

THE LUMBER MILL AND OTHER STORIES

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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ABSTRACT

THE LUMBER MILL AND OTHER STORIES

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George Mason University, 2014

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This thesis is a collection of short stories written over the course of eight months. Many of these short stories involve close relationships – the kind that form between two people – and the moments, often disconcerting, that define them. A particular afternoon, a conversation, a way of looking, can signify a timespan, a relationship, much greater, much more involved, and it is the author’s intention to portray a timespan of great length in as small a space as possible.

HOMELESS

It was the way her body felt on the sand, she'd told him...it didn't feel nice. If they'd maybe had a blanket; something to set down...but the young man had gone off without responding, leaving her alone on a shadowed stretch of beach in Big Bay.

Beyond the rocks, the sun stood over the lake, casting an orange glare along the surface. The cold wind rose and gave the girl goosebumps. She got dressed. They'd had such a nice time on the water that afternoon, swimming despite the season, searching for crayfish and bits of shells along the shoreline. She hated for things to be like this...the way these things seemed to matter more than anything else. The whole day was ruined. A pair of cawing lake birds circled overhead as she finished dressing. Reluctantly, she gathered her things and walked barefoot uphill to where the young man had wandered off to.

At first she couldn't find him anywhere. The tall grass outside the beach scraped her feet, and she rested for a moment to put her shoes on. She thought of calling the young man's name, but decided against it. She took her time. The trail climbed upward from the beach, branching out into a series of trees, a distant cliff. Eventually she found him farther up, off the trail, bending queerly in front of a tall oak tree on the horizon. She had to squint her eyes. An old man, probably homeless, sat slouched against the tree trunk in front of him. He was the only other person she'd seen at the beach all day, and she could just make out his features in the changing light. He seemed to be unconscious. The girl watched from a distance as the young man reached down toward the old man.

When he rose again the young man carried away a bottle of gold that sparkled in the setting sun.

“What are you doing?” the girl asked him, catching up. He drank from the bottle and handed it her way.

“He won’t miss it,” said the young man.

“Is he...”

“He’s passed out,” he said. “Drunk.” He drank long and thirsty from the bottle, wiping his lips, and offered it again, but the girl would not accept it.

“You drove us here,” she told him.

“I’ll drive us back.”

“You will not,” she said. They walked away from the homeless man against the tree, not toward the car or toward the beach but off into the tall, sharp grass. The girl’s hair blew in the wind and she tried to hold it down. The young man continued drinking. They walked single file with the young man in the lead. Neither of them said anything.

“Just stop,” the girl said finally. They’d approached the grassy end of the small cliff overlooking the lake. A breeze swept through and rippled the vast orange water. “I don’t know why you have to act this way...” she said to his back. “You know I want it the same as you.”

The young man kept drinking. He didn’t turn around.

“But you won’t talk. You never talk. You storm off and act crazy. You steal and you drink and you say you want to drive us home. Can’t we just have a nice time for a change and leave it at that?”

“How can you say that?” he said, turning. “That you want it, too?”

“I *do* want it,” she told him.

The young man laughed.

“Not *here*. On the ground, out in the open. Without privacy.”

“There’s no one around!”

“What about that old man against the tree?” From the top of the cliff they could still make him out, a small growth beside the tree.

The young man drank. He moved toward the girl and she pushed him away.

“Not here and not anywhere,” he said. “I’ve given you all the time in the world. I took you all the way here today. To the beach in September. You’re selfish,” he told her. He came close again, wetting his lips, and she reached into his pocket and took his car keys.

“Give them back,” he told her.

Now it was the girl’s turn to storm off. She could hear the steps of the young man behind her, crunching through the grass, first moving slowly and then picking up speed. The girl went fast through the grass, back toward the parking lot where the young man’s car had been left. She got in and locked the door and left the young man standing outside, knocking on the glass.

The girl turned on the ignition but she couldn’t drive away. Instead she buried her face into the steering wheel and waited for him to stop. She cried. Of course he would stop. He would calm and get over it. She would drive them both back to Baraga County, and park his father’s car at his parents’ house and walk the half mile down to Howe St. in

the cold. And the next day he would call her and he would come over and maybe he would apologize. It was not unthinkable. Or maybe, after all this, she would give in and let him have it in her bedroom, and she would bite her tongue and just be done with it. It wouldn't kill her. She listened to the bottle break and shatter on the concrete. The sun went down and the sky filled with stars. The young man eventually settled and the girl let him in. She turned on the car's headlights and checked the mirrors, and driving away, she saw the small, shrinking image of the homeless man. He had risen from his tree and was standing hunched over across the field, wildly searching through the tall grass all around him.

ANNIVERSARY

“You should have worn your glasses,” said Kate. The sedan sped down the highway, a short drive from the city, no traffic on a Thursday night.

Ben placed a hand on his wife. She wore a heavy coat. It bothered him that she was right about this. He had counted on the snow on the side of the road, and also on the brake lights of the other cars, but the highway tonight was dark and empty. All signs of the previous night’s snowfall had melted away. Leaning forward, he focused on the road ahead. From the corner of his eye he noticed Kate, shrinking in her seat the way she did when she felt her husband was driving too fast.

“Hold on tight,” he teased her.

Kate did not react. She was still a young woman, a decade her husband’s junior, slight and skeletal, who taught at the junior high school, science, though she had taken the semester off. She had hardly eaten at dinner, and now she cradled her belly, a habit she’d developed, filling the car with the rustle of her coat.

“Say, kid,” said her husband, determined. “I was thinking of the bar. In Bay City.” He moved his fingers in a circular motion on his wife’s covered leg. The swishing of her coat grew louder.

His wife snorted and looked away. “You’re in quite a mood tonight.”

“You remember, though?” he asked.

She adjusted in her seat. “What was that place even called?”

“The Rusty Nail,” he told her.

“*The Rusty Nail.*” She paused. “A romance from the start.”

“You’re here, aren’t you? Five years and counting.”

“I suppose you were a charmer then.”

“Then and forever.”

“Do you remember the smell?” she said, turning toward him. “The fried pickles.”

She made a face. “I could hurl.”

“And waste those Pacific oysters I just paid for?”

She turned back to the window. “A charmer through and through.”

When Ben said, “I love you,” after a pause, she allowed him to touch the stocking of her leg; the bump of her knee, just an inch inside her dress. Ben had planned the evening without her knowing. Reservations in the city, and then...He felt nervous watching it unfold. He envisioned a big night for the couple. He smoothed her knee; felt the terrain of the bone. He relaxed without taking his eyes off the road. The lines blurred a bit, and he crossed from one lane to the next. He progressed up her thigh.

Kate stopped him. “You know what Harper said,” she told him. She picked up his hand and dropped it beside her.

He retook the wheel.

For a while they drove along in silence. The wife slouched and unbuckled her shoes and began to rub her stockinged feet. Again the husband leaned forward. A few

cars had come and gone beside them, but the road remained dark and largely vacant.

When a light snow began to fall, he turned on the wipers.

“Can you see alright?” she asked him.

