work can be found in *CONSEQUENCE*, *Muzzle*, and *Potluck Magazine*, among others. Her website is sophiaholtz.com.

Hannah Larrabee considers herself tremendously lucky to have completed an MFA in creative writing, and to have engaged in two disparate fields of work: teaching and technology sales. Her chapbook, *Virgo*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2009 and nominated for a Massachusetts Book Award and a Pen New England Literary Award. Her poems have appeared in: *Best Indie Lit New England*, *Tidal Basin Review*, *Contemporary American Voices*, *Extract(s)*, *Conceit Magazine*, *Scarab Literary Magazine*, and others.

BILLY McGuinness is an interdisciplinary artist who maintains a solo practice and belongs to the Chicago-based Collective Cleaners. He has recently exhibited and/or performed at numerous locations, most notably the Jane Addams Hull House Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. In 2014, he had a solo exhibition at Illinois State University Galleries and was an artist-in-residence at Acre in Steuben, Wisconsin. He received his BA from the film program at ucla and his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he is currently employed as an instructor.

ZEKE RUSSELL grew up in an artists' community in central Maine, surrounded by poets and lumberjacks. Since then, he's been a rugby player, line cook, historian, cop, and teacher, but he now lives in Boston and works in homeless advocacy. He has competed in the National Poetry Slam and toured New England performing his poetry. Zeke is the author of three chapbooks, most recently *One Less Drunk*.

NICOLA VERLATO was born in Verona, Italy in February 1965. In these last years he showed principally in New York City and in various galleries and museums around the States, Italy, and Norway, but also in India as well as Germany, Holland, and other European countries. His major achievement has been his participation with an installation of paintings and sculptures as a representative of the Italian Pavillion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Since 2011 Nicola Verlato lives and works in Los Angeles.

Theodore Worozbyt's work has appeared or is forthcoming in Antioch Review, Best American Poetry, Crazyhorse, The Iowa Review, The Mississippi Review 30 Year Anthology, New England Review, Po&sie, Poetry, Sentence, Shenandoah, The Southern Review, TriQuarterly Online and Quarterly West. He has published two books of poetry, The Dauber Wings (Dream Horse Press, 2006) and Letters of Transit (The University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), which won the 2007 Juniper Prize. Impossible Objects appears in the inaugural issue of The Chapbook. His newest chapbook, The City of Leaving and Forgetting, is just out in Country Music.

CAITLIN CORRIGAN

Good Old-Fashioned People

Solved his truck around the traffic circle and parked on an empty side street. He'd never heard of anyone from town staying at the Grand. He didn't think it would look right to leave the delivery truck overnight in the lot. Lena had chosen the place and she'd made a point of telling him about Marilyn Monroe and DiMaggio staying there in fifty-two, back when she was a girl and her mother ran the hotel switchboard. He'd said it sounded great, sure. Downtown, right next to the falls.

Chet shut the lobby door hard and entered with his head bowed, the carpet thick beneath his thin loafers. Lena walked towards him from the fireplace, her narrow hips squeezing between a pair of leather wingback chairs. Chet swallowed once and couldn't think of a thing to say. She kept her hair long, braided and coiled like silver cable. The soft fuzz by her ears, backlit by the fire, shone white as his own. Her dress was buttoned down the front like a man's shirt, and over it she wore a coarse cable-knit sweater that opened in the front. It was the kind of thing a fisherman would wear, and he smiled like a fool, pleased at how sensible she was, how warm.

The last time he'd seen her was the night of Audrey's funeral. They'd met at an all-night diner in Buffalo. She hadn't attended the service. He'd come to her dry-eyed, seeking comfort. Lena had ordered tea and kept herself apart from him, not even an elbow within reach as he walked her

to her car. It seemed almost an afterthought when she turned to him before unlocking her sedan: the name of the hotel and a suggestion to meet in three weeks' time.

Now, she pushed a folded newspaper at him with both hands.

"Chet, here. The key's inside," she said. "Seventh floor."

The elevator ride up was slow and the mirrored walls trembled. He ran a hand over his face and wondered what Lena would think of him when they were finally alone. When he was a younger man and newly married, Audrey had been crazy for his face; she'd stroked it like a pet. His skin was coarser now from decades of cold and work and alcohol, but his chin and nose were still strong. Overall, he thought he'd held up.

The room key was a metal skeleton key, long and slender and tarnished, and he was glad. A card, a little rectangle of plastic, wouldn't look right in a place this old. He had a key like this at home for the door to the crawlspace by the kitchen, still full with Audrey's photo albums and knitting projects. His daughter Maggie had called him last summer from her honeymoon in Ireland sounding like a little girl again: all the B&Bs have skelly keys, like the one for Mommy's room. She'd sent a postcard every day. He'd lined them up on the dining room table, pleased that the months of trailing Maggie to the bridal shop had resulted in a beautiful party, and then ten picture postcards of sheep and rocks and sea. He'd felt so embarrassed in the bridal shop, he and Maggie wandering the racks of lace and satin, the smell of Audrey's antiseptic hospital room clinging to them both. But Lena had welcomed them to the shop warmly and did what Audrey could not: guided Maggie toward a dress that made Chet's breath catch in his throat.

Chet didn't want to think of Audrey and Maggie; he didn't want to be alone in the elevator at all. But Lena was careful. She always was. It had taken him months to convince her to join him for coffee. The second afternoon in the bridal shop, he'd lingered with Lena near the register while Maggie and her friends snapped pictures of trains and trims. Lena stood apart from him, her careful gaze on the girls.

It wasn't as if she didn't know who he was. Lena and Audrey had finished at LaSalle in the same class – sixty-five – and Lena's husband was just a year younger than Chet. Everyone said it was a shame that he'd

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passed so young. Chet had always wondered why Lena hadn't remarried. She'd been beautiful then; she was handsome now and seemed to know a thing or two about endurance.

By the fourth visit to the bridal shop with Maggie, Chet could distinguish the scent of Lena's perfume beneath the layers of too-sweet potpourri. He'd brought a business card from the liquor store, underlined his name next to the word "owner," and added his home number to the back. He still wore his wedding band (he'd worn it until the day after Audrey's funeral) but he thought his visits to the shop alone with the girls made his situation obvious. Lena eventually agreed to coffee, an occasional movie, and once, a touring musical matinee downtown. But she'd never been to his home, not once, and he'd never been permitted inside the upper half of the bridal shop that housed her apartment. Chet knew that his interest in Lena had begun as curiosity; he wondered how she'd learned, so successfully, to be alone. She was always meticulously groomed and dressed; she dictated their meetings with the same level of exactitude and an almost professional detachment. And now, this. A hotel and the line about DiMaggio. Like they were slummers doing something wrong, instead of two good old-fashioned people.

In the room, Chet hung his coat in the closet, lumped his gloves over a hanger to dry, and wished for a minibar. The water from the tap was cold and tasted of bleach. He dried the glass and put it back, lining it up with the others and replacing the paper seal.

Her knock was light, but he opened it before she was through, her fist still up at chest level.

Lena's lips parted in surprise, but no sound came out.

"Are you going to hit me?" he teased, then took her clenched hand to his lips.

She glanced right and left, her mouth frozen in a silent *shh*. A door opened down the hall and she pressed inside the room, freeing her hand to shut the door.

It was over in fifteen minutes, and afterwards Chet rolled away, his breathing labored and his body flushed.

Lena had been quiet, her sounds more like surprise than pleasure, a little questioning, "Oh?" in his ear. He couldn't even remember it feeling good; he felt numb still, and embarrassed. It had been a kind of release,

like a day's piss held in too long. She deserved something different from him after all this time, after all those long looks and chaste coffeshop conversations. He closed his eyes to gather his thoughts, and then it was dark and the blanket was on, his eyes gummy with sleep and Lena awake beside him.

"I'm sorry, I must have dozed off." Chet's voice was thick and he moved to roll towards her.

Lena pulled the blanket higher. "Chet -"

"Easy," he whispered. His eyes sought hers in the darkness.

"Chet, I'd like to be alone."

Chet opened his mouth, but nothing came. During his good years with Audrey, he could never keep quiet. They would lay in their narrow bed and Chet would talk to the creases of her neck, her knees, his words alive in the wet cleft of her. He shook his head, gradients of gray and white and black bringing the room into dim focus.

"I must have fallen right asleep." Chet bent to pull off one sock, then the other, ignoring Lena's high sigh behind him.

"Chet? Listen, I mean I want you to leave. I'll take a taxi home in the morning. I'm sorry."

Chet navigated the space between the bed and the wall and felt his way to the bathroom. He returned with two glasses of water and placed them on the small table that sat between the two queen beds. Chet pulled back the covers on the second bed as Lena moved to switch on the light.

Lena pressed at her neck. "If you don't mind, Chet. I could use some time alone." Her mouth dropped open in a yawn, strands of saliva stretching at the corners. He blushed at the sudden candor of her body and nodded.

"I get it. I'll stay right over here, out of your hair. You get some rest now." He lay down without waiting for her to respond. He felt more awake, having gone against her wishes. It was foolish, just as foolish as her insistence to go to the movies in Buffalo or Lewiston, where they wouldn't see anyone they knew, so afraid was Lena of shaming a dead woman she hadn't spoken to in thirty years. He would just as soon walk those three snowy blocks to his car as Audrey would appear now in the room, full of life and giving Lena whatever it was she seemed to think that she deserved. "Take a drive tomorrow," Chet murmured, acting

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sleepier than he felt. He rolled over, his back to her. "Niagara-on-the-Lake. Real nice lunches."

If Audrey had ever... he thought, but that wasn't a thought worth thinking. Audrey hadn't needed to kick him out of bed. Chet slept in Maggie's old room willingly those last few years before Audrey got sick. He'd lain there in the dark some nights listening for her. She wouldn't have had to say a thing, just come and stand by the bed. That would have been enough. But they'd turned away from each other, and there was no going back.

Lena clicked off the light without another word. Chet rolled his head on the pillow, eyes closed. He wasn't a brute and he wasn't a bad man. He and Audrey never let other people know about their troubles, especially not Maggie, although having her so late might have been what changed things. He could see that now. Chet could never rightly tell who started it, though he'd tried to place the blame over and over in his mind. It didn't much matter either way; his silence and her distance became two bears sharing the same dark hole. These were old thoughts, tired thoughts, and it felt strange to wonder them with Lena there in the dark, just beyond his reach.

It wasn't that he wanted to tell Lena these things. He'd said all he needed to in those last months in Audrey's hospital room. Only when she was sick and silent and locked away inside herself could Chet begin to speak to her again. He sat and talked about everything: where they'd gone wrong, the ticking sound the thermostat kept making, even Lena. Lena in her bridal shop helping Maggie into the gown. Lena and the copied pages of poetry she carried in her purse. The nurses patted Chet's arm when he left Audrey's room, praising his patience, his devotion. It was shameful. All that praise for something he should have been doing all along.

Lena woke when the first stripe of morning appeared beneath the heavy cream valance. She lay a while longer, willing the drapes to part on their own, to flood the room with golden light. She allowed herself a moment to imagine how it could be: their skin soft and honeyed in the sun, a tray of fruit and toast between them, strong coffee in china cups. *Look out the*

window at the noiseless snow. Chet's willfulness had been a surprise, as had her reaction to his decision to stay. It was what she'd needed: a show of force, a glimpse of a different sort of man beneath the kind, grieving father. It disturbed her that she was excited by his refusal, by his casual disregard of her wishes. It was better, wasn't it, to stay to one's self, not to have to parse through the emotions in one's own heart? She'd built much of her life around this belief, wrapped it in the guise of hard work and faith. Surely her prudence would lead to a kind of dignity.

She reached for the leather-bound menu on the nightstand, being careful to move without waking Chet or disturbing the full tumblers he'd placed there in the night. She would order for them. Something rich. Eggs Benedict, French toast, Croque-Madame. Forget the fruit for once. Lena stretched beneath the blankets, skimming her legs with the flat of her palm. She'd taken her time with her toilette, shaving her legs slowly and applying a cream one of the boys had given her for Christmas. She could smell it still on the sheets. Sweet almond. Made, Pat and Rob had told her, by fellow businesswomen in a small, war-torn part of the world. She felt like a good mother, a good citizen, just by virtue of using the cream and thinking about those women. They knew, as she did, how to go on after tragedy and provide something beautiful to the world.

Chet rolled once, but didn't wake. Lena eased out of the bed and over to the small case she'd left in the room before meeting Chet in the lobby. Her satin robe was dark with wrinkles, but she felt like she belonged in a room with a sleeping man when she tied it beneath her breasts. She placed the phone on the edge of the bed, then moved into the bathroom, stretching the long cord as far as it would go and closing the door behind her. The girl on the line had a high, sweet voice, and Lena was reminded again of her mother, the way she would set her hair and dress each evening after dinner for her shift on the switchboard.

Lena had been the oldest. She'd known to bathe her brother and sister and put them to bed, to check on her father and give him the pills her mother left each night in a paper cup. At ten, she'd imagined herself a young Florence Nightingale. She liked the feeling of moving through the house and checking the locks and windows, turning off the lights the way her mother had taught her. Her mother was more like Lucille Ball, painted and pretty, her voice sugary when Lena called each night

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with her bedtime report. It wasn't until Lena was in her teens that she questioned her mother's decision to make a child responsible for an ailing adult and two small children. She realized then that most mothers didn't put on makeup and go out to work in the evenings, or stay in their wrappers and drink coffee in the mornings while their children ate cold cereal and walked to the bus stop alone.