“Yes,” he answered, exhaling. Then he leaned back some. “Did you like your dessert?”

She said that she did. “A bit rich. I just want to get out of this dress.”

As they approached their regular exit, Ben again moved his hand onto her leg, crunching the tip of her coat with his reach, and again she let him rest there. This time he kept his fingers still.

“Ben...*dear*,” said Kate, “you missed the exit.” She sat upright, shaking him loose and holding her seatbelt. “I said you should have brought your glasses. Honestly, can you even see the lanes? Do you need to pull over and let me drive?”

“I’m taking us somewhere,” he told her, unphased.

“Oh, are you?” she asked. “Because I really don’t feel like groceries tonight. I just want to go home...change...get into a bath. Whatever you need can hold off until tomorrow.”

“It’s not the store,” he said. “Just trust me.”

“Ben,” she began with a sigh. “Thank you for dinner, but I’m just not in the mood for anything else tonight.” She looked out the window, at the snow falling down, and still the car persisted.

Kate leaned her elbow against the window. She turned down the heater, which had begun to give off a faint burning smell, and returned to her cradling position in the seat.

“I wish you would at least slow down.”

Ten minutes later, when he pulled off the highway, Kate looked around. They had come down a little road and turned into a park. The park was closed, though even in the day it was nothing more than a baseball diamond, some bleachers and a thin dirt road. She recognized the place, and again she dropped her husband’s hand.

“Ben –” she said.

Eventually he slowed to a stop.

“You remember this place,” he said.

“Honey, it’s snowing. I’m tired.”

He parked the car beside a row of bare trees.

“Do you know where we are?” he asked her. He remembered it clearly, their first night in this town, and recounted the whole of his memory.

She listened and responded, “You know what the doctor said.” She faced him.

“Thank you for dinner.” She turned away. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you tonight.”

He kissed her gently on the lips, reaching across the front seat, and she kissed him briefly back. He did it again, and she breathed warm air against his mouth. When he reached again this time, she again made him stop.

“Dr. Harper,” she repeated, using the name as a defense. He tried to unbuckle her seatbelt, but she set her hand down on the latch. “There’s no point to it, Ben. *Ben*. Enough!”

For a while they sat alone in the park.

The snow fell down and collected on the windshield. He didn’t bother wiping it away. It stacked and darkened the inside of the car. Kate sobbed for a bit. Eventually he gave in, and touched her face to move the tears. This she allowed.

“I wanted to surprise you,” he said, returning to his seat.

“I know.”

They sat apart, their hands to themselves.

“But you know, there *is* a point. There’s more than one reason, besides the science of it.”

“I know.”

“Nothing has changed for me.”

“I know,” she said. She looked out the cold, fogging window. “Just give it more time.”

LITTLE BIRD

Look at him, she mused, watching the young man take aim. He had a serious look in his eye, a chewed-on lip; her little soldier. She wanted to ruffle his hair, but not to distract him. Instead she looked on with her hands at her side. He shot all the pins and won a prize.

“The bear or the ring?” he asked her.

She asked him to choose, and was glad when he chose the ring; the bear could not come home with her. He put it on her finger, a thick metal band without a jewel, though it didn't quite fit, and she had to work it down. “There,” she said, spreading her fingers wide and holding them up to the sky. “It's lovely.” He bent down, and with a kiss on her lips (among the crowd! she flushed), they walked arm-in-arm, their feet in a rhythm on the rough, pebbled ground. It was a busy summer evening, the night of the fireworks, but the crowds all moved apart for them. She played with her ring as he navigated, a pretty steel toy meant for a girl. A small bird was stenciled on the band. She twisted the prize around with her thumb, irritating the skin and admiring the gift, keeping it from getting too stuck.

Of course, he was not so little – her young man. She had to tilt back her neck to kiss him (her spine sometimes clicked when she did this). They walked together past the shooting games, the rides, the vendors, all of them lit and blinking with exclamation in

the blue-black night. To the left, a man called out, “Go on! Try your luck!” To the right, one cried, “Take a shot! Win a prize!” She watched them all, smiling and enjoying the crowd.

Ahead was an open field. Everyone was setting up lawn chairs and blankets; children were swinging their feet from the trees. A sudden breeze, warm and thick, blew against the couple; it smelled of beer and cotton candy. The world turned beneath them – could he feel it, too? she wondered. How nice it was to be outdoors; and surreal, to be out like this. It was really so sweet of him to come. She pulled him closer, wanting him to kiss her again, in front of everyone. She felt very light. Then she noticed the sweat beneath her arms, on the small of her back, in a stream beneath her breasts. She unlinked and tried to dab the moisture away with her clothes. The young man didn’t seem to notice, or at least he pretended not to. She wanted to kiss him on the spot.

They had driven many miles to get here, to this town two hours south of their own. “A safe enough distance,” she had called it the week before, and though he hadn’t flinched, she’d wondered if she had hurt the young man’s feelings at all, for she often tried to guess about his nature.

He seemed, though, to be in good enough spirit. When she’d picked him up that afternoon, he’d insisted on driving. Had he ever driven a truck like this? she’d asked. His father had almost the same kind, he’d said, and so she’d given him the keys. She slipped off her shoes along the way; she listened to his music and the wind blowing through her hair. She daydreamed about all kinds of things – terrible things at first, as it happened, but then some not so bad. She wanted to thank the young man (her mind flirted). To

thank him in a particular way for going to all this trouble. She dreamed of thanking him as he drove down the freeway, in a way he would enjoy, though she felt out of practice with that sort of thing. She argued back and forth, leaning and retreating, until in the end, her nerves got the best of her. He was driving so fast, she reasoned. She thought it best to wait.

“This way,” he told her now, pulling her arm as he went.

In the field he chose a spot where less people had gathered. They stepped around the families and children; hard to make out in the dark. Fireflies bobbed and lit up the way; a group of dark figures worked in the distance, all of them facing toward the ground.

“You’re cold,” she said as they lowered, his large fingers finally joining with hers. He smiled, but did not take them away.

“You’ll have to warm me up,” he told her. She sighed as they positioned.

Because they had not brought a blanket, they leaned back on their elbows, their legs interlocked, and looked up at the long night sky. The grass felt soft, and the fireflies reminded her of many childhood summers...but soon she missed the commotion of the games. She did not like being so alone with her thoughts; for one, the young man was not much for conversation. She moved against him, still holding his hand, and he quietly accepted. He seemed in a fine enough mood still, though in the darkness she could not make out the details of his face. She imagined his thin, serious look. More of a grad student’s face than a sophomore’s. She pinched at his knuckles, playfully. She wanted, in a funny way, to hurt him; something childish; to talk about John perhaps, something

rotten and true; to give him a sort of test...but she shook the thought away with another pinch, and instead she sank against him.

“It’s a bird,” she said against his chest. He had been absently running his fingers against the engraved shape on the ring.

She moved around her attention. Across the way, a pair of young couples – close to the age of the young man, she thought (she had had a similar laugh once) – had lain out near the spot the young man had chosen. She watched them settle, all of them noisy and close, drinking from a bottle they passed along the lawn. She squeezed the young man’s arm, wanting him to squeeze her back, and wondered why the young people had chosen to come so close. She waited a long time. When the young man finally squeezed her back, she relaxed some.

“I hope they use real shells,” said the young man. He had said this close to her ear, which had startled her. Confused, she looked his way. He was watching the older figures set up for the fireworks.

“I’m sure they’ll be great,” she told him. She felt better. In the darkness, she dreamed again, she could not help it, another set of terrible thoughts. This time they seemed worse than before. In a way, though, moving back from them, it made her feel good to have them. She kissed the young man’s shoulder. She wanted to find a drink somewhere – it had been a while since she’d been good and drunk – but then decided against it when she heard the young couples cawing and shouting again nearby. She pressed herself deeper against the young man’s body. He accepted her weight, but also

laughed quietly as he did so. He had a high-pitched laugh, she thought, that didn't suit him. She turned and asked what him what was so funny.

“Nothing,” he told her, now speaking further from her ear.

She rose a bit and positioned on her palm. “What?” she repeated.

This time he did not reply.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No, no, of course not.”

“Well, then, what?”

“It's really nothing.”

She loosened her grip on his arm. The thoughts came back to her in a heavy flood.

“A friend of mine, is all.” He paused, then continued. “When we were kids. Derek Klomp. He blew off his middle finger, or part of it at least, with a bottle rocket.”

She settled back down. “That's awful,” she replied. “Is he alright?”

“He's fine,” said the young man, still laughing through his nose. “They sewed him back together.”

Neither of them talked then for a while.

“When I was younger I used to love sparklers,” she told him.

She watched the figures down the field, still kneeling. She watched one man stand up from the group and light a cigarette, the tip a tiny, bobbing orange. She wished she could smell it. He smoked it the whole way through.

“That seems awfully dangerous,” she said about the smoker.

“Hmm?” he asked. Then, “No, he’s really fine now.” She turned again to see him, and followed his gaze to the young couples. They were doing something now beneath their blankets.

She bent up against him and kissed him. She could not wait for the fireworks. He took the kisses and kissed her back. There. She kept it going. When the fireworks began with a whistle and a bang, the park became loud and powerful. At the end of every explosion, the audience clapped. She kissed him again and again, among the sulfur. She held his attention. She looked around from time to time, watching for any children who might have wandered off. He made soft, stuttered noises in the dark. The air caked with smoke, thick gassy flumes.

On the long drive home she fell asleep. He got out in front of his dark colonial house and they kissed each other quickly, (though she did not leave the truck, even to switch seats), and she watched him take the key from the plant beside the door and slip inside. She always watched him do this. She drove herself home. She parked in the garage, and inside she found John in front of the TV. He was snoring in deep, heavy bellows, his head leaned back and his mouth wide open. She watched him and thought about kissing the thin top of his head. Despite the time, she went upstairs and into the shower. She did this for him, and she got very clean. She found the ring again as she scrubbed, and she covered it in soap and twisted it around her finger, this way and that. The skin around it had turned purple and red, but after some pulling she was able to get it free. She set it on the sink, and then once covered, in the little wooden jewelry box of her mother’s.

THE LUMBER MILL

A cold wind rustled through the trees...they trudged along...crunch, crunch...one of them carried a loud plastic bag. Up ahead: a lumber mill...a rotted old building in the middle of the woods. Two boys, Peter and Nick, stood at the base of the mill, which obscured the moon. They looked toward their shoes, muddy and cold, at what they'd found.

"Is it her?" asked Peter, a boy with short blonde hair, far-set eyes. His stomach contracted.

The other boy nodded. Nick, with dyed black hair, acne-scarred cheeks. "Frozen." He prodded the dark shape with the tips of his snow boots. "I say we leave her."

Peter looked up. "She can't be too heavy," he said. He unslung the bag.

"That's not the point," said Nick, still looking.

"Come on," Peter said anyway. "No one will ever find her up here." Peter looked her all over. He spat onto the ground. The lumber mill, roped off with a limp, grounded tether, had been inactive for longer than either boy had been alive.

"Someone will," said Nick. He stopped looking down. "She got up here. So did we."

"Well, we should at least tell someone. Before she starts...you know..."

"Makes no difference."

Peter looked over at the other boy, but he couldn't make out his face in the dark. He looked back down. He crouched to get a closer look.

"She's only a couple years older than us," he said.

Nick picked up the bag. There was no getting through to Nick.

"It's weird," said Peter. "You can hardly tell."

"Tell what?" said Nick.

"You know. About the thing. What she was."

The lighter flicked beside him and soon the cold sky smelled like smoke.

"Retarded?"

Peter nodded.

Nick handed him a beer. The echo cracked through the nighttime, spread like fire, then was gone.

"I wonder how she got up here?" said Peter. He leaned against a tree a yard away, but he never stopped seeing her. "I wish we could tell someone." He turned to Nick.

"You think there'd be a reward?"

Nick smoked and passed the cigarette to his friend. It was their last. "She's not a lost kitten." He laughed.

Peter held very still and the smoke came up and the air smelled bitter. It made him more sick. He spat again. The trees all around looked like skeleton hands, bare and reaching. He kicked the ground. He thought of his family, of his own little brother, and the report on TV.

“Anyway, I’m just saying. They’ve been looking everywhere...” but Nick had already walked up the path to the mill. Peter watched him go up. He listened to the crunching of boots on the cold dry ground. His own feet sweated into the lining. Everything but Nick was silent...even the wind had gone now. He wondered if Nick would still want to go ahead with it tonight. It was strange, but he didn’t feel like calling it off himself. It was always such a long way. He adjusted himself in the darkness. Then he followed.

“Nick,” he called, but Nick kept walking, over the forgotten barrier. He got to the side of the lumber mill. The lumber mill had been gutted many years ago. The first time they’d come here they’d hoped to find it still intact; a giant buzz saw, or some other large equipment used for cutting trees. But the inside was hollow, and even the woodsmell was dim. The leaves grew all around

When Nick started puking Peter stopped. He stood halfway between Nick and the girl on the ground. Peter stood and listened and felt his own stomach rising. He coughed. He felt the sharp singe of the cigarette, whittled down by time, on his fingers, and he chucked it down. “Fuck,” he whispered. He crushed it out. When he looked back up, Nick had disappeared into the lumber mill.

SISTER HOLLY

At the far end of our street there is a cul-de-sac, a dead end of houses removed from our proper neighborhood. We gather in the woods behind the cul-de-sac in a clubhouse built at the top of a tree, titled with an old bar sign one of us stole from the rubble of a nearby fire: *The Rusty Nail*.

From our clubhouse we can see into the houses of the cul-de-sac. Two of the properties are owned by old hags, the ancient Agmon sisters, whose rundown houses face each other across the street. Other than to investigate the whirring noises that come from their bedrooms at night, we've had no reasons to study them.