Lena ordered more than they could possibly eat. Afterward she stood for a moment in the bathroom, listening to the crackle and silence on the line. Chet would be startled to wake at the sound of the knock on the door; she knew she should wake him now, but was unprepared for such an intimate, domestic act. She didn't want to see his face flicker into awareness. She didn't want to talk. She wanted only to skip to the quiet of breakfast, the morning light, the promise of companionable hours behind a closed door on a Sunday.

Instead, she moved quietly through the room. She applied lipstick, threw the crumpled receipts and used tissues from her purse into the bin beside the window. The phone the boys had bought for her still seemed out of place, too large and efficient in the soft nest of mints and newspaper clippings she kept for times she needed to wait. They were good boys, men now, far away but diligent about sending pictures of their children and short, cheery notes; it seemed harder for them somehow to use the phone to hold a conversation, however brief. Lena was surprised then, to see a new voice message. It was Sunday; the shop was closed as it had been every Sunday for the past thirty years. Lena felt a quick pulse of guilt, imagining the explanations she would make next Sunday at mass. She'd gone to the four o'clock service at St. Mike's the previous afternoon before coming to the Grand, but Saturday never seemed to count.

Lena thumbed the screen. Her boys were preoccupied with their own families and besides, the number was unfamiliar. Lena settled on the ottoman by the window and pressed the phone to her ear. She played the recording twice and then a third time.

It was a policeman, young enough to mumble his name when he should have slowed down and stated it plain. An explosion on the street. Gas leak. The policeman left a number to call, but Lena was already buttoning up the front of her dress. Your property has suffered significant damage.

Her hands shook against her chest like a pair of small animals she was trying to hold. Pat had taken home the class gerbil once when he was seven. Rob was only five, and Lena was still keeping the shop closed until noon and staying in bed with the blinds drawn most mornings. The sound of the thing scratching at the cage had driven her crazy until she released it in the yard and placed the cage upside down on the floor with the door flung ajar. Staged a crime scene and blamed the boys when they came in from play, their negligence. Rob had wailed but Patrick said nothing, and Lena had felt judgment in his silence.

Your property. No one remembered that it had been his too, theirs. Lena clasped her fingers to her mouth and bit down to still herself. She put on her sweater and scarf and reached for the coat on the rack before she realized she was still barefoot.

"Lena?" Chet sat up in a series of small, grunting movements.

She'd entirely forgotten he was there. It carved her up, this willingness to forget about others in the presence of her own, more compelling emotions.

"I have to go." She hated that she had to sit and stoop to pull on her socks and boots.

"No," Chet said. "No, pet." She looked up at the name. She'd warned him. They weren't children.

"The shop," she said.

"It's Sunday."

"No," she said. "There's been an accident."

Chet did not tell her to wait, did not ask questions. She watched him without wanting to, the way he stood from the bed and moved to and then past her, reaching for his coat and gloves and sliding into his own shoes without socks, despite the cold. She was the one to pause, to call after him.

He turned just before he reached the door, his eyes still hooded with sleep. "You can tell me on the way. We'll take the truck."

"Let me," Lena said.

"Drive?"

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Caitlin Corrigan 1

"Let me take the truck. You stay."

"Here?" Chet unzipped his coat and came towards her again. "What's going on? Is this some kind of fib to get me out of here?" He reached for her.

Lena let him take her in his arms. His coat smelled like smoke and the cold old smell of the liquor store's walk-in cooler, where he kept cases of beer and champagne. Taking a taxi to the Grand had been foolish. She wanted to push past Chet to her own car, but it was at home, parked in front of the shop. And what? Destroyed now? She couldn't very well pull up alone in his delivery truck, but it would be worse still if Chet drove her there. She couldn't trust herself not to do what she was doing now, crumpling into him and crying in front of the police and who knows who else. Her neighbors. What if someone was hurt? She imagined blood on the snow and stood up straight again and wiped her eyes.

"We never should have come here." Chet held her elbows.

"Lena, for God's sake. What is it, a fire? Busted water pipe? Come on. I'll drive and you call your insurance."

"This was a mistake," Lena said. "I should have been there."

Chet pulled her to the door and she let him, scuffing her boots on the carpet as if she was a child. He didn't let her go when he reached for the security bolt, and this is how the boy with the weighted cart of silver trays saw them; the door opened before he had a chance to knock. Lena patted her fingers beneath her eyes and smiled like nothing was wrong. The boy looked away. He seemed to make himself a little smaller and pulled the cart to the side to allow them to pass.

"We decided to dine out after all," Lena called. The elevator made its sour creaking sounds. She fluffed her hair and smiled again at the boy, who was gazing stupidly towards them. "Charge the meal to the room and be sure to take care of your tip, dear." Lena watched the boy looking at them, then followed his gaze to the sight of Chet's ankles, bony and bare beneath the salt-stained hem of his slacks.

The police determined that the blast originated in the kitchen of the house directly behind Lena's, one street over. Something to do with fumes

and harmful chemicals, powerful enough to send pieces of a stranger's bathroom through the double-block windows of the bridal shop.

Bolts of fine lace frothed over the shelves, pockmarked with fragments of mildewed tile. A lone claw foot from a rusty tub lay atop a crushed hatbox. Silvery dust from a shattered mirror haloed a gash in the wall like fireplace ash. The wind blew through the broken windows and needled tears from Lena's eyes. She gripped the collar of her coat tighter.

What had Chet said? Some sort of drug lab? She'd tried to send him away once they arrived, but again he'd refused. He stood talking to the officers on the sidewalk, but she couldn't listen and walked towards the shop, alone. She pictured young girls snorting powders with their legs spread on the filthy bathroom counter that lay upended in her store. She guessed at the form the drugs would take. Powder seemed explosive enough. Her thoughts buzzed like horseflies as she picked her way across the room. It must have been a fine, tiled counter once in a fine house, the kind you would rest a baby on before bathing it in the sink, cradling its head with a sturdy hand. Her brain was a loose net, trapping images. What was the next step? She placed a hand on her chest to feel the solid retort of her heart. And then she saw their bed.

It lay broken and twisted in the yard, the lovely cherry oak frame disappearing under the snow blowing in from the river. Lena could make out the shape of her pillow beneath the mess. A refrigerator door leaned against the remains of the headboard, the edges charred and crumbling. There were no magnets on it, no pictures. She opened her mouth and took in a long shuddery breath for what felt like the first time in many years.

The bed had been a wedding present, part of a custom set that had been trucked up from her relatives in Maryland. It still looked new that long ago morning when she'd found the bottle of pills on her husband's nightstand.

His mouth had still been warm when she wiped the foam from his lips. She'd pressed her hands against his chest, like a woman in a play, knowing it wouldn't help with what came next. She'd hid the bottle and called an ambulance. Later, she'd allowed a neighbor to help her dispose of the mattress, but Lena had kept the bed and the two twin nightstands. In those first years following his death, Lena had paced each night,

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making a circuit between Pat and Rob's room and her own, then down to the shop to stare at silent rows of merchandise. She'd been waiting to find something amiss, something she could notice and prevent.

A handful of emergency workers in padded coats throbbed through the shop, snapping photographs and marking areas with yellow tape. Lena crossed her arms over her chest, unable to shake the feeling that the emergency workers would find whatever it was she'd missed in the rubble of the shop. She wondered, as she often did, how it would have been different if it happened today. People were kinder then, and trusting. No one questioned that a healthy man just over forty would die suddenly of a heart attack in the night. The medics had worn collared shirts and dark ties and they'd taken her statement with solemn faces and patted her hand. No one pushed her to request an autopsy. No one asked her much of anything at all.

She didn't regret the lies, to their families, to the boys. Nor did she forget them. It was all to preserve what they thought they'd known about a good, sweet man. And she'd lied, happily, easily. She'd let him go with dignity, even though he'd refused her the same courtesy.

Lena heard Chet's footsteps crunch in the snow. The wind gusted, raising a corner of eyelet trim from her bedspread. Chet stood behind her and held her in his arms. They stood in silence, ignoring the officers and the snow, the neighbors standing on the street in mittens and hats or peering from their windows. Chet spoke quietly, his mouth at her ear.

"That could have been us in there." Lena huffed something close to a laugh.

"Well, me. It should have been me." Chet released her and turned her body to face his.

"How can you say that? Don't say that."

"We all have our time. This was supposed to be mine."

"This?" Chet swept his hand at the wreckage of her bed. "No." He leaned in and held her again. He didn't care who was watching. "You saved your life last night and you better believe you saved mine, too." Chet took Lena's chin in his hand, like he was someone who could get away with that sort of thing. His gloves were rough against her skin, but she didn't move. His eyes moved across her face. She felt scrutinized,

scanned, but it was not an entirely unwelcome feeling. She fluttered her eyelids against a gust of wind and willed him to ask her something, anything. She would tell him everything he wanted to know.

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THEODORE WOROZBYT

After Sunrise

That heron hesitated but then plunges, gobbling a minnow from the fog: a three noted gurgling sound lifts; a woodpecker beaks at pine bark shingled with white grubs; cardinals dive into red shadows. Sucked up into the point, mud swirls green the rounded gravel and the river is risen past my recognition of its terms.

Froth chops the moving water; some chemical, like glacial ice, bobs in the rainy strew. There, next to me: so much of beauty at my hand, nearly comical.

And so it is, a bruise in my shoe that stabs Each jogging lurch through mist tarred raw by the tire plant. My breath spells itself as I sing torch-smoke from the radio and watch the duck crouch flat-footed as a sower, then render the dripping air with his wings.

The rains have left the path washed, the needled ground blown with limbs. Lichens swelled their leathery papers, orange and silvery aqua. I slip the fat disk of a wisteria seed into the lined pocket of my wool jacket, and I have dried it to a weightless crinkle, forgetting to press it into a pot of mix. I'm not sure, but the river seems to be, how hard I surge the leash.

Every morning I watch scullers heave through the fresh light, their oars pressing up and down like ribs in a skinnied chest. My dog ignores them, vague faces too far away to threaten or admire his leaps among the roots and granite of the pipeline, or me, his charge. When a strand of spider silk catches across my throat I taste iron. Trumpet flowers drip like cut fingers.

A perch belly-up in silt; a shiner deep blue on the path; the cups emptied of night crawlers, their nine hearts tangled in the knot my mind pretends to ravel. And what I long to be is what I am not: supple, explosive, a black shape flashing surely through the grass, waving only the flag of my pink tongue, unsurrendered.

JEREMY CANTOR

Deference

not just later, when the universe turns inside out overandoverandover

but from the moment when mind with an understanding nod kindly steps to the wings and leaves the stage to breath and skin

everything else disappears

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自動化 Automation

a generative poem by Andrew Campana







オンラインでやろう。 Please do it online







http://pdrjournal.org/arts/ Andrew_Campana/automation.html

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KATHLEEN BOYLE

Yuma

I went down to an inner hymn,

high wrenching and reddened.

The southwest. If not for this:

My own skin.

A comma in a thousand towns of sin.

How endless the regretted.

KATHLEEN BOYLE

Untitled (Outer End of Coos Bay Jetty)

once wagons once ropes

stretch the arms straight over head

where would I be without this aperture of sorrow

so easy to lose the trail where it crosses meadows

the shoulders skyward

this is the place inside the later storm

this is what I finally wanted

now cross a footbridge

continue through port orford cedar western hemlock

KATHLEEN BOYLE

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Everybody's Autobiography OR My Grandmother Demands Another Poem

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Later my sister and I lived in her house, among the light switches and wooden spoons, her lamp shades and wallpaper choices. A recipe is supposed to be a formula, for example: 900 for 60 acres.

The sum of 120 to be impossible. The receipt, her handwriting. The redwoods had already been cut. Have you sent the porcini? Everything is sliced, cubed, chopped, & minced except for the tomato which is put into the pot. She told secrets in Genovese. How much would you pay for a ranch by acre? Adalina, Aliche.

Console your parents and don't think badly of me. For that reason I made her teach me I arrived last night in San Francisco at midnight. Today before noon I went to Olema. gnocchi and minestrone. I wrote it all down, but who knows where I put that scrap of paper. It is in summer warm and dusty. The other Sunday I received your socks and your letter.

pot. I remember I leaned hard on the edge of the pine table, watching. Was it 1:1 potato Up near Glen Ellen it is cooler. Gnocchi: no egg, work fast, keep the dough under the to flour?

Sonoma in the summers and jumped from the bridges. It was like any western town. Selection of rootstock. Shears. A shade overripe. The small Genovese words: djzuedi, scurna, fagassa. It has a jangled sound. Lodes and pockets of earth. She returned

Bianco e rosso, what clings to, taste of the soil content. The beginning of vineplanting like the beginning of mining for precious metals. Sometimes it lasts a lifetime.

continued need for something is another matter. After my grandmother died our cuisine Filo de se, auto da fe, a generous amount of olive oil. Cravings, yes, but, the actual and turned heathenish.

Here: a photograph, 1912, one of the many pickers preparing to harvest grapes. Her father the year before she was born?

Kathleen Boyle

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Cook something to please me. I saw tiny jewel potatoes and the women shelling. Gnocchi, unexpected and pleasant.

An Old Enemy

Punk rock's middle age and heroin's unlikely comeback

Any punk, goth, skin, or ska kid could have told you the motto of our generation. John Derek had uttered it over forty years earlier: "Live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse." We have always been a generation obsessed with death, from ultraviolent horror movies, to the pounding beat of punk and hardcore, to the slackers and the flops of grunge. The junkie was the undisputed god of this loose federation of tribes. In the scenes I knew, there were always a few of them, and their willful self-destruction was always a thing that inspired awe. The gods of our consciousness were all junkies, dead or living – Jim Morrison, Iggy Pop, William S. Burroughs, Perry Farrell, Lou Reed, and, of course, Kurt Cobain. Kurt, as it turned out, was different from the others. His death would signal the beginning of the end of our headlong coffin ride.

I was not a junkie in the nineties. I was a half-assed sort of scene punk, going to shows and shaving my head and attaching a disturbingly large chain to my wallet. I was never brave enough for hard drugs. I knew a lot of the people I was hanging out with were using them. I certainly saw it occasionally, but most of what I ran into was cheap beer, vodka in plastic cups, and horrible shake weed. I was, to put it plainly, a poser – not as

hard as those with whom I shared mosh pits and dorm rooms and art galleries set up in the backs of abandoned concrete plants. I didn't pierce anything other than my ears. I got no tattoos. Nothing that marked me as a punk couldn't be traded for a suit on Sunday so I could take communion. I read the beats and shook my ass to Gangrene.

Drugs were one of the ways you counted coup in our scene. Some kids had pounds of metal piercing their faces, some kids were inked up, some shaved their heads and beat the asses of rival Nazi punks. Some kids got fucked up. Some of them got really fucked up. All of the kids I knew were runaways or hideaways from damaged or dangerous homes. I got involved in the punk scene when I went to Bradford College in Haverhill, Massachusetts. I would go into Boston and go to shows at places like the Middle East and T.T. the Bear's, in basements in Somerville and South Boston and Allston. I gravitated toward the ska scenes and the suspenderswearing punks. This was where I got to know the nowhere kids. The ones with homes they couldn't or wouldn't stay at. This was in 1995 - Kurt Cobain was already a year dead, and a slow change had begun to come over the scenes when we talked about drugs, when we talked about suicide, it was different.



Kurt Cobain. Photo by Jesse Frohman, 1993.

Our previous heroes had been engines of destruction. At the shows I went to, everyone tried to channel the emaciated, walking death of Iggy Pop. We watched *Velvet Goldmine* and *Heathers* and *Eraserhead* and reveled in the slaughter and the waste. But something had begun to trickle into our heads, and it started with the death of Kurt Cobain. The punks that I knew in my hometown, all five or six of them, worshipped Cobain. I remember listening to a thrice-dubbed cassette of *Bleach* in the parking lot after a meeting of the after-school writing club when I was fifteen.

I had this friend Casey, who was the only thing in my town that approximated a rock star. And he was always high, always reckless, drove too fast, slept too little. One time, blasted on ketamine, he played me *Incesticide* in its entirety on his acoustic guitar.

The day that Kurt Cobain died, I ate dinner in my mother's house before going to the movies. Kurt Loder broke it to me. I don't think I cried until later. I remember going to the Skowhegan, Maine, McDonalds and drinking, like, fifteen cups of coffee.

By the time I went to college and discovered the real scene, Cobain was firmly dead. The excess and death worship I had experienced through Casey was still present in the Boston ska scene. But it was fading. We began to care less and less for the acolytes of self-destruction. We moved away from that kind of death worship. One by one, our heroes got clean and sober.

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Rurt, as it turned out, was different from the others. His death would signal the beginning of the end of our headlong coffin ride.

Kurt Cobain was just the visible part of a much larger trend, the thing that finally hit us where we lived. This trend actually started with the death of Andrew Wood of Mother Love Bone from heroin overdose – a death that turned his bandmates into a new kind of rock and roll stars. Wood was the heartbeat of a late eighties, early nineties Seattle scene. He was by all accounts a magnetic personality - a king of excess style, slacker-lord of don't care and for-sure-don't-care-if-I-die. And then he died, and a small crack appeared in the slacker veneer. Two bands arose from the ashes of Mother Love Bone - Pearl Jam and Sound Garden – bands who shared stages with Nirvana in Seattle's scene. This was the beginning of the mark that this particular kind of tragedy would have on us young tumbledown punks in the nineties.

Cobain was different even from Wood, whose death was an overdose, a regrettable but predictable side effect of his addiction, the addiction that defined him. Cobain was a suicide, a shotgun blast to the face. In Cobain, we witnessed an actual tragedy. This was not the glamorized death we had been feeding ourselves, not the bonfire-of-the-vanities burnout of Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, or Jimi Hendrix. When our other heroes died, it had seemed either glorious, or somehow unavoidable. Kurt Cobain's death was real pain, tragic

and eminently preventable. In life, his pain had been utterly relatable, real, unglamorous, juvenile. It had seemed beatable, in the way we assumed our own pain was. This was the thing that broke the spell. The scenes of the late nineties moved from the worship of destruction to a sort of preserved ennui. Bands like Modest Mouse, Bright Eyes, and Neutral Milk Hotel lacked the power-driven angst of their predecessors. The angry young men and women of punk, slam, fringe, and riot grrl had given way to this kinder, gentler thing. The children of the nineties did what children of every decade do. They got old, they got fat, they got jobs. Most of them either got off or stayed off smack. Some got sober. Some stayed drunk. Music and art took odd turns in America. The internet rendered the warring tribe model of scenes irrelevant.

Now for me, this was the part of the story where I actually became a junkie. In my late twenties, after my days of basement shows and binge drinking were basically behind me, I got hooked on smack after a sports injury turned into chronic pain. Most of my friends from the early nineties who were hooked had managed to get clean, and yet here I was, tumbling from prescriptions to dope. I used secretively, and managed to keep my job. It wasn't part of my image

My friends got clean. The bands we loved broke up, made new records, put out solo projects. Kurt Cobain was dead a long time now and it was something we thought of only periodically. It seemed like fewer of our heroes were oping or killing themselves, and the music of college radio was jaded and dispassionate. Eventually, I got clean too. The world kept spinning. Whatever scene had existed in the nineties was mostly over. I had stopped writing shortly after college, been sucked in by work and then by my addiction. When I got clean I started to write again. I found a new scene, slam poetry, and it was – for the most part – remarkably free of hard drug use. There was a vibrancy and an energy to my new scene that I had not experienced before. I adjusted to it and it to me. I let myself believe that things were different.

Then heroin made a stunning comeback. The number of Americans hooked on heroin doubled between 2002 and 2012, according to the *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. Around the same time, an ultra pure, cheap form of heroin began to hit the streets in the United States, brought to us by, among other sources, the war in Afghanistan and even, in some cases, smuggled home in the luggage of returning soldiers and contractors.

For instance, in 2012, former U.S. army captain Saleem Sharif admitted to importing "at least 2.5 kilograms of heroin [to the U.S.] from Afghanistan while employed there as a contractor," according to the DEA.² He had formerly been deployed to Iraq in 2004 and honorably discharged in 2005, the *Army Times* reported.³

As *The Boston Globe* reported in 2003:

And the drug is now so pure that users can snort it, increasing its appeal for people who once avoided heroin because of the stigma associated with injecting the drug... In New Bedford, street heroin has reached 90 percent purity, as compared with an average purity nationwide of 57 percent, according to the DEA.⁴

According to Steven Kinzer, veteran foreign correspondent and a visiting fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies, "most heroin used in the United States [still] comes from Mexico, but the flood coming from Afghanistan depresses world prices and makes the drug easily affordable." Earlier this year in the small city of Taunton, Massachusetts, where sixty-four people overdosed on heroin over a period of just six weeks, you can buy a bag of heroin for seven dollars, a 65 percent drop from previous prices, which had held steady for years. 6

This surge was accompanied by an increase in deaths by overdose. According to Kinzer's op-ed in *The Boston Globe* earlier this year,

News about soaring rates of heroin abuse and death by overdose is hard to miss in the United States. Governor Peter Shumlin of Vermont devoted his entire State of the State address this year to what he called Vermont's "full-blown heroin crisis." Senator Edward Markey of Massachusetts has cited a "meteoric rise in addiction to heroin." Attorney General Mike DeWine of Ohio, where 900 people died of overdoses last year, said heroin "is

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killing Ohioans at record levels." From Philadelphia to Miami, from northern Kentucky to southern Louisiana, this scourge is taking a terrible toll.⁷

If you add in the deaths by overdose from prescription opioids, it all adds up to a shocking epidemic. Anecdotally, I could see it happening, as could my friends in the recovery rooms, my colleagues in social services, and my clients in Boston-area homeless shelters. Old friends who had beaten dope were back on the stuff, and they were dying. Between November 2013 and January 2014, over 185 people died from heroin overdoses in Massachusetts alone.8 The friends I watched dying were the very same ones who had gotten clean ten years earlier. Beloved celebrities succumbed this time, too, liked Phillip Seymour Hoffman – a poster-child for the new epidemic, he had gotten clean years earlier, and died after only a brief period of relapse.

The same men who had experimented with destruction and then decided to live their lives have ended up burning out anyway. Except this time, we are too old to die young. The corpses we leave behind are not good-looking. These days, heroin is purer and cheaper than it used to be. As we have gotten old, we have gotten hurt - we have surgery and teeth pulled out and doctors throwing Oxycontin at us like it's candy – and just around the corner from Oxy, there's dope as cheap as a pack of cigarettes. If – or when – we finally buy the bag of dope, if and when it kills us, we die alone in our houses, not young, not glamorous.

Where does this leave the scene? We

don't have the angel-headed hipsters bent on a fiery ruin; we don't have the worn-edged intellectuals who've learned from their mistakes. What are we left with but a world where redemption doesn't stick? Cobain's death may have seemed a wake-up call, but it turned out to be more of a snooze alarm. In my new scene we have also lost a few members to overdose, to paralysis from infections caused by dirty needles. We are a generation haunted by our mistakes. The war in Afghanistan has provided us an opportunity to keep making those mistakes. But these days our addiction is something that happens in private; it is not an act of artistic expression. In this way, it is more like my own personal story. A dirty secret, a thing that you know you have outgrown. A thing you cannot quit.

Most of the art I consume these days is written by people of my generation and deals with the consequences of middle age on the creative mind: from John Darnielle's defeated reminiscences on dance music to Jon Stewart's perpetual incredulity to the comically looming mortality of *Bojack Horseman*. We are a generation marked by death and tragedy, yet we are now facing our greatest crisis. We are struggling with what it means to still be alive when we tried so hard and for so long to die.

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Foot Traffic

Works and Text by **Billy McGuinness** Interviewed by **Joshi Radin** Five Months of Love, 2013, foot traffic on canvas, 37×93 in. Canvas installed for five months on the entrance ramp to the dining room of a soup kitchen in the Wicker Park neighborhood of Chicago.

During that time, roughly 18,000 meals were served; 800 showers were provided; and 600 bags of laundry were washed, dried, and folded free of charge. Once each week, mental health outreach, drop-in case management, medical attention, and substance abuse counseling were offered.

In some way, I feel the canvases ride the line between art objects and social engagement. They really are art, the most arty art I've ever made in that way. But they only can come about a) as a result of my interaction with the space and the people there, and b) from the people doing what they do in that space. They are of that space. In that regard they're sort of way outside of art. The studio is the total opposite of the space where this gets made, and where the process is.

One is from a soup kitchen, and two are from a homeless shelter. The big long one is from the main entrance of a homeless shelter that has 257 beds that are full every night, and every night they have to turn people away. And just to give you a sense, in Chicago, between summer 2013 and summer 2014, there were over 138,000 people experiencing some variety of homelessness in a city of a couple million. It's staggering. It's such a huge problem.

I was influenced by Tehching Hsieh's five *One Year Performances*; being aware of that work was helpful to me. Also learning about Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation*. She wrote the *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* She spent two years, forty hours a week, doing ride alongs or working alongside sanitation workers in New York, and she met and personally thanked and shook the hand of every single one of them – that, too impacted me.

The stance that you're aestheticizing a problematic issue is something I think you find more in art school. The shelters and the kitchens that turned me down,

they just felt it was a pain in the butt; they didn't want to deal with me. "We've got work to do, don't bother us." With previous work, I may have been accused of being preachy. Not so much with this work. In talking, I am right up on my soapbox. I am a preacher. And I mean that sincerely. But not in the work. That was a real struggle for me: how do I make work that doesn't feel preachy, that doesn't proselytize. Because I don't want to turn people away. I'm not advocating – I'm saying, as all artists say, "look at this." Different people see different things.