The third house, painted pale yellow so that it stands out from the others, and with large, uncurtained windows, belongs to Sister Holly. Sister Holly is the youngest nun we've ever seen – all of us students at the Catholic boys' high school. She must be just a few years older than us, and she doesn't teach, as far as we know. Each day she leaves her house in full uniform, heading to an unknown place: a convent in the city, we imagine, or some other queer religious institute. Our parents call her *Sister Holly* – the italics a tone in their voices – when referencing her.

“Poor Mary Miller,” says my mother to my aunt one evening at the kitchen table. Across the room my father sits in his usual chair, whittling a piece of wood into some sort of knick-knack. “That daughter of hers is going to end up in the family way.”

“A disciple of *Sister Holly*,” says my aunt.

Our street is full of these sayings, these innuendos, though we’ve never seen anyone at the pale yellow house but its owner. In the clubhouse we share our findings, trying to understand the young nun.

“Ms. Lyttle said she’s had an abortion.”

“Who’s Ms. Lyttle?”

“She works at the clinic.”

“You don’t know anyone at no clinic.”

“She got expelled from the convent. That’s why she can’t teach in town.”

“I’d confess my sins to Sister Holly any day.”

We swap binoculars in the evening, watching Sister Holly’s routines on the top floor of the house. Her hair falls down to her shoulders, slick and dark from the shower. She wears a towel, or else a pair of off-white underwear. She lies on her bed with a book, her feet up in the air. We watch them sway. We encourage her to go even further. “Roll over!” We become obsessed with the word “abortion.” She’s the first and best woman any of us have ever seen; a curse printed in the Bible by mistake.

One day we’re sitting in the Rusty Nail when one of us dares another to sneak into the pale yellow house in the cul-de-sac. Of course we’ve all thought it before. Sister Holly has a hold on us. The girls on our street, who attend our sister-high school, distract us during the day, but Sister Holly keeps us up at night. Those with girlfriends choose the sway of Sister Holly’s legs, prefer her discolored white bras to the lacy black show bras of their girlfriends. The grotesque faces of the nuns at school only elevate our affection.

“What would be the point?” the dared boy asks. “She’d freak out and call the cops on us. She’d close her windows up for good.”

“Then go in when she’s out in the city, or wherever she goes all day.”

“That would be even more pointless.”

The mission, of course, is obvious. “Bring us back a souvenir.”

But the nervous boy backs down. “It’s not worth it. It’ll ruin everything.”

“It won’t ruin nothing.”

That’s when I suddenly volunteer. “I’ll do it,” I say. The boys have been joking, all of us packed inside the clubhouse, sweating and bored in the late spring sun. They turn to see me – a boy in the corner of the fort – to figure me out. It’s not often I have their attention. “I’m serious,” I say. I take the binoculars and look inside the familiar window. “You can watch from up here.”

The boys look around the clubhouse. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

“Tomorrow,” I tell them. “After school.”

We all know Sister Holly will be home at any minute.

At sundown I leave the clubhouse and go home for dinner. I change to hide the cigarette smoke, which hangs like a cloud around our tree. As we eat my mother talks about her job at the Sunday school, my father grunts at appropriate pauses. I drink two glasses of milk and sit beside my father after dinner as he whittles what appears to be a small balsa rabbit.

In bed I can't sleep; my nerves feel electric. I replay the afternoon in my head – the wide, uncertain eyes of the boys – then picture the pale yellow house. It has two stories like ours, though the houses on our street are larger, constantly under construction – basements added, swimming pools dug, attics expanded – so the houses in the cul-de-sac appear old, from another time. I wonder about the inside of the house, the mysterious layout of the rooms. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I try to see the décor of the hallway: modest and beige, crucifixes, a couple of them, hanging at a tilt. I imagine the smell of her bathroom, her soap, the feel of her carpet on the soles of my feet. I think of the pale white color of her underwear, and then I'm really going.

The next day I get to school early. I worry about the other boys, if they've taken me seriously. But they tease me in a brotherly way. They raise their hands in class, deflecting the inquiries of the nuns. The nuns act suspicious, slanting their eyes, but they carry on as usual. It amazes me that the girl in the cul-de-sac can be one of them, can have anything to do with these old, bitter women. In the back of the classrooms I bite my lips and watch the clocks, wanting this to go on forever.

Soon the final bell rings and on the way to the Rusty Nail the boys talk.

"She's a nympho," says one boy. "You lucky son of a bitch."

"In his dreams," they laugh.

A small boy not usually one of us has come along to the clubhouse today.
Somebody's cousin.

"I wouldn't do it if I were you," says the cousin.

"Well you're not him," I'm defended. I haven't had to speak all day.

They pass the binoculars. I can't see her dresser, but it has to be nearby – in the corner of the bedroom; against the far wall; beside the window. We establish an emergency signal, in case Sister Holly should return ahead of schedule: the boys will fire a bright orange flare gun one of them stole from their father's safe box.

As an extra precaution we check the soundless homes of the Agmon sisters. Nothing to report. I get punched and patted and have dozens of fingers run through my hair. I'm assured the binoculars will track my every move until I'm there inside the house, and will wait for me at the bedroom window. I'm wished good luck and warned not to chicken out.

And then I'm climbing down the clubhouse. My stomach turns as they chant my name and I cross the woods into the cul-de-sac, calculating my footsteps, careful not to trip. The sun feels hot on my neck and shoulders; also the weight of their eyes.

At the front of the house I check the curve of the street – no one to catch me, to mistake me for a criminal – before taking the key from the potted plant beside the door. Everything is right. The lock of the pale yellow house submits, and I shut the door and the rest of the world behind me.

I exhale. The first thing I notice is an earthy smell – like flowers steeping, an old newspapers turned yellow. A woman's scent, I imagine, though my mother never smells that way. In the dark of the hallway I survey my surroundings, eager to report my findings. A small gold mirror hangs beside the door, square and smudged across the middle, and a pair of shiny black church shoes waits patiently beside an empty umbrella bin. I pick up the shoes and examine their insides, worn and stiff, larger than I expected. I

sniff them once, on a whim. On a table nearby, a single framed photo of an unknown dog greets the entrance (whose dog? I wonder): a smiling beast with a branch between its jaws.

Queer as it is, I don't see any religious memorabilia – no crucifix on the wall, no cozy embroidered prayers, like at my house. If her house is anything like mine, I think, I'll find the stairs in the next room over, beside the den, but instead I'm somehow in the kitchen. Looking around I picture the young nun, for the first time, eating: thin crisps and celery sticks, her teeth lightly crunching. The room seems well-ordered, except for the sink, in which a tower of dirty dishes leans out over the counter. I wonder if the nun has cooked for someone, or if she's just a slob, though both seem hard to imagine. A tea kettle sits on the stove, probably from breakfast. I want to investigate her refrigerator, but I decide against it when I come across the stairs.

Up I go. I move slowly, but each step alerts the top floor of my presence. The walls of the stairwell are bare, but I take my time in the sun-starved darkness. I linger outside the bedroom, preparing myself to be rejoined with the boys.