One viewer said it was really hopeful. Another said it's not really fair: if you do work with social content, you're held to a different standard than people whose work doesn't do that. There are all sorts of criticisms that you open yourself up to that aren't part of the conversation otherwise. It isn't fair. It's ridiculous that someone can put up something that's completely vapid, and we can talk about it all day long and it's free from certain criticisms. And I don't disagree with its existence in the world, but that's not what I want to be a part of at all. I feel like it does so little of what art can do.

I struggle with this all the time. And I struggle with whether I am only aestheticizing the issue. I am aestheticizing, definitely, and the work might be exploitative in some way, but it's not one thing or the other. It can be both. You can be a little bit exploitative, and you can aestheticize, but if you're fifty-one percent for the good, you can have these mitigating elements. You can do a little harm.



The Women's Dormitory, 2014, foot traffic on canvas, 72×60 in. Canvas installed for three months in the women's section of a homeless shelter on the West Side of Chicago.

At the shelter, all guests are provided with a bed (that includes sheets, a blanket, and a pillow), supper and breakfast, visits by health care personnel and opportunities to meet with mental health workers.

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The Main Entrance, 2014, foot traffic on canvas, 37×266 in. This canvas was installed for two months in the entryway of a homeless shelter on the West Side of Chicago.

During that time, the 257 beds of the facility were full every night, for a total of over 15,500 stays.

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LUCY ALEXANDER

Wish You Were Here

They sat next to each other at the end of the bed, looking down at their respective feet. They had taken off their shirts, but stopped before going any further. With a quick sidelong glance, Danny noted the girl's lacy black bra. Her breasts were large and globular. Her skirt was too tight, so that her hips and belly puffed out above its rim. Her black hair hung straight down her back, touching her behind. Even sitting down, she was much taller than he was.

"I want you to hurt me," she said, softly, still not looking at him.

Danny wasn't sure how this went.

"I want you to hurt me too?" he offered.

The girl turned to him, her hair whipping around.

"No! You're supposed to be the dom. Not me. I'm a sub."

"Oh," Danny said quietly. He raised his head and looked at her. She had a heart-shaped face, very pale, with a small nose, short razor-straight bangs, and a black ring through her left eyebrow. She scared him a little.

"I'm sorry, I'm a...I guess I'm a sub too." He shrugged and began tapping his left index finger against the bedspread in a slow, steady rhythm.

The girl exhaled with annoyance and reached down to grab Danny's shirt off the floor. She brandished the nametag he'd slapped on when he'd arrived at the party an hour earlier.

"Look!" she said. "You wrote 'Dom."

"That's supposed to say 'Dan." He shook his head. There hadn't been space for "Danny." It's my name. I guess my handwriting isn't very neat."

The girl groaned and pulled on her black velvet shirt.

"You're not supposed to put your real name! You're just supposed to write 'dom' or 'sub.' How else will people know how to interact with you?"

Danny watched her as she tied the shimmery blue laces on her combat boots. She was pretty, in a distressing way.

"So what's your name?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Elektra," she said, and flounced out the door.

He was buttoning up his shirt when he noticed the pair of glasses left behind on the bed. They had dark blue frames which curved up a little on each side, the kind a librarian or an old lady would wear. He picked them up and put them in his shirt pocket, then walked back downstairs. On the landing he passed two women wearing black corsets and fake fangs, pretending to bite each other's necks. The first floor was jammed with costumed people holding glasses of red wine, variously draped across one another while their bodies vibrated to electronic music in a minor key. Danny asked them all, but nobody knew an "Elektra." And as for her description, it turned out that half the women there looked at least a bit like her. He couldn't find her anywhere.

He felt himself becoming angry. At thirty, he was getting to be too old for this. His friend Eric had been the one who'd suggested they go to the party in the first place. Danny had been standing on the Allston condo's sagging porch, rocking uncomfortably in his loafers, when Eric texted him to say he couldn't make it after all. "Let's do this another time," he'd said. Danny had been about to leave when the door opened and a tall man in a black cape leaned out, booming "Welcome to our abode!" He'd grabbed Danny's hand and led him to the table with all the name tags, and then to the kitchen where they had the drinks. And it was there that the girl had come over to him and then led him upstairs.

Danny decided to walk the two miles back to Mission Hill, past sleepy warrens of row houses and street corners haunted by slouching, dimly outlined figures. He felt his jaw unclench as the night air dispersed his irritation. His own street was silent, and his footsteps echoed loudly in his building's toothpaste-green stairwell. When he reached his apartment he turned the key and opened the door, but he did not enter. Bowing his head slightly, he touched the lintel with his right index finger and counted under his breath. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine,*

ten, eleven. But it wasn't right – a miasma of tension still filled his head. His mind had wandered at eight, when he noticed the glasses in his pocket. A disturbing thought began to unfurl, but he tamped it down, beginning again: one, two, three, four...

It took him three more tries to reach eleven without any distraction. Finally able to cross the threshold, he closed the door behind him and hung his jacket neatly on the hook, passing the kitchenette built into the entryway, with its oven and fridge almost as small as a child's play set. The studio was tiny, but Danny felt it was just enough space for him to keep track of. He had a futon on which he slept, a coffee table, a torchiere lamp, and a bookcase. The parquet floor was ancient, the varnish almost entirely rubbed off, and small rectangular bits of wood were missing from many of the squares. Still Danny lavished attention upon it, sweeping and mopping every other day. His small window looked out on a parking lot, but he sprayed and wiped it regularly, maintaining a clear view of the cars in their neat rows. He was in the process of purchasing an additional standing lamp, but was only a couple weeks into his investigation. It would take him months to make such a decision.

Danny put the glasses on the coffee table. As he showered and changed, he thought about Elektra. He wondered why she had chosen him, and what she had really been expecting.

Before he went to bed he checked that the oven and the electric stove were off seventeen times each. He lay in bed and tried to count to thirty-seven, but he kept getting distracted and having to start again. A streetlight from the parking lot cast an orange glare upon the room, so that out of the corner of his eye he could still see the glasses. He imagined Elektra wearing them.

The next day was like any other, except that he put the glasses in his backpack before walking to the hospital where he worked as a surgical technician. As he did on every journey to and from his job, Danny counted each step he took and tried his best to think of nothing. But when a passing trolley forced a sudden pause, he was assailed by an image of Elektra: blind without her glasses, wandering before a speeding city bus, reduced beneath its wheels to a mass of blood and long black hair.

Danny knew this internal apparition was not real, but still he felt his head pound and his throat constrict until he was practically unable to breathe. He stopped beside a lamppost and with his right index finger tapped it seventeen times, his eyes clenched tightly shut. Then he continued on, blinking with every step to further expunge the horrifying vision from his mind.

Because, as always, he had left home very early, Danny arrived at the hospital on time for his shift. He had worked as a surgical tech for eight years and had by now become comfortable with the daily theme and variations of his job. In the locker room, he changed into his blue scrubs and surgical cap and then came out to look at the board. The wall-mounted flat panel screen displayed the traffic in and out of the various operating rooms; the names of patients and the types of procedures; and the surgeons, nurses, and techs who would be involved. "D. Rosen" was listed under OR eleven.

Danny went to get the carts with all the surgical instruments. Once in the OR, he positioned them where the surgeon and scrub nurse would need them, in neat alignment with the operating table. Then he went to the big sinks outside the OR to scrub.

Danny loved to scrub in for surgeries. It was more than just cleanliness, or even sterility. It was a kind of ritual purification that gave him a feeling of unblemished "rightness" before each case. The first scrub of the morning was especially satisfying. Gloriously predictable, all according to pre-specified instructions – wet the arms and hands to two inches above the elbow, take the brush and scrub the nails of each hand thirty times, the sides of each finger twenty times, the back of the hands twenty times, the front of the hands twenty times, the arms twenty times per third up to two inches above the elbow.

Once scrubbed in, gowned, and gloved, Danny opened up the packets of instruments and aligned everything the way the surgeon would require. When the patient was brought in, anesthetized and draped, he moved the large round or lamps until they formed a cone of light directed at the operative field. Then the surgeon began to call out the names of instruments, hundreds of which Danny had memorized, names that had nothing to do with their actual functions. It was an elaborately choreographed dance:

"Metz," the surgeon muttered, and Danny handed him a pair of scissors. "Kelly," and Danny handed him a small clamp, with a handle like scissors and the curved, serrated head of an ichthyosaur.

"Richardson," and Danny handed him a large flat piece of metal, bent at the end. He held the grip at the other end, retracting the tissue so the surgeon could see.

"Yankauer," and Danny held the suction tip into the surgical field, clearing away the fluid.

The procedure always ended with another satisfying activity – the sponge and towel count. Danny would call out, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight sponges," checking off that it was the same number they had started with. Sometimes he would re-count them in his mind, unless he was distracted by a more pressing task.

If asked, Danny would have said that for the most part he was happy with his job. He did not like working swing shifts or being on call for emergency surgeries, which he was periodically forced to do. And while his desire for order and predictability, not to mention his fear of catastrophe (which intruded any time he was not occupied), ought to have made this an unsuitable profession for him, Danny preferred to view it as a challenge, made all the more noble because doing his job was so much more difficult for him than it would be for another, less encumbered individual. He was proud that in his years at the hospital no one had ever complained about his performance. And as for catastrophe, there had only been a few occasions when a patient actually had severe complications or died on the operating table. On those days Danny would retreat to the restroom once the case was over and count in a whisper while clenching his eyes shut as many times as he could until it hurt, which made him feel slightly, temporarily better – but he had to admit that each of these episodes chipped away at something inside him, and he never recovered completely.

He met Eric for a beer after work. Danny was sitting at the bar, picking at a scratch on the wood counter, when Eric came up behind him and put his arm over Danny's shoulders.

"Hey," he said, close to Danny's ear. "Did you get any last night? Was there any – you know – fwp-chhh!" He made the motion of a whip striking flesh.

Danny pushed him away. He raised his voice, slightly. "No, I did not! And you've got a real problem, leaving me at a freakin S&M party."

Eric laughed. He was Danny's best friend from high school – well, his only friend from high school – and he worked a few blocks away for a software startup. He was a big man with a ridiculous-looking red beard, so voluminous and unkempt that it occasionally alarmed passers-by. Danny was aware that the two of them looked funny together – quiet, elfin-featured Danny and big-bellied, obstreperous Eric – but Danny liked Eric's company, for the most part, so he put up with him.

"There was one thing," Danny said. "This girl I... met... left her glasses behind, and I have no idea how to find her to return them. Do you know how to get in touch with the people who had the party?"

"No, actually I deleted the email. It was to a list, anyway, one where the members' emails are kept private ... for obvious reasons!" Eric raised an eyebrow, a wicked gleam in his eye.

"What kind of messed-up stuff are you into?" Danny asked him.

Eric drained the rest of his beer. "Nothing, nothing. I just like to know what's going on in this city," he said, though Danny was not convinced.

Despite this setback, Danny kept the glasses in his backpack, except when he was home. Then he took them out and put them on the coffee table (aligned with the back issues of *Scientific American* and the lone coaster he possessed, a ceramic tile with a picture of a frog on it and the words "Puerto Rico" across the top).

Each night after work he thought about everything that had happened that day, each conversation with the other techs or with his boss, each interaction with the nurses and the surgeons and the patients, what had gone well and what had not. Beyond specific, imagined calamities, even on the best days, Danny was filled with a constant, inescapable sense that things were not right. It was at this sensation – this dissociated "wrongness" – that he experienced physically, like a wrenching in his chest, or a poisonous mist clouding his head, that the counting and the checking, the tapping, the aligning, and the cleaning, were aimed. These activities gave him a sense of control, but they afforded only a

faint, temporary relief, as weak and inadequate as the comfort provided by rubbing a badly bruised knee.

Danny knew that all of it was abnormal. He even felt guilty about it – he had no reason to be this uncomfortable. The product of a quiet, suburban childhood, he had two equally quiet and loving parents who did their best to shield him from any suffering. He had been a mediocre student and an athlete of no distinction. After some mild bullying, he had made an effort not to attract too much attention from the other children and was for the most part successful.

The counting was the most prominent of his compulsions, and Danny could not remember exactly when it started – he was probably a young child. It began innocuously. He loved numbers and would lie awake at night thinking about them, adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing. When he learned about prime numbers – numbers divisible only by themselves and one – he felt he had found a sort of home. Soon the goal of every count had to be a prime number – one, two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen, etc. And as Danny got older, he found himself becoming a sort of prime number too. He was an entity divisible only by himself, and if asked, he would have said that he was relatively happy this way, or at the very least comfortable.

But there were times when the counting got the better of him – when he seemed to freeze in an infinite loop: standing for hours trying to count in just the right way before he would allow himself to sit, or sitting on a bench in the cold, muttering numbers under his breath until he nearly developed frostbite. He blamed one such episode on Larissa, a nurse he had dated five years ago, who had kept her blonde hair in a ponytail with a single braid across the front, and who had liked to go out to bars several nights a week. While they were together, Larissa went to Puerto Rico with several of her girlfriends, and when she returned she seemed different. She had become more remote, a simulacrum of the Larissa he loved. She gave Danny a coaster with a frog on it but wouldn't say much about the trip. He began to suspect that she had had an affair, although he didn't feel comfortable asking her directly.

It was then, when the feeling of wrongness began to squeeze all the air out of him, that the counting threatened to take over. At Larissa's urging,

Danny went to see a doctor. She prescribed a medication but told him it wouldn't cure everything – he had to want to change. Danny wasn't sure he did. Still, he took the pill every night, and things began to feel a little less wrong. And he felt a little less out of control. But there were side effects. One miserable night Danny and Larissa had lain in bed next to each other, wrapped in mutual frustration. Larissa had leaned toward him, so that he could feel her hot breath on his ear as she whispered, "I like sex" – as though *be* didn't – and he hadn't known what to say. A couple weeks later she called to tell him she had been offered a job in Texas (she had gotten the news while she was in Puerto Rico), and she was going to take it. She hoped they could still be friends. Danny stopped taking the pill and seeing the doctor. He began to carve out a life alone.

When the weather was good, Danny took his breaks outside. Ten days after the party, on a clear, windy spring afternoon, he sat on a bench in the hospital courtyard, munching an apple and skimming a book on the Riemann hypothesis. Suddenly the wind gusted, and he was pelted by white petals from a nearby flowering tree. He looked up and there, right across the stone courtyard on the facing bench, was Elektra. Improbably, ridiculously, but it was definitely her. Her hair was now streaked with blue and gathered into a long ponytail that draped across one shoulder. She wore a conservative-looking black cardigan and knee-length skirt. She was holding a paperback book inches from her face, her brow furrowed, squinting. His heart pounding, Danny got up and walked over to her.

"Elektra?" She didn't respond. The book she was reading was entitled *A Field Guide to Demons*.

He tried again. "Sorry, I don't know your actual name. I'm Danny. Do you remember me?"

Elektra looked up. She squinted and stared, until finally her face changed with recognition.

"Why are you dressed like a doctor?"

"Because I am – well, I'm a surgical tech. I work in the operating rooms. I help with surgeries. I mean, they couldn't proceed without me." For some reason Danny wanted her to know that he did something important.

"Oh..." she nodded and began to go back to her book. Danny felt something weird in the pit of his stomach, something like disappointment.

"Um, did you happen to leave your glasses – anyplace?" He felt he probably shouldn't mention the exact circumstances under which they had met.

Her eyes widened. "Why, do you know where they are? I've been looking for them forever. I can't see a thing."

For a moment Danny didn't want to tell her. As long as he hovered in this space between having what she wanted and giving it to her, there would be the possibility of a connection between them.

"I have them. You left them ... you know, at that place... Elektra." "So where are they?"

"I have them ... I'll get them for you. But – tell me your real name?" Elektra gave him a wary look. "Why?"

"Because you know mine," Danny said.

She sighed. "Beth. Okay?" She showed him her ID tag. It read "Elizabeth Boothe, Library Staff."

"You work in the hospital library?" Danny tried to draw out the conversation.

"Yeah, obviously. Now give me back my glasses. Have you been hoarding them all this time? Are you some kind of creep?" She stood up and clutched her book to her chest.

"No, I just didn't know how to find you." But then Danny thought about how he had put the glasses on his coffee table each night, and he wondered if that was, in fact, a little creepy. "Look, they're in my bag, which is in a locker. I'm off at three thirty, what about you? I can meet you somewhere and give them to you."

Beth sniffed imperiously. "Just drop them off at the front desk of the library."

Later that day Danny did as Beth had instructed. When he arrived at the library, she was nowhere to be seen, and he didn't have the nerve to ask for her. And yet he couldn't forget about her. For the next week, even when it was cloudy or cool, Danny took his break outside in the hospital courtyard, hoping to catch Beth there with her *Field Guide to Demons*. But she didn't appear. Finally he gave up hope and returned

to lunch in the hospital cafeteria with the other techs. Bored by their conversation, he stared out the window – and one day there she was, sitting on a low stone wall and reading. Danny leapt up and without explaining to his co-workers where he was going, dashed through the breezeway door and outside.

"Hey," he said, panting, trying to seem like he had just been strolling past. Beth looked up. She was wearing the glasses. Danny thought they made her seem intellectual, and yet witty. Saucy. He felt a tingling on the back of his neck.

"Why are you reading about demons?" he said, pointing to her book. Beth raised an eyebrow. "Because I have many?"

Danny laughed. "Oh yeah, me too. Does the book tell you how to get rid of them?"

"Not really," Beth said. "Actually, I'm on an information-gathering expedition for a book I'm writing."

"Oh really? What kind of book?"

"A horror novel." She leaned towards Danny as she said this, as though to check whether he was suitably impressed.

"Hm, I've never read one of those."

"Well, it's going to be awesome, and I am going to make lots of money."

"That's great!" Danny wasn't sure what to do next. He had ten more minutes of break time.

He sat down a foot away from her on the wall and looked down at the pigeons bobbing back and forth across the flagstone courtyard. It seemed like the two of them were in separate but adjoining cells.

"So," he said. But he couldn't come up with the next sentence.

Beth reached into her bag and withdrew another book. It was a large hardcover, entitled *The Encyclopedia of Animals*.

"This is the other thing I'm reading. Are you interested in animals? There's a lot of good information here."

Danny shrugged. "I don't have much contact with animals, to be honest." Suddenly Beth reached over and grabbed his arm.

"Do you know how sloths mate?"

"Excuse me?" Danny was taken aback.

"Sloths. Extremely slow arboreal mammals of Central and South America? Order *Xenarthra*, suborder *Pilosa*?"

"No, I don't actually know that ..." He began to worry that she was a little bit crazy.

"Well, it's fascinating. Don't look at me like that, it's my hobby – gathering information about all kinds of topics. *You* must have hobbies." She paused. "Or – well – I guess I can imagine you not having any hobbies."

Danny let his head drop into his hands. "All right. How do sloths mate?"

Beth sat up straight, put her book aside, and began to declaim, as though giving a lecture. "Sloths are solitary creatures, each keeping mainly to a single tree. They may be widely separated from one another in space. When it is time to mate, the female sloth utters a loud cry, like this – "Beth raised her head and emitted a high-pitched shriek. The pigeons scattered and the white-coated courtyard crowd turned to stare. Danny looked away, trying to pretend he was not involved. But Beth grabbed his arm again.

"The male sloth may be a great distance away, but when he hears the female's cry, he begins the slow, laborious process of descending from his tree. Once he reaches the ground, he is vulnerable to predators, but he is persistent in his mission, not stopping until he reaches the source of that irresistible noise. Sometimes when he gets there the female has moved on already, but it doesn't matter. Next time he hears the sound, he'll try again."

There was silence between them. "I guess that's pretty impressive," Danny finally said.

Beth got up. "I need to get back to the library. Will you be here tomorrow?" "Maybe," Danny shrugged, pretending it didn't matter to him either way. But as Beth walked off, he realized that (for the first time in recent memory) he would actually anticipate part of his day. It felt good, but at the same time strange, and a little worrisome.

The next few lunch breaks were similar. One would see the other across the courtyard and approach. Each day they sat a little closer to each other – twelve inches apart, then eleven, then ten. Beth told Danny about the horrible many-tentacled and winged creature Cthulhu, the product of H. P. Lovecraft's lunatic imagination, whose image she had tattooed on her shoulder. Danny told Beth about the different surgeries he'd helped with that day, the baby who had been born with intestines on the outside (and which, it turned out, could fairly easily be tucked

back in), the teenager with a mass in her liver. On the days when Danny's schedule did not permit the lunch break, he felt a new and peculiar type of wrongness, a pulsing ache that spread all over. And as he scrubbed and counted, he thought about the sloths, and how he would try to meet Beth again tomorrow.

Then, one day, Beth invited him to a concert.

"You like music, don't you?"

"Uh, some kinds," Danny hedged. He was actually quite picky, preferring the classical piano recordings of Glenn Gould to just about anything else.

"Well, one of my favorite bands is going to be at the Paradise tomorrow and I think you should come with me. They're like ... what was playing at the party we went to, only a little more laid back. I think you would like them."

Danny agreed to meet her the following night in front of the theater. When he arrived the crowd snaked along two blocks of Commonwealth Avenue, a motley group who laughed and chattered and compared outfits as they waited to get in. He marveled at the array of unnatural hair colors – purple and green and pink – at the ladies wearing corsets and garters with striped stockings, at the men with top hats and waxed mustaches and, for some unfathomable reason, goggles.

Suddenly Danny spied Beth towards the front of the line. She was standing on her toes, her face tilted up as she scanned the crowd, looking for him. When the waning sunlight caught her pale, shimmery makeup Danny felt a shock. As she came running towards him, clad in black as usual, the effect subsided.

"There you are! I thought you weren't going to show up." She reached out and took Danny's hand, pulling him next to her in line. Just as he began to explain the slight delay (he had prepared a story about a bus that didn't arrive on time, when it had really been a fit of counting that detained him), the doors opened and the crowd pushed them inside.

Once they had shown their tickets and ID's, Beth again grabbed Danny's hand and did not let go as she led him up the staircase on the left side of the theater, pushing through the wriggling throngs until they

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reached the front edge of the balcony. The theater had no seats; at least here they could get a clear view of the stage while avoiding the press of the crowd below. Danny grasped the worn wooden railing – scarred by decades of knife-carved initials, proclamations of love, calls for help – and stared at the roiling mass beneath him. He could feel the presence of other concertgoers behind and around him, the people who stood on their toes to see over his head, and the ones who ducked in and out on either side, some so close that they pressed their shoulders against his. Danny took deep breaths, trying his best to stay calm. Finally the opening act began, and suddenly from chaos the crowd transformed to something else – a hyper-animate, complex multicellular organism, a supra-human entity made up of sound and movement and flesh. Danny gazed down on them, mesmerized. He looked over at Beth, who was swaying to the music.

And then – he could see it happen: as the band played, plumes of smoke unfurled from all directions. Flames crackled, surging highest by all the exits, melting the locks shut. The audience members screamed and trampled one another as they fought towards the impregnable doors. There was no way out. He and Beth alone remained on the balcony, safe within the last pocket of oxygen. But there would be no way out for them, either.

It's not real, it's not real, it's not real, he kept repeating.

As the vision dissipated, Danny found himself hunched over the lip of the balcony, drenched in sweat and panting. He noticed Beth looking at him. How long had she been staring at him?

"Are you okay?"

Danny nodded, gritting his teeth. He stared out at the open space before them. He had to get rid of the vision. He began blinking vigorously, counting each blink.

By the time the main act came out, Danny was in a daze. He looked at the stage and it rippled before him like a mirage. There were two ladies playing electric cellos. They had huge red flowers in their long yellow hair, and wore what looked like old-fashioned underwear. As Danny stood there, swaying slightly, a spare, lilting melody unspooled from a single cello, soon joined by the other, and then, very slowly, the drum.

Danny felt himself slide along between the notes, from one faintly accelerating drumbeat to the next. He began nodding with the drumbeats and, without thinking about it, started counting them.

Suddenly, Beth was there again, and she took his hand. It felt like they hadn't seen each other in a long time. Danny was shocked to see that she had been crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I just love this song," she said, rubbing her nose. "You know, 'Wish You Were Here."

Danny shook his head. He wasn't familiar with it.

When the concert was over they waited for everyone else to leave before they descended. Outside the theater they faced each other uncomfortably. Danny looked down at his feet. He knew he had let her down somehow, but he also did not know what else he could have done. He wanted her to know that he used to be better – with Larissa he'd been better about things, a lot better, but since then – he didn't know how to say it.

Beth's eyes were still red but she gave him a small smile and asked, "What about a picnic? Anything that freaks you out about picnics?"

Danny laughed. "Well, I don't like ants, but I think that's pretty universal. Unless you study them, or something."

Beth smiled more broadly. "No, ants are not a focus of current inquiry. All right. Let's try for a picnic." She reached into her purse and drew out a card, which depicted a black spiderweb and across it in slightly raised red letters, "Beth Boothe, Horror."

"Email me and we'll figure out the details."

The Saturday they'd chosen for the picnic was overcast, but Beth sent him an early morning text instructing him to come to her apartment anyway. She lived in a part of Allston not far from where the party had been, filled with degenerating brick rowhouses occupied mostly by university students. The streets were littered with empty bottles and cans, with condom wrappers, paper bags, and other detritus of the previous night's parties. Beth's apartment was on the second floor of one such building, and as Danny pressed the call button an exhausted-looking

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girl wearing high heels and a tight-fitting dress pushed past him and staggered inside. The ground floor hallway was crammed with bicycles, and the worn, squeaking staircase smelled of urine and Lysol.

Danny knocked, and when Beth opened the door she was still wearing her pajamas.

"Sorry, I'm running late today. Make yourself comfortable, I'll just be a couple minutes."

She motioned towards a lumpy blue couch in the combined living/dining area, and Danny gingerly took a seat. Although there were no bookshelves, every available surface of the apartment was covered with books. They were piled precariously four and five feet high, along the walls and even in the middle of the room, informational stalagmites that had to be avoided to navigate from one area to another. The books seemed to cover every possible topic, from time travel to biochemistry, from auto repair to vegetable canning, from breeding ferrets to astral projection, all with no discernible organization. Danny took a peek into the kitchen and saw that the explosion of books had taken over there as well. He began to wonder about something.

"Hey Beth, can I use your bathroom?" he called out.