Finally, I turn the knob, and enter the bedroom. I recognize it right away. It feels like someplace fictional come to life. It also seems smaller in person. Immediately I go to the window and search for the Rusty Nail. To my surprise, I can't see the tree or the clubhouse from this angle. I'm blocked by trees. I squint and wave to the invisible others; I put on a show, knowing that somewhere out there they're fighting for the binoculars. Remembering the way they'd treated me at school, I lie down on the bed in my sneakers, rolling into Sister Holly's usual position, basking in their excitement like a cat in the sun.

I return to the window and bid them farewell. Now I'm feeling good. The dresser waits across the room; I saunter over to it. Rifling through the drawers I expect to find a neat supply of nuns' clothing – rows of squarely folded black and white outfits. Instead I find sweatshirts, and in the next drawer down, some slacks and old jeans.

The final drawer contains the treasure. Chewing on my tongue, I inspect it all: the textures, the discolorations, the minor holes, the slight stains. I finger through the cotton fabrics; I pinch them between my fingers; I hold them up to my face. No one can see me alone in this bedroom. Without discrimination I shove a pair of each kind into my pocket, wadding them up into balls. On a whim, I also take a pair of stockings and a second pair of underwear, a pair with a small dark stain along the inside. These I shove into the waist of my pants for safe keeping.

With my mission complete, I make a reappearance in the window, holding up my souvenirs like flags. Between the branches I think I can see the bright orange reflection of the flare gun held out in celebration. I wonder what the group will do with these findings, if Sister Holly will notice them gone.

Because I want to make this experience last, I decide to use the bathroom before I go. The pressure of the heist has sunken into my stomach and, in a stroke of excited planning, I think of using the bathroom and not flushing – a calling card to leave behind, like the criminals on TV. I cross the room and click on the light of the master bathroom.

Then I freeze in place.

Sister Holly swings a large white curling iron, steaming and plugged into the nearby outlet. She has on her nun's uniform, squatting barefoot on the tile floor beside the toilet.

"Get back," she tells me.

I want to run away, to scream, but I only just stare in her direction. She holds the curling iron, straight and trembling, and I don't know what to do. I've never seen her up close before, none of us have, and I look into her brown, liquid eyes. She looks younger in person; her face is small and alert and on her cheek there is a scar. She stares back; she can't seem to understand why I haven't moved, why I haven't fled. She whispers something again and again in stunted breaths, and I realize at this moment that I've never heard her voice before.

"What do you want?" she asks me. "Why won't you leave?"

She bows her head, looks down at my crotch, at the stain I've yet to notice.

"Whatever you want," she says, speaking slowly, crying, still gripping the weapon, which is steaming, but lowering it a bit to her side, "just hurry." The room smells like fire and I want her to take a swing. To make a move. "Please."

That's when I finally run. I run down the stairs and out of the cul-de-sac. I don't run to the clubhouse, but home, to my bedroom. I lock the door. I rip off my pants, still hot and wet, and the pissed on underwear and stockings fall out limp on the floor. When I hear the pounds of the boys' hyper fists on my bedroom door, I kneel down beside my bed, naked from the waist down, and cry.

THIRTY-FIVE

“It’s funny, though,” he said, “how afterwards they just let you go.” The basement was dark, either midnight or noon because the curtains had a way of blocking time. A few kids were knocking against the furnace while the rest of us had formed a half circle on the floor. We listened to him speaking – all of us, His disciples for the evening, followers of Hannah’s friend, He who was the size of a refrigerator, unshaved and loose-eyed and continuously licking his lips between sentences. “After all that time,” he said, “you’re finally out there. You’re back on the street, but it’s like nothing’s fucking changed from before.” Hannah lay down on the other end of the couch, swooned in a queer way, her long Chinese hair spilling down, one finger plugged into the mouth of the bottle. The man held her feet down as he sucked on his smoke, and we sat there in awe of him, Hannah’s friend, smoking two, three packs on Hannah’s mother’s sofa, a floral thing, and he coughed across his thick, bristled arms, or else down on Hannah. He must have been thirty or thirty-five.

“Did you make any friends on the inside?” asked one kid, a voice from somewhere in the distance. Someone hit the kid, or at least that’s how it sounded. The man laughed something mucousy and dry, and I got up and left a hole in the circle. I crossed over the grunting kids, gasping beside the furnace, and I went to the bathroom for a good half an hour. What happened there was, I saw this towel, this ragged green hand

towel, just hanging there on a cracked plastic rod. Really, it was just an ordinary towel in a crummy downstairs bathroom – the walls were turned yellow, and black mold crept over everything – and the towel had started to come apart at the seams and little green threads split off and hung loose and I realized, then, that we had the same exact hand towel at home, in the bathroom by my little sister’s room down the hall. I knew it was the same towel, not a similar green towel but our same exact green hand towel and I didn’t wash my hands but I picked up the towel and I ran my hands against it and thought I might be sick. I flushed the toilet three, four times and fingered the towel in my other hand and when someone started to hit on the bathroom door I flushed again and again and ran the cold water and shoved the green towel into the sink to get it wet and then opened the door and let the other kid slink in behind me.

Back in the basement I wondered about how many hand towels were the same in the world. I felt hot, hot, and I wanted to take off my shoes, my socks, but I thought then I would never get out of there. One of the kids beside the furnace snarled triumphantly and collapsed against another kid and I sat back down and completed the half circle. The man continued. “It isn’t fucking right,” he said. He talked in toothless wisdoms, a high scratchy voice. Everyone in the basement knew what he’d done. He knew it, too, that we knew it from Hannah, but he never talked about any of it in any real words. Instead he spit into a can now and then, and sucked on one of Hannah’s big toes, though she didn’t seem to notice. He rambled on and on and then he stopped for a minute and we heard the pounds of the furnace speaking, beating and moaning, and the digital clock by the black TV blinked *12:00 12:00*, and the man continued:

“The thing of it is, though, it’s all just the same. You can’t change it or hide the things you’ve done. You can’t be unwired the way they want it, that’s what I learned about. So fuck it, that’s what I say. Nothing ever changes. Not a goddamn thing.”

SHAVED HEAD

When Adam showed up it looked like Jenny might faint but instead she turned to Beth and that was that. We went up to Adam and some of us made jokes. He looked queer. Most of us, of course, had done it ourselves in the summer, but it looked different on Adam, who usually had a thick head of hair. We were at Beth's house and the music was loud – her parents had gone for the night – and though I wasn't ever that kind of guy (of course I'm still not), I found myself watching Adam that night, and noticing certain things about him. It was like how when you brush your teeth and everything tastes all wrong. His shirt fit in a queer way for some reason. He seemed more in shape despite his shrinking ... probably a trick of the haircut, I figured. I thought of how – and I know this sounds *out there* – I thought of how at this other party once, this girl, I don't remember who it was, was saying that a boy's lips were always the same color as his the head of his cock – that's just how she said it – and I looked at Adam's lips that night, tan and thin and peeling. Who'd told me that? I wondered. I'd never thought to check it myself.

Anyway Adam drank a lot that night and the rest of us did too – compliments of Beth's absent parents – and all of us cheered him on. It wasn't supposed to be a party for Adam, or at least not at first but I guess it sort of became that way without anyone saying it. For the most part the guest of honor seemed his regular Adam self, though he and Jenny didn't talk much, and that itself seemed odd. It turned out to be a pretty good night

for me anyway. I got pretty drunk, and later on, I went to bed with Jenny. That's right, Adam's Jenny. We went upstairs to the master bedroom. It happened so fast and it felt pretty great. I'd liked her in secret, like everyone else. She bit me and pulled on my hair a little. A kinky girl. I liked it and I let my mind wander a little and I held Adam's girl down against the bed. At one point I thought she'd started crying so I stopped and she hit me on the chest. She hit me twice and said, "What the fuck are you doing?" and I started up again, but the sound of her crying was killing it for me and I stopped again and she hit me harder than the last time and she pushed me away and stormed off into the master bathroom. I lay in the bed for a while, the sheets warm and wet, still out of breath and my skin kind of raw, and I listened to her peeing. When I heard the sound of the electric razor buzzing I went to check it out.

"Jenny," I said. She stood in front of the long bathroom mirror, holding the buzzer – Beth's father's, I guessed. When I came in she looked kind of confused, and she sharp pressed the end of it to the palm of her hand. It couldn't do anything because those things have protective shields. Still I took it away from her and she gave up pretty easy. She looked a mess, like she'd been crying more, or even puking, though I hadn't heard any of that. I set down the razor and put my arms around her from behind. Her body was warm, though she was trembling. I almost kissed her neck when she started talking.

"His parents are making him do it," she said. "He thinks he doesn't even have a choice." At first I didn't get it. I looked at us in the mirror for a while. We looked so good together I even got another erection. Then I nodded my head. She wriggled free. She

threw up in the toilet. It came out fast, and most of it clear, I saw after. I held her long hair back and I told her she looked pretty even then.

In the end I tried to explain it to her, how I thought it might be about people like Adam, at least how I saw it, and then I lay down beside her again in the bed and we watched the big snowflakes come down outside the window and we listened to the party downstairs. I thought about Adam and what would come next and about my own future and I let her scratch my hair with her long sharp nails. It felt amazing. There was no more crying and with my body still around her I felt the breathing in her chest.

She even let me finish – could there be a better girl? – before we went back down to the party.

THE STUDENT

Because it was still early on, the café had only one other customer, an old man eating peanuts at the bar. A baseball game played overhead but the old man did not seem to notice, and neither he nor the bartender turned to see the three new customers come in and seat themselves at a booth in the far corner of the room.

“I’m starving,” said James, a colossal man, and the first to sit down. He swatted at a fly and turned to the younger man. “Have you eaten here, Bryan?”

“No,” said Bryan, who sat down beside Tina on the opposite side of the booth.

At night the café would fill up with customers, all of them crowded and drinking themselves blind, and so less likely to notice the ordinary shabbiness of the café. The dim lighting at night also made the place seem nicer, while the sunlight from the front window only exposed the yellow walls and cracked plaster during the day.

“Great eggs here,” said James. “They do something special with them...something with pancake batter, I think it is...it makes them bigger...fluffier.”

The young man nodded. “They mix it with the eggs before they cook them. Sometimes they use flour.”

James watched him across the table.

“Excellent,” said James.

Before long a waitress appeared beside them, a great big woman who huffed and seemed burdened by the café's only ordering customers. James ordered a bottle of wine for the table, a moscato, light and refreshing on a hot summer day, but as it was only one-thirty, the waitress gave him a queer look before exiting.

"Christ," said James once she'd left them. He watched her go toward the kitchen. "Anyway you can see why she's working the lunch shift." He directed this comment, like the others, toward Bryan. Then he continued. "Do you like moscato, Bryan? I don't drink it much myself. It's really very sweet. Tina loves it, though, don't you, sweetheart?"

Tina said that she did.

"I don't really drink much wine, really," said the young man.

"Really?" said James. "What then? Rum?"

"Not much of anything," he responded. "At least not right now. Not with my thesis work to finish and all that."

"Yes," said James, "Tina showed me some of hers the other day."

"What a lie," said Tina, who was seated, cornered, against the wall. She too was looking at Bryan. "What about the other night at Missy's party? You were all over that girl. The poor thing," she smiled, "with the lazy eye..."

The two of them laughed and James again swatted at the fly. He smiled along with Tina's interruption.

After a while, the waitress returned with the bottle, a clear thing with no label, and poured three glasses, twisting her arm as she finished each pour in a professional way. A little dribble landed on the table as she did.

“What will it be?” asked the waitress, holding her pen and pad.

“I hear you have good eggs,” said Bryan, sitting up and glancing only briefly at James. “I think I’ll have mine scrambled.”

“With wine?” asked Tina. “You’re a mess.”

They laughed. She ordered a salad, light dressing, and James ordered a ham and cheese on rye. The waitress wrote down each order, and huffed a second time before continuing on her way.

Across the café the old man rose and pushed in his stool, and the scraping sound bellowed across the restaurant. Then they were alone. James looked over at the bartender, who removed the old man’s dishes and carried them away.

“So,” said James when the waitress had gone into the kitchen. “How is your thesis going then? You are writing a novel as well?”

“It started out that way,” said Bryan. “I wrote a good three quarters of something. But it was rubbish. Now I’m writing stories.”

“Stories?” said James. “Really? Do stories sell much these days?”

“Not at all,” said Bryan.

“Yours will though,” said Tina. She paused to sip. “He workshopped one the other day, from the perspective of a young homeless man who had a whole family on the streets. Just gruesome. And sad.” She hovered the wine glass to her lips. “And anyway, Bryan’s more of a stylist. The free-indirect was really well done. Reminded me of Joyce, though he wouldn’t like to hear it.”

“*The ineluctable modality of the visible,*” said James.

“You’re ridiculous,” said Bryan, looking to Tina.

“And what happened to the young homeless man?” said James. “Was he saved? Killed? And his family? Did they starve?”

Bryan and Tina looked at each other. “It wasn’t really about what happened to him,” explained Tina. “It was his thoughts. It was really very beautiful and intense.”

“I see,” said James. “I’d like to read it someday. Or perhaps I will, in the *New York Times*.”

“Probably not in the *Times*,” said Bryan.

“I wonder though,” James continued, “and I mean no offense of course, to either of you, dear, but the studying of writing fiction...or any type of art...can something like that really be taught?”

Bryan shrugged. “I’ve learned a lot so far,” he said.

“It sounds like you have. It does indeed. You must like the moscato.”

“I suppose I do,” he said, and Tina laughed.

After lunch the couple walked up to James’s room above the drug shop. They sat together in his bed and listened to the traffic but the girl would not touch him. He picked up her small feet, at last, and began to rub them.

“A nice boy,” he said to her.

“Nice is not the word,” she said, closing her eyes.

He watched the sunlight, sliced by the blinds. “I could break him in half,” he said. “It would not even be a strain.”

She rolled over and presented her back. “I wish you would.”

Outside the city banged and sirened. Her skin felt warmer than God.