"Sure, make yourself at home! Also take something to drink, if you can find a cup anywhere."

Danny decided to avoid the kitchen. The bathroom's pink linoleum floor was curling up at the edges and the shower tiles were crumbling off. As he stood at the sink, he looked at himself in the cracked mirror and wondered if he actually belonged there. Then he had a sudden impulse. He opened the medicine cabinet behind the mirror, which swung open with an unfortunate creak. Inside was the usual complement of medications for pain, allergies, stomach upset. There were a few prescriptions, too, all labeled "Elizabeth Boothe." With a start he recognized one of the medications – it was the same one he had taken. Then there were a couple others he couldn't identify. With a sinking feeling, he realized that Beth was probably crazy. He closed the door as gently as he could and tried to un-know what he had seen.

Beth emerged, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, her hair neatly pulled back, damp and redolent of her flower-scented shampoo. "I put together a picnic basket," she announced while rifling through the clutter on the kitchen counter. She didn't say anything about the books.

They walked the few blocks to Ringer Park. The sky was beginning to clear, and by the time they'd spread out their blanket and taken off their shoes to hold the edges down, it was comfortably warm. The "pock" of tennis balls hitting racquets could be heard off in the distance, mixed in with the excited screams of children climbing around the playground. Beth opened the old-fashioned wicker picnic basket and took out a pile of sandwiches cut into neat rectangles – cucumber, egg salad, smoked salmon spread. She added to this a large bottle of sparkling water and two plastic wine glasses.

"Wow, you really went all out," Danny said, tucking into the sandwiches.

"I like to do things properly."

For a little while they didn't speak. Danny enjoyed feeling the sun on his face, the faint breeze, the ambient noise of the park, and the presence of Beth beside him. But soon a darkness crawled across his mind – a fear not that something would happen to Beth, but that something was wrong with her, something very serious, something that would be very bad for him to be around. He looked over at her as she sat on the blanket, head tilted slightly back to let the sun hit her face, and tried to imagine what could possibly be so bad about her that she would need three medicines. *Three* medicines, whereas he had only ever taken one, and in the end, did not really need it.

Just then Beth turned to look at him.

"What's up?"

Danny looked down at the blanket. "Nothing. Just – " he fumbled for something to say, "I noticed you have a lot of books."

"Yep – I am a reader."

Then Beth looked at him more closely.

"What did you think of my medicine cabinet?"

"What?"

"You heard me. What did you think of my medicine cabinet?"

"I didn't – "

"You can't deny it. I heard the creaking. I am familiar with guys looking in my medicine cabinet, believe me."

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Lucy Alexander Lucy Alexander

Danny didn't know what to say. "I guess, I was just, worried about you." "Worried about me? Ha! You should be worried about yourself," Beth said.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh come on. Don't think I haven't noticed you counting, or squeezing your eyes shut, or tapping on things. One time when we had lunch, I noted that you reached back and tapped your wallet twenty-five times. *Yes*, I am very observant."

"Twenty-three times," Danny muttered. "And so what?" he said, flushing. "I'm not the one taking three medications and living in a total mess." As he said this he turned away, unable to meet Beth's eyes.

"You don't know the first thing about me!" Beth shot back.

Danny backed down, chagrined. She was right. "I'm sorry. Why don't you tell me?"

Beth shrugged. "There's not much to tell. I have the right moods at the wrong times and the wrong moods at the right times. Sometimes I get really 'up' and I have a lot of ideas and some of them are really great and some of them are really crazy, and I do weird things, including buying too much stuff, and that's why I have all the books, among other things, and then I crash and I get really depressed, and I can't ever finish anything because of that. I wanted to go to school and be something, maybe a zoologist or a veterinarian, but my life is totally unpredictable, even if I take all the medicine, so it's been hard for me to finish anything. I don't know if the library assistant job I have now will last. I've just had to learn to live with it all, you know? I take each day as it comes, realizing it might be completely different from what I had planned."

Danny stared at her in horror. In a near whisper he said, "That is the worst thing I have ever heard."

Beth gave him an incredulous look. "Well it's not that bad. It's just really different from how you want things. But I think even you have a lot more capacity to change than you realize."

Danny shook his head. "I don't think I really need to -"

"What? Danny, you are living this completely featureless existence where one day just spills into the next, and you anesthetize your brain with all this ridiculous counting and blinking and tapping and – whatever, just so you can check out from reality and never actually feel anything. Maybe my problem is that I feel too much, all the time, and yeah it can take over, but it's worthwhile to feel sometimes, and I think you deserve to experience that. You are a good person – I could tell that about you right away. But you need to try to help yourself. It's not going to get any better as you get older, trust me. You're just going to end up stuck, and alone."

While Beth said all this Danny felt his throat constrict tighter and tighter and although her words penetrated into his ears and he registered them, he began to feel that he was very far away from her. Finally, once she had been quiet for a while, he stood up. She was looking away toward the playground, wiping tears from her face with a napkin. Danny muttered something about needing to catch the bus and left.

For two months they managed to avoid speaking with or seeing each other. Nevertheless, Beth intruded regularly on Danny's thoughts. These incursions were often associated with lapses in his usual pattern of perfection. Twice he lost count of how many times he'd scrubbed each finger prior to surgery. He had to remain extra vigilant in the or to keep the correct count of sponges and towels. Once, a surgeon chided him for a slight delay in passing a set of tiny mosquito forceps. Each of these missteps was punished by an expanded version of the usual set of rituals when he got home.

Finally, when he couldn't stand it any longer, Danny decided to seek Beth out, though he wasn't sure what he would do once he found her. One day, when his shift was over, he went to the hospital library to ask for her. He'd hoped to have a moment to formulate what he was going to say, but as it happened, Beth was working up front at the circulation desk that day, and they came precipitously face to face. Beth had a bunch of small white flowers from the courtyard tucked into her hair, and when she looked at Danny, her eyes seemed to sparkle behind her glasses. She appeared genuinely shocked to see him.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"Beth, I – " Danny's voice trailed off. He'd imagined having a whole speech ready. Some kind of apology, to start with. But now his mind was empty.

Beth nodded. "It's okay. You can return the book and we won't charge you a fine. But this time only."

"What?" Danny was confused.

"This time only, we will not charge you a fine. This is your last chance, though." She smiled sweetly at him. "Would you like to take out another book? Perhaps a horror novel?"

It took Danny a moment to figure out what she meant. When he finally understood, he laughed, but too loudly, so that the other librarian shushed him, and Beth had to shoo him away. Later that night he emailed her and, to his own amazement, invited her to come over to his apartment.

The day before Beth's visit, he stayed up most of the night cleaning. He fumed at the residual spots and streaks on the bathroom mirror, vowing to get a different cleaning product as soon as the stores opened. He aligned all of his science fiction novels on the shelves, put them in alphabetical order, then in order of hard sci-fi versus popular versus fantasy, and then re-alphabetized them within that. He scrubbed every inch of floor and even the walls. He set up the futon so that it would be like a couch and put a clean sheet over it, since he didn't have a cover. He vowed to research futon covers as soon as Beth's visit was over. Each time he imagined her arriving at his apartment, he was overwhelmed with feeling, a kind of rushing wave of excitement, and panic, and something like hope, which he did not remember having felt in a very long time.

By the time Beth called up from the lobby, he had fallen asleep on the futon. He awoke with a start. He buzzed her in, then opened the door and stood there, waiting for the anticipated vision of Beth to appear in the dusty hallway. Then, there she was, her white teeth shining in the fluorescent light. When she reached the threshold, they faced one another. She was outside and he was inside, separated by the open space of the doorframe, as though it were some kind of cosmic portal.

She looked at him and asked, "What am I supposed to do now?"

Danny reached over and took her right hand, lifted her index finger so that it touched the lintel, and began counting, for both of them. *One, two, three, four, five* – and then, abruptly, he stopped. "No," he said, surprised at himself. "Just come in."

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SOPHIA HOLTZ

Advice for Exorcism

What the bad ghost tells is hard to swallow. It's a bitter pill, a tale in the dark,

an open cut you can't keep from tonguing as you lie awake again before your alarm.

Maybe you listen because of the hurt – fooling yourself that hurt makes talk true.

Maybe once you've heard her, there's no going back: she's buried those knives, she's burned all your crops,

she's built your effigy so real you mistake it for right.

SOPHIA HOLTZ

Diagnostics

When you are sick and nobody knows why you may feel, at times, that you are underwater with only angler fish and deep-sea shrimp for company. Many do not know about your part of the ocean. Those who do, fear fanged eels, writhing hagfish – the things waiting there we know nothing about.

The reasons why your new home is called the twilight zone have nothing to do with light. Nobody can find you. Of course they send submarines to search with sonar. Of course they drop glass-encased letters, like enemy leaflets. When you try to read them the ink will bleed from the paper into streams of smoke before you are finished reading.

You start to believe there's no bringing you back to the surface. That your body, if fished out, will not be able to survive the changes in pressure — you will end up like the squid they keep in formaldehyde-filled tanks at the museum.

Nothing is certain: what will sink down, what bones will collapse in the sand, becoming an ecosystem for anything desperate.

HANNAH LARRABEE

On the Topic of Belonging

It seems the time of year to notice a wisp of tailpipe exhaust hovering over night pavement, rain soaked, it seems the time of year to recognize how it lingers, moves a little once the car surges forward, once it has become its own entity for a moment, and in that moment it chooses to move toward what has moved away, useless, God help me for I have sinned, it seems to take a knee before the alter, it touches the rain soaked pavement and at that touch has already been diminished; tell me there are a few who can recognize that moment in anything: water spinning down current from the dip and pull of a canoe paddle, tell me, is there anyone who can hear that low-tone bargaining, the kind we all let escape our lips, wanting, as it were - to belong.

HANNAH LARRABEE

Domesticated

Headline: Couple rescued off Florida coast after treading water for fourteen hours.

Understand there are notable differences between steel wool and s.o.s. pads. I didn't know. Now I wonder how long they went on talking, or, if what saved them was – they didn't. They saved breath. They treaded water. They became wild in their own longings, stripped of every household nuance they had learned about each other, bursting like champagne kept for years. Now what if the world had slowed, if there were still moments when each of us had to kill to eat, take a chicken by the neck and carry it off? In bed, we would watch that body anew, flushed as it was with contradiction: the kindness you had witnessed from those same hands planting flowers. I am afraid I am heavy as marble – that I would sink. If I am wanted, your body would have to carve mine into a masterpiece: the way Bernini's hand grips a marble thigh. A masterpiece: your hair enveloping my face. If I am wanted, I am okay with understanding things just as they are. Put to teeth, a strawberry turns to gristle. Put to charge, steel wool ignites.

JENNIFER CHADOURNE

Heartaches Are Going to the Inside

Toon't want checkered flags on my cheeks this time," Joey instructs. "I want an 03. That's Daddy's new number. He took it in honor of Dale Earnhardt."

"How thoughtful of him," Teresa says. "What color?"

"White with black outline." She digs through her makeup case for the grease pencils she bought on sale after Halloween.

"Wasn't Earnhardt's number just a plain ole 3, without the o?"

"Daddy put an o in front of it out of respect. None of the drivers are going to use a plain ole 3 again." Joey tilts his small head to the side to make a level drawing surface. Teresa frowns a bit as she uncaps the black and white pigment.

"Okay," she sighs. "03 it is."

"Make it look like the writing on race cars. Don't just write an o and a 3."

"I'll do my best."

She carefully sketches one figure on each of his flushed cheeks. His skin is fair like his father's and shows emotion easily. Excitement spreads across it like cherry syrup stirred into a bowl of egg custard.

"Your Mawmaw Mart sent us another jar of your favorite today." Teresa thinks about the glaze over Mart's eyes when she stopped by the old woman's house this afternoon. It made her wonder if Mart was still all there. When Mart was her mother-in-law, Teresa never noticed how much the woman aged from one week to the next, but now that Teresa

is just her home health worker, her visits have become more infrequent. Mart seems to wear each month like a year.

"What?" he asks.

"Mixed pickles." He sticks his tongue out and wrinkles his wide-open face in disgust. She laughs and repositions his head.

"Did she send me a birthday present?"

"No, honey." Teresa darkens the white pigment over the red of his cheek. "I don't think she remembers dates too well anymore. Don't mean she don't love you, though."

He nods a little. As she makes the black outline, she scolds herself for not buying a birthday card this afternoon and having Mart sign her name to it. *Oh well. Joey is old enough to know that his grandmother is aging.* She draws motion lines behind the three like it's speeding across his face. Looks just as good as what those clowns at the church fair could do.

"You're done." She ruffles his sandy blond hair. "Go take a look."

Joey jumps off the bar stool and runs down the hall to the bathroom.

"Awesome!" he yells back. She smiles to herself and recaps the grease pencils. He's been so mopey since Little Buck stopped coming for him on the weekends that she's just happy he's happy again.

His enthusiasm gooses the old thrill she used to get every race night. That feeling is probably what attracted her to Little Buck in the first place, but now she wonders if she would've done anything differently if she had known how quickly that thrill would turn into fear. When she was growing up in the holler, Mart used to warn her that falling for a race car driver would mean a world of heartache. "Either you leave, they leave, or they die," Mart used to say. Teresa had always thought Mart just felt guilty about leaving her husband two years before his crash, like maybe if she'd stayed, she could've prevented it. But Mart had been right about everything.