PUERTO RICO

One evening last summer, my (now ex-) girlfriend Renee made a call to our super to complain about our neighbors in 4C. She'd explained it to the woman who'd answered, the way they were always sitting on the stoop of the building, smoking cigarettes and muttering in Spanish whenever we walked by.

There were two of them, always together, obviously brothers but not quite twins. Both of them had shaved heads, smoked probably two packs a day, and both had a habit of picking at their toes between cigarettes (they never wore shoes on the stoop). I'd told her it was silly to harass them, to make such a big deal. "They're harmless," I'd said. One of them, the brother with the cleaner, rounder face, with the stockier build, was always standing up to get the door whenever one of us came through, and the other, the smaller, mustached brother, always seemed to be nodding in a content, meaningless way.

"I'm not afraid of them," said Renee, setting down her things on the counter. "I just don't understand why they have to sit there all day. Or how they can afford it." She had an excited way of talking about these things, of trying to make sense of people. "Do they ever leave? Who pays their rent? We're not in the slums, you know. This building isn't cheap."

I tried to ignore the comment. At the time I'd been studying at a big-time university, a post-graduate program in literature, and though sometimes I felt funny not

chipping in for rent, Renee had found a good job at the hospital and she'd said she didn't mind it while I finished up my courses. In another year I'd hopefully be teaching at a private university downstate.

"At least they're quiet," I'd said. In fact, other than the stoop problem, they'd been perfectly fine neighbors. They'd lived across the hallway from us since that April, three months back, and though we could usually hear everything through the walls of our building – you can imagine what that means in this city – we'd never heard a peep from their apartment.

But still she'd made the call.

"It's weird that they're always out there. Not to mention the second-hand smoke."

I started making dinner. I put a pizza in the oven.

"I doubt they'll do anything about it," she'd continued, annoyed, maybe, that I'd challenged her, but also with an air of relief, as if she'd done what needed to be done.

"Anyway, it's hot as hell out there."

"I guess they'll probably go inside in the winter," I said.

The next week the property managers went about taping up some anti-loitering flyers around the building, but the brothers continued to claim our stoop throughout the summer. In the colder months, as I'd said, we rarely saw them, though their apartment remained as silent as ever. I studied as much as I could during the semester, taking a full course load, and Renee returned at night, tired and with other things to complain about. At one point I'd even wondered if the brothers had moved out.

Then one evening in November I ran into the smaller brother, the one with the mustache and who was always nodding for no particular reason, in the indoor stairwell. On first glance he'd seemed upset. He'd been rushing down the stairs as I'd been climbing up, his footsteps making echoes up and down. I'd been returning from a night class on the French avant-garde. We hadn't made eye contact as he'd passed, and in my thoughts I'd been writing manifestos, riled up from the night's discussion. After I'd passed him I heard him slow down. Then, I noticed, he'd started to come back up. His shoes – not bare feet this time, by the sound of it – banged heavy, thunderous in such a small space, and I tried to hurry up with my keys. A broken light in the stairwell flickered. When I felt the light tap on my shoulder I nearly bit my tongue.

“*Eh,*” he'd said as I turned toward him. His deep voice echoed in the narrow stairwell. His eyes looked worriedly all around. “*¿Has visto a mi hermano?*”

I looked at him, blinking. “*Has visto a mi hermano,*” I repeated in my head.

“*Lo siento,*” I told him. I shook my head *no*. I wondered why he'd thought I spoke Spanish. I'd retained a bit from secondary school anyway, and his problem seemed clear enough. I'd never seen him alone before. He'd looked confused at my answer, as if I'd known his brother well, or if somehow I'd known where he'd be. I tried to move on, but he only just stared me over. Out of neighborliness, and maybe out of something else – because, let's face it, Renee would have kept on walking – I added the question, “everything okay?”

He thought for a moment before answering. “*Sí,*” he nodded, though not in my direction. One more time I'd turned to go, when he'd asked me something else in return.

His next question he had to repeat a couple of times...it ended with an unfamiliar word... *chavo*...and I'd finally understood it when he'd made the motion with his hands.

Besides the cards in my wallet, I had no money, and so I told him.

He asked another question in Spanish, and when I'd not understood it again, he announced the word *coche...coche* – concluding with several *por favors* – which I knew to mean *car*. The brother had a desperate look on his face...his thin mustache fell into a downward curl that fed into his mouth...and again I thought of Renee upstairs in our apartment. The stairwell carried a lot of noise, and I wondered if she'd heard any of our conversation. I looked back at the brother, still pleading, and started to say *I can't, lo siento*, but then I thought again about Renee, about her reaction to this story, and soon I was nodding and fingering my car keys, and I felt a warm flood of something like thrill.

In the car he barely said anything. Traffic wasn't bad at that hour, and in the quiet between songs on the radio I could hear him nibble on his lengthy mustache hairs, though he looked out the window the whole time. He directed every turn until we reached a gas station a few miles down the road. It had not closed for business, but no one was there, or at least no other cars were pumping gas. A couple of figures stood beside the white brick convenience station, though none of them looked up when we drove over. I dropped him off beside the building, and he thanked me ("*gracias*") and I told him *de nada* and then I said "take care."

With the car to myself, I thought about watching him from a distance, seeing what my neighbor might be doing next, but I couldn't find anywhere inconspicuous to park, and so instead I turned back home. When I returned to our apartment, Renee hadn't even

noticed I was late. She lay out on the couch, watching some show on TV. I put something frozen in the oven and we ate it with two beers. I wanted to tell her the story of my evening, but she'd started going on about some important issue at the hospital, some typical disaster, and I listened off and on while I waited for a break in the story. Then, before she'd run out of breath, we heard a loud knock on our door. My heart sank, for I'd never stopped thinking about my adventure. Renee stayed behind in the kitchen and I looked through the peephole. A trio of policemen stood outside our door.

I opened it up.

“Good evening, sir,” said one officer, a large man who – like most cops in my experience – barely seemed to fit his uniform. “Sorry to bother you, but do you know...” he asked in a low, almost whispering voice, before pausing. “Well, we’re looking for two Puerto Rican brothers. Do you have any idea which apartment is theirs?” Puerto Rican? I remember thinking. Then, without speaking, I pointed to 4C. The officers exchanged glances and the large one in the lead said, “That’s what we thought. Thank you for your time.” They turned to face the apartment, which I knew to be empty, and knocked on the door repeatedly. Through the peephole I watched them, circling around the apartment, but I couldn’t make out whether or not they had placed their hands on their weapons.

“Who was that?” asked Renee, still eating.

“Just some police,” I answered, returning to my seat.

“Police? What did they want?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Found a wallet on the sidewalk, or something.”

“A wallet?” she said. “You should have taken it.” She laughed. It was somewhere between a joke and a scolding. Either way I grabbed another beer.

THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

His father had a job as a lighthouse keeper. The lighthouse could be seen from all over town – on account of their town being built on a hill that descended into the lake – but no one was allowed on its grounds but his father. Some said it was haunted. The lighthouse stood close to a hundred feet tall, and according to his father, from the top you could see the whole town, the way the birds do.