Joey waddles back into the kitchen, legs bound together by a blue jumpsuit with white and red racing stripes. The store tags still hang off the back collar. Even though Teresa would rather see him in a dress than racing gear, she feels proud that she was able to scrounge enough money together to buy him such a nice gift. The delight she sees in his face as she helps him pull the jumpsuit up and zip it is worth the extra trips she had to make to the old folks on the home health agency's roster.

She's confident Joey will remember this birthday as more than just the first one they spent as a two-person family.

"Okay, smile." She takes the disposable camera she bought this afternoon out of its box. Joey clasps his hands over his head in a winner's pose and she snaps the flash at his beaming face. "Perfect! Just like a Winston Cup champion. Now go get in the car while I feed the dog. On your mark... get set ... go!"

Joey shoots out the front door of their house, and in a couple of seconds Teresa hears the car door slam. The noise is like a rallying cry. This will be the first time they've been to the track since Little Buck left them, and she knows Joey wants her to be just as excited about it as he is. He still has visions of late-night hot dog dinners in the box seats and falling asleep across her lap with exhaust fumes in his nose. She looks at the clock on the microwave. Six-thirty. Half an hour till race time. She grabs the big bag of dog food from under the kitchen sink.

"Wink!" she yells out the back door. Their one-eyed mutt comes running out from under the porch. "Suppertime." He wags his tail and Teresa squats to stroke his soft brown head. A breeze fingers her hair. Darkness is falling slow and easy, seeming to come up from the ground instead of down from the sky. She sees lightning bugs fire up in front of the black tree line down at the bottom of their hill. Dots of yellow twinkle amongst the pines like Christmas lights. Absorbed in the spectacle, she finds herself wishing that tonight wasn't Joey's birthday. She wants to stay home and show him how to make a lantern out of fireflies and a Mason jar. She wants to play with him in the yard until they get eaten alive by mosquitoes. She wants to sit here petting Wink until the sun comes back up and extinguishes the lightning bugs for another day.

The car horn honks and her thoughts shake loose. "Coming!" she shouts. She pours Wink's kibble in his bowl and walks back through the house. Before walking out the front door, though, she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror above the living room couch. There are lines in her forehead that weren't there a year ago. A few strands of gray wind from her temples into her thick blond ponytail. Only two years past thirty and she's already headed downhill. She takes a tube

of rhubarb lip-gloss out of her jeans pocket and applies just enough to draw attention away from the changes.

New River has changed a lot since Teresa was a girl. Driving through downtown, she sees things less for what they are and more for what they used to be. That boarded-up storefront was the hardware and that abandoned brick building was the post office. O'Dell's Market is now a Thrifty Thrift. Old men still sit outside the barbershop on warm days, but that's about the only place that does any business downtown anymore. Even the Old Regular Baptists moved into a steeple-topped aluminum box out by the interstate.

Joey fiddles with the radio dial as she steers her clunky old Escort onto Route 11. This road used to be Virginia's main drag from the tip of the state to the toe. She remembers cruising it all the way down to Bristol with Little Buck when she was in high school. Now people only use it to get to the storage units that sit where the drive-in used to be and, of course, the racetrack.

"Aww," Joey moans as they clear the bend of a foothill and meet a line of cars with steady brake lights. The track's entranceway is still about half a mile away. "We're gonna miss the start."

"These things always start late." The electronically enhanced voice of some country singer bleats from the car's speakers and Teresa realizes her head is pounding. She wishes she had some aspirin in her purse. The pain will only get worse when they get close to the roar of the race. "Mind if I turn this off?" The woman on the radio sounds like she's having a seizure. Joey shrugs his shoulders, so she punches the knob.

The driver in front of them releases his brakes, and they move ahead about two car lengths. When they would come here with Little Buck, they'd drive past the line on the shoulder of the road and then walk right through the ticket taker. He was friendly with everyone at the track. A holler and a wave was payment enough, even when Little Buck wasn't driving in one of the races. Teresa had felt like some kind of VIP in those days.

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"You wanna have hot dogs for dinner?" she asks Joey.

"Yeah," he sighs. "I guess." He stares out the side window, where the fluorescents from the racetrack glow between two hills. Harsh white light turns the night sky into chalky slate and reveals the lack of color in Joey's face. His excitement has waned. Just the fact that they're sitting here in line means this isn't going to be like it once was.

"Your daddy's gonna be awful glad to see you," she tells him. "I bet he'll let you sit in his car."

Joey nods. He takes in a breath like he's going to say something, but doesn't. They creep forward a few more car lengths, and he looks over at Teresa.

"He knows we're coming, right?"

"Sure he does. Told me on the phone last night he can't wait to see you."

Joey nods again and turns back to the window. Teresa says a silent prayer that Little Buck has at least remembered to get a birthday card. They move forward a little more and eventually make their way into the weedy field that the track owners use as a parking lot.

"Last stop," she says and cuts the ignition. "Everybody out."

Joey unfastens his seatbelt and hops out the door. Nervous energy shows in the way he drums his hands on the car hood. It sounds like squirrels running across a tin roof. Teresa gathers her purse and sweater and remembers her headache.

"Reckon it's started?" Joey asks. He skips ahead a little, then turns back.

"Course not. You know we'd be hearing it if it had." An announcer's voice bounces between the hills, saying something about a pie raffle. Teresa can hear cars revving, but they're not running yet. She and Joey fall in behind a few other stragglers. Everyone except her is making great haste toward the gate. She moves her feet like they're pulling boulders. What a stupid idea this was. It's always easier to face Little Buck back at her own house, surrounded by her own things.

"Hurry up, Momma." Joey skips ahead again. "They're gonna start." Suddenly she hates his jumpsuit and wishes she had bought him video games or LEGOS.

"I'm hurrying."

When they get to the ticket booth, old Idy recognizes Teresa right off. Her crinkly eyelids narrow for inspection while she shows her perfect false teeth in a grin.

"Well, Teresa," she says. "Little Buck told me you all would probably be coming by tonight. Been a long time."

"It's Joey's birthday. This is what he wanted to do."

Idy redirects her grin down to him. "Well, well! How old is the little man?"

"Nine," he says and pulls at his mother's hand. He wants to dart through the gate and go find his daddy. Idy winks at Teresa like they're sharing a joke. Teresa feels like running back to the car and staying there until the race is over. These people aren't my people anymore. Every single one of them is going to search me up and down for cracks while pretending nothing has changed in the past year.

"How much?" she asks Idy and rummages through her purse.

"Oh, nothing for you all, sugar," she says. "Would you like to buy a chance on a lemon meringue pie, though? They're light as a cloud and sweet as syrup. Proceeds go to help one of the drivers who got busted up last week. Don't have no insurance since getting laid off at the plant."

"Sure." That's one thing she doesn't miss. She used to worry every week that Little Buck was going to leave her a widow, and when Joey came along, she started questioning the sense in him continuing to drive. All that nagging must be why he went off and did the next worst thing to dying.

Teresa pulls a few dollars out of her billfold. Half of her is pleased Idy's letting them in for free, and half of her wants to pay the full amount, plus some. It's hard to say if the woman's generosity comes from affection or pity.

"We thank ye," Idy says and gives Teresa a couple raffle tickets before waving them through the gate.

"Thank you."

"Happy birthday, little man!" Idy calls behind them.

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Joey tugs hard at Teresa's arm and leads them to the starting line. They walk in front of the crowded bleachers that hug two hillsides. With Dale Earnhardt dead only three months, several people hold signs saying "R.I.P #3" and "O2/18/OI — THE DAY GOD NEEDED A DRIVER." Young guys wearing T-shirts bearing the faces of famous NASCAR drivers sit with their arms around their dates. One of them holds a little boy on his shoulders who waves a homemade poster for the number fourteen car.

Fourteen, Teresa thinks. Fourteen. She's been out of the loop so long, she has no idea who's driving what anymore. Engines rev as they walk, and the smell of gasoline and exhaust gets heavy in the air. Everything seems unreal in the fluorescents' phony daylight. Teresa's headache evolves into dizziness.

"There he is!" Joey yells over the racket.

Teresa sees Little Buck standing by a new-looking black car with an o3 painted on its side in white. He's wearing the red jumpsuit she bought him two Christmases ago and giving directions to his pit crew. Teresa remembers most of the guys – Little Buck's cousin Lane, a few work buddies – but the teenager is unfamiliar. Straggly brown hair droops beneath a black number three cap that the boy has pulled down low over his eyes. *New stepson; so this is your son's replacement*.

Joey lets go of Teresa's hand and runs to his father. She watches as Little Buck picks him up and lifts him toward the sky. A wide smile cracks Joey's moony face, and a deep red flush blooms around the threes on his cheeks. All of Little Buck's offenses are wiped away with one swift motion. Teresa thinks about the past few weekends Joey had spent brooding about the house, refusing to do anything except watch races on TV. Why can't you tell him how mad you were, she wants to say.

"Happy birthday, little man," Little Buck says and sets Joey down on the ground.

Teresa stands a few feet away, waiting to be addressed. The crew guys crowd around Joey and make him giggle with playful punches, telling him how tall he's gotten in a year. Teresa studies Little Buck. With a helmet covering his baldness, she could almost mistake him for the twenty-seven year old she married fifteen years ago. A belly bulge is the only visible difference. She's annoyed to feel her stomach jump with

electricity. She looks around until she finds Mona, Little Buck's new wife. She's standing in the box seats up above the starting line, waving a big number three flag. Desire recedes as Teresa's anger surges. Mona's broad hips are stuffed into tight jeans that give the saddlebag effect. Teresa rubs a hand over her own size eights and wonders if a younger woman would've been easier for her to handle.

"Teresa." Her name coming out of Little Buck's mouth gives her a start. She looks over at him and sees that he has taken off his helmet. His green eyes are the shade of unripe fox grapes.

"Buck," she says.

"How've you been?"

"All right. And you?"

"All right."

His face is a wide open plane like Joey's, but she knows not to trust its innocent veneer. He stares at her, maybe wanting a reprimand or an outburst to relieve the pressure of the moment.

"New car, huh?"

"New to me. Got a deal off a guy down in Bristol. Already had the roll cage installed and everything. Just had to load her up and bring her home."

He seems pleased that she came up with a neutral subject and brings his hand to rest on Joey's head. The crew guys have dispersed, some to duck under the car's hood and some to rifle through the piles of tires and parts that lay about. Joey wriggles out from under his father's hand to peek in the racecar's window. Teresa sifts through conversation topics and remembers her trip to Mart's this afternoon.

"Saw your momma today," she tells him.

"Oh yeah? How's she?"

"Looking frail. She's got too much time on her hands to think."

"Yeah. She probably needs seeing about. Reckon I'll run her to church on Sunday."

Teresa thinks about Mart's empty, oppressive house and how quickly she's been aging. With her daughters down in North Carolina, she has no other close family to rely on. Even if Little Buck took her to church every single Sunday, it wouldn't be enough. He should see about her on a daily basis. It irritates her that he can't or won't see that.

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"You realize I don't get out there as often as I used to, don't you?" Teresa watches Joey reach in the racecar and try to turn the steering wheel. "I mean, you know how much I care about your momma, but I can't be going out there all the time like I did before you ...well, before."

Little Buck rolls those lustrous green eyes of his.

"Now, Teresa. You know how it is when the season starts."

Joey holds onto the windowsill and jumps a little. He wants to swing himself inside like the drivers do, but he misses by a mile.

"Why don't you take that thing for a spin?" Little Buck puts his helmet on Joey and lifts him by the waist into the driver's seat. "Drive safe, now."

Joey takes the wheel and jerks it back and forth while palming the gearshift. The sight of him in that car chafes Teresa's nerves. He'll grow up to get killed in one of those things and you're content to let him. Little Buck turns back to her and shrugs his shoulders like he has no control over anything. It makes her so angry she wants to smack him.

"Yeah, I know how it is."

He groans. "Now what are we fighting about?"

"Your momma. Your son. Everything."

"Everything? Well, I don't have time to fight about everything just now."

Teresa's head throbs hard. He seems so unworried, so satisfied with himself. Next to him, she feels like a stiff, angry brier.

"You don't have time for anything except whatever it is you want. You never have."

"And you don't have time for anything except nailing yourself up on a cross so you can look down your nose at me. My momma is my concern, not yours. You get paid to do what you do for her. The rest just isn't your business."

"So now I'm the one who's done something wrong." She glances up at Mona. Although several rows of people and an ocean of noise separate the two women, Teresa can tell she has caught her eye. Mona looks away quickly. "I'm not the one who doesn't see his son for weeks at a time."

"Yeah, yeah yeah. I'm not fit to kiss the soles of your shoes. Well, I'm done apologizing to you, Teresa. You think I like not seeing our son for weeks? I don't come get him because you don't want him to be here. Why should he have to see a wrestling match between us every week?"

Little Buck's stepson taps him on the shoulder. He turns, looking angry at first, then relieved when the boy tells him the race is about to start.

"Well, how nice you've found a son whose mother doesn't mind him learning a deadly sport." Teresa pries a struggling Joey from the car. Once on the ground, he plasters his hands to Little Buck's helmet, but she pulls his wrists hard and takes it from his head. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Little Buck trade smirks with his stepson as he motions him away. Teresa looks down at Joey's jumpsuit and wishes she could rip it off him and set it on fire. How stupid she was to buy him such a thing. A year away from the track had lulled her into thinking she could be okay with all this now. It was a false peace she'd found, built on forgetting, not approval. She holds fast to Joey's twisting hand.

"Happy birthday, Joey." Little Buck ignores Teresa as he slips into the driver's seat. He takes the helmet she's thrusting in his direction and slaps a high five on Joey's free hand. "Thanks for coming tonight. I'll be by the house tomorrow with a big birthday surprise for you."

Joey's eyes widen. He looks up at Teresa to make sure she heard, his hand pumping hers.

"Love you, little man," Little Buck says.

"Love you, Daddy."

Teresa pulls Joey away, toward the bleachers. The green flag drops as they stumble over people, trying to find a free spot. Noise explodes in the air and there is Mona, waving that big number three flag up in the box seats. She wonders what kind of wife could possibly get that excited about seeing her husband hurtle toward his death. They pass an open space next to an elderly couple that Teresa cleans for once a month. The seats are so close to the track, she can hardly see anything except the colorful blur of cars passing right before them.

"Hidy, Mr. Compton," she mutters as she sits Joey down next to them. "Mrs. Compton."

"Hidy, Teresa," the old man says. He wears dress pants and a tuckedin button-up shirt, making him the nicest dressed spectator by far. His wife leans her coifed gray head to peer around him and smiles at Joey.

"Who's this we have here?" she asks.

"This is my Joey." Teresa pushes Little Buck from her mind.

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"Joey, this is Mr. and Mrs. Compton. They're the nice couple who sent you that homemade taffy last month, remember?" She nudges him a little and hopes he won't mention how much he hated the molasses-flavored chews, and how much Wink loved them. "What do you say?"

He's completely absorbed in the race and ignores her prodding.

"He thanks you," Teresa says. "He's nine today."

Mrs. Compton smiles and nods at him. "Our grandboy is in the race there." She points toward the track. "He's number twenty."

"That's nice." Teresa sighs to herself. She doesn't want to engage in race talk and explain their reasons for being here.

"My daddy's number three!" Joey pipes up, suddenly riveted by the conversation.

"Number three..." Mr. Compton searches the field. "Why that's Buck Lawson, Jr., isn't it?"

Joey nods.

"Well, I'll be. His daddy was the best driver this state ever saw. Maybe the best this country ever saw. I bet you're going to be a driver when you grow up, too, aren't you? I can see you're already dressed for it."

"Yep. Momma bought me this jumpsuit for my birthday."

"It's mighty sharp." Mr. Compton gives Teresa a wink she doesn't return.

"Why, Teresa," Mrs. Compton says. "I didn't know your husband drives a racecar."

"Ex-husband."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay."

Everyone is silent and turns back to the race. Little Buck is lagging behind several cars, including number twenty. Joey looks worried, but Teresa feels a secret joy. She wants to believe that somehow regret is weighing him down and keeping him from whipping the curves like he's known for.

"You know, these things scare me to death," Mrs. Compton leans past her husband to say. "Nobody could keep our grandboy Ricky from driving, but I sure do wish he'd a found a safer hobby. It's a wild-natured person who can put themselves in harm's way like that, if you ask me. Ain't easy to sit back and watch."

Teresa nods to her, but hates that Mrs. Compton is trying to sympathize. Her words sound so timid, so prudent, so old. Teresa wishes she could go back to when danger was more exciting than threatening and refute her in some way. The invincible years. The years when she was loved.

Alone amongst all these people, she lets herself imagine Little Buck's arm around her. She watches him circle the track and remembers what it was like to be the one he was trying to impress. She's comforted until she sees Mona cheering up there in her box. Down here in the bleachers, Teresa is engulfed by noise. The commotion frays her nerves in a way it never used to. Her headache swells. *That woman has made him think I'm a monster.* The comfort she took in his phantom embrace now feels like it's rotting out her insides. She asks the Comptons if they mind watching Joey while she runs to the restroom.

"Sure, honey," Mrs. Compton says.

"Be back in a minute," she tells Joey, but he barely notices her leaving. She picks her way down behind the bleachers. Crouching in the soft sheltered dirt, she sobs until she can't breathe.

When Teresa awakens the next morning, Joey is already up watching his Saturday cartoons in the living room. He's still wearing his jumpsuit and has let Wink in to lay in front of the TV with him. There's a cereal bowl sitting on the carpet with a puddle of milk left in it, stained pink by colored marshmallows.

"What did I tell you about letting that dog in here?" she asks, her voice still thick with sleep.

"He's clean," Joey says. "I wiped his paws on the mat."

The dog's stink is already filling the house, but she lets it go. It gives her an excuse to open the windows, even though the morning is chilly. She goes to the kitchen and slides the glass door open. The sun is stretching across the backyard and burning up the mist that accumulates in the mountains during the night. It'll be warm later in the day, maybe even hot. One of those almost-summer days when she and Joey can spend the

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whole day outside in the not-yet-scorching sun. A cool breeze rattles the screen door and raises goosebumps on her arms. She folds them across the long T-shirt she wore to bed. Through the pines at the bottom of their hill, she sees a rusty pickup crawling up the switchback. The trees only allow glimpses, but she recognizes it well enough.

"Dammit," she says. "The one time he actually comes when he says he will."

"What?" Joey has muted the sound on some commercials. She wants to scoop him up and run into the woods.

"Your daddy's coming," she says. "Get that filthy dog out of here."

Joey rockets from where he was lying. While he ushers Wink out the front door, Teresa hurries to her bedroom and throws on her old terry cloth robe. She probably has about five minutes until Little Buck pulls into their driveway. He was going pretty slow and still has to reach the turnoff for their road. She finds a hair band on her nightstand and goes to the bathroom to take care of the rat's nest on her head. In the medicine cabinet mirror she sees that her eyes are still puffy from crying last night.

"Ain't you a sad sight." She combs at her hair with her fingers and rushes back to the kitchen to pull two ice cubes from the freezer.

"What are you doing?" Joey asks. His face is absolute crimson.

"My eyes are hot."

His eyebrows twist in confusion, and then the doorbell rings.

"Go get it." She tosses the ice cubes in the sink and wipes her face with a paper towel. Joey runs into the living room and opens the front door. "Daddy!"

"Hey there, buddy," Little Buck says. "How's it feel to be an old man?" "Pretty good, I guess."

Little Buck laughs. Teresa leans in the living room entranceway. Without his helmet and jumpsuit on, he looks older than his forty-two years. His belly swells softly beneath his white polo shirt and slims his legs to sticks in their dark blue jeans. His thick and wavy brown hair has ebbed from his forehead. That hair, his innocent grin, and slightly devious eyes used to remind Teresa of Conway Twitty. When they first got married, Little Buck would sing Twitty's "Hello Darlin" or "Slow Hand" to her in bed.

"Teresa," Little Buck says.

"Buck."

He just stares at her without saying anything. She feels worse than naked, like he can see right down into the bottom of her soul.

"Awful early, ain't it?" she asks.

"Now I'm not here to fight. I have to take my car down to Bristol to have it worked on today and I wanted to bring this gift by before I go."

"What gift?" Joey asks.

"What gift? Well I don't know. I guess you'll just have to run out to the truck and find out."

Joey squeezes past his father and out the front door. Little Buck watches him through the storm glass. Teresa drifts over next to him and watches, too. He smells the same as she remembers – gasoline and aftershave. She sees Little Buck's stepson get out of the passenger side and take Joey around to the back of the truck. The boy's presence here feels like an intrusion. She almost scolds Little Buck for bringing him without asking, but decides not to. He probably wants a rise out of her about it.

"That number fourteen car was something, huh?" She was so glad to see Little Buck lose to someone she'd never heard of.

"Rookie luck."

"Probably."

Their arms are almost touching. Little Buck seems to notice and shifts away from her. He looks so uncomfortable in this little house that used to be their home together.

"That car of mine don't run like the man said it would. That's why I have to take it back down to him today."

"Gotta watch out, this day and age. Never know what you'll get."

"Now that's the truth." He crosses his arms and steals a glance at her. She looks away.

"Reckon I should've known better than to use Earnhardt's number, though." He stares out the storm glass again. "Nothing but a curse."

Joey comes running back up the walk, his feet bare and muddy.

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"Momma!" he pants. "Daddy got me a racecar bed!"

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"He did?" Teresa raises her eyebrows at Little Buck. He smiles the way he used to when he wanted her approval for something he knew she didn't approve of. It would've been easier if he'd forgotten Joey's birthday altogether. She feels like she's being blackmailed. If she doesn't let Joey have the bed, he probably won't speak to her until he's thirty.

"Well," she says. "How thoughtful."

Little Buck leans out the door. "Donny! Open up the tailgate. Let's get that thing in here." He goes out to help, with Joey following close behind.

"Put you some shoes on!" Teresa says, but Joey pretends not to hear. She steps onto the front stoop, her own feet bare against the cold concrete. Little Buck bends to pat Wink, who's circling him, begging for attention. No doubt the dog remembers his smell as well as she does. She watches as a blue wooden racecar with black plastic wheels is toted across her front yard. Stepfather and stepson turn it on its side to get it through the door as Joey puts his hands against the middle, like he's lifting.

"Watch out now, little man," Little Buck says. "Let us get it inside, then you can carry it the rest of the way."

Teresa opens the door for them and Little Buck flashes his straight white teeth as he passes.

"Down the hall and to the left," he directs Donny. It seems strange that he knows where Joey's room is, even though it shouldn't. Donny keeps his eyes on the bed as he shuffles past, maybe sensing that eye contact with Teresa could be a dangerous proposition.

"Just set it down next to his twin bed," Teresa tells them. "Move the mattress over and I'll take the old frame apart later."

She hears a few scuffs against the wall, then a thud as the bed lands on carpet. Joey gives directions for exact placement. Plodding down the hall, she glances into her own room and feels embarrassed that the bed she and Little Buck used to share is only unmade on one side. Her clothes from last night are folded neatly across a chair. *Guess it's obvious I'm not dating anyone*. Mattress springs start squeaking as Joey takes his new bed for a test jump.

Teresa crosses the hall into Joey's room. Donny gives her a nod, but she looks away. He brushes past her, and the front door closes. She wonders what he will tell his mother about her house. Little Buck's eyes narrow on the spot where Donny was standing. Teresa focuses on the bed, which is tacky as hell. Its bright blue paint blends into the room's navy blue carpeting like some kind of multicolored bruise. She can't help but hate it. It's just one more step toward her house becoming a museum of decaying racing relics, like Mart's. She wonders what Mart's doing today, hurt that Little Buck thinks she should only care about her as much as she's paid to. She's been more of a mother to me than my own was.

"So you're off to Bristol now?" she asks.

"Yep. Just gotta go by the house and pick up Mona and the car."

"Y'all are staying for the race down there tonight, I reckon?" "Yep."

The two of them watch Joey bounce up and down, his head almost grazing the low ceiling.

"I bet Joey don't even remember the Bristol track," he says. "It's been so long."

"No. He probably don't."

"Reckon he'd like to come along?"

Little Buck sets his green eyes on her. She looks down and sees she's been picking a bare spot in the sash on her robe. I should've known something like this was coming. The bed was just to loosen up my resistance.

"I'm sure he would. But there's an awful lot of people down there, Buck. No telling what he might get into."

"You know I watch after him, Teresa. We all do."

She doesn't know that, but the edge on Little Buck's voice cuts down her protests before she can even make them. "Guess I have to let him, don't I?"

"The judge would say so."

She shrugs her shoulders. "It's not that I like fretting you." He gives the back of her neck a squeeze. Electricity jumps from his fingers down her spine.

"Hey Joey!" Little Buck says. "How'd you like to take a trip down to Bristol with me today?"

Joey bounces lower and lower until he comes to a standing stop. His face is deadly serious as he looks at Little Buck, then Teresa.

Jennifer Chadourne

"Really, Momma? Can I?"

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"If you brush your teeth and put some shoes on, I guess you can."

He jumps from the bed and pulls a pair of sneakers from the closet, then runs to the bathroom. Teresa and Little Buck walk back down the hall to the living room.

"Thank you, Teresa." He sounds like she did something wonderfully generous, even though she had no choice. He can be a good man when he tries.

"Kids need seeing about," she tells him. "No call to be such a stranger to him."

Joey scoots in with his shoes half on and hugs her goodbye. She clutches him tight and wonders what she's going to do with the whole empty day that's gaping before her. There's a minute of drop-off discussion and then, before she can think, Joey is rolling out of sight in the middle seat of Little Buck's pickup. She stands on the front stoop and watches them disappear around a curve. Wink circles her legs. When the truck is gone, she bends down to pet him. She's hungry, she realizes. And Wink needs a bath. She gets up and goes to the kitchen. Through the pines at the bottom of the hill, she sees Little Buck's pickup easing down the switchback. Teresa's heart pounds into her throat as the two of them pull out of her grasp.

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