“Nothing goes on in this town without my seeing,” said the father. After dinner, on the night before his thirteenth birthday, they walked down to the lake and skipped stones along its surface. Because the town was built on the east side of the hill, they could not see the sunset, and across the dark lake the lighthouse had already begun its nightly searching.

“How can you see anything,” asked the boy. Not only was his father near-sighted, but the lighthouse stood at least a half a mile from the shore.

The father paused. He skipped a smooth stone before speaking, and the stone plopped heavily into the lake. Sitting up he opened another beer. He drank it the way he always did, in long, exaggerated gulps. He took his time, and at the end of each drink, he kissed at the bottle with a loud pop of his lips. It sounded very refreshing to the boy.

On the sand beside them lay their shoes, and in the changing light he buried his father’s feet, long-nailed and budded with the cotton from his socks.

“You know,” the father answered finally, “you could see for yourself if you want to.”

The boy continued digging. He uncovered a treasure: a smooth, thin stone, perfect for skipping. He skipped it with a sharp flick of his wrist, the only way to make it skip, and it made five jumps along the surface of the water.

“Not bad,” said his father. At the end of the skip, after it sank into the water, a splash came up and formed a series of rings on the water.

“Fish aren’t too smart,” said the boy.

The father shook his head, as if to say he’d known plenty of smart fish. Then he continued, “I’m serious, Tom. Would you like to go to the lighthouse tonight?”

He glanced in his father’s direction, but in the setting sun he could not make out the details of his face.

“You’re thirteen today.”

“Not until tomorrow morning.”

“Nonsense,” he said.

He pulled up his feet and left the empty bottles on the shore.

“Come on,” he said, and where his father went, the boy followed.

The stars came out as they headed toward the boat, which the father had kept in the shed down shore. Because of the rain, the boy had not been out on the boat all summer.

“The water is freezing,” he called to his father. With his pants rolled up he tried to adjust to the temperature.

The father swatted his arm. The mosquitos had risen and were keeping close by. For some reason they seemed to like him better. “Now you have to keep this a secret,” said the father.

“A secret from who?”

“From everyone,” he said.

The boy considered as they approached the shed, a ramshackle building.

“This is just between you and me.”

The father let ring another another slap as they untied the boat. He jumped into the mud at the bottom of the shack, and there went the boy behind him.

“We push on three. One, two – ”

The boat was very heavy, but eventually they knocked it loose from the mud and seaweed. With the slop between their toes and their lower bodies soaked, they jumped on board. They shook themselves dry, and from a hidden compartment the father uncovered another beer. He cracked it open and the echo rode down the lake. There on the lake the mosquitos were fewer. The boy watched his father. He knew he would not share. He wanted to ask him, “Is the lighthouse really haunted?” But when the motor started he could not hear a thing. The sky became a dark reddish blue.

“Here,” said the father, and he handed him a life jacket. “The water gets rocky further out.”

He set it aside, but the father insisted.

“Do it for your mother’s sake.” He pointed toward the shore. He watched his son get buckled.

The motor cut off twenty feet from the island. The beach where they'd started was far off and undistinguishable in the dark. The boy saw the lighthouse as they approached, ancient and built from stones and reaching high into the sky, its rotating light like a great north star.

No wonder no one can come here, thought the boy, looking out at the black crashing waves, at the border of tall rocks that circled the island. The world around them thundered, and he wondered what his father would do next.

“We can drift the rest of the way,” he said, belching to himself and reaching for a rope.

The boy agreed and shivered. He tucked his feet between his legs, but his wet clothes had stuck to his skin. The waves knocked the boat up and down. The entire lake had awakened around the lighthouse. He looked back at the town, at the small, scattered houses, their tiny lit windows, and wondered if anyone could see them.

When he climbed out onto the island, his father tied down the boat against a post. The wind came howling and blew back his hair and he could barely hear anything over the loud wind and water. He wanted to tell his father that it was going to storm, that they probably should not have come, but he knew he'd only be silenced by the island. His father held onto his back and guided him inside.

Inside the lighthouse everything was black. The storm outside, or what sounded like a storm, got muffled by the lighthouse's heavy metal door. The father pulled a switch, and piece by piece the tower was revealed. The inside of the lighthouse, with its

long narrow stairs and gray stone design, resembled a castle, or how it seemed a castle might look. The whole place stunk of fish and mold, and when the boy looked up at a window he saw a long silverfish scurrying up a wall.

“Do you see this?” said the father. He’s pointed to a small white panel beside the door.

The boy nodded his head.

“This is what controls the lighthouse,” he said. “This box right here. It’s programmed to tell time. Dusk and dawn. The light at the top of the lighthouse is on a timer. This is what turns it on and off.”

It looked very simple, but the father opened the box and softly fingered the buttons. The boy saw a closed glass window, slatted with iron bars on the inside. A sludge hung down from the sill. A thick, caked material.

“Guano,” said the father. “The birds like to sit in the windows when they’re open.”

The boy still shivered. On the boat he’d put on a pair of his father’s flip-flops, but above it he only wore shorts and a polo shirt.

“Remind me to wipe this one down. Come on,” said the father. He began to climb the stairs.

Because of the stink the boy tried to hold his breath, but soon he felt exhausted. The father climbed to the top without so much as slowing, and the boy noticed for the first time that his father was in good shape. At the top of the staircase they came to another heavy door. Outside the lake wind moaned.

“Are we going back outside?”

“Do you want to stay in here?”

He shook his head. Because of the wind the door slammed back against the circular stone wall. They stepped out onto the thin porch at the top of the lighthouse.

The breeze above the lake was something living. It forced them back against the building, but the father walked over and leaned against the railing. He signaled the boy closer.

“Look at the lake,” he shouted.

The lake was dark black, galactic. Speckled with constellations, it blurred in the current and was interrupted in patterns by the light at the top of the lighthouse.

“It looks like it goes on forever,” said the boy.

“It looks that way some nights,” he answered. Then, “careful.” He pointed out another piece of guano.

The moon shined down on the dark rippled water, and at the top of the tower the wind felt electric. The boy squinted his eyes in the power of it, but his father kept on staring, unfazed.

“Do you see that blinking light there, all the way out to the west?” he asked.

“There’s another lighthouse out that way.”

He traced the point of his father’s finger to the dim blinking light. In the darkness the far off light looked lonesome. He leaned out over the ledge to see better, but his father pulls him back.

“A man can drown himself getting that close to the edge,” he said.

He looked at his father in the shadows. His face seemed a mile away, lit in segments by the glowing lights inside. He stared out over their town, and the boy shared his gaze. It was hard to make out anything from this distance.

“Now you’re one of only two folks in town who have seen it all,” he shouted over the wind.

The boy braced himself in the strong, bitter cold. He thought of his mother at home, worried and wondering what had happened to them. With his arms in his shirt, he measured the dark water between the town and his father in his sanctuary. He tried to pick out his house across the lake.

A STORY ABOUT RAIN

April came, though the birds did not return to the city. It looked like rain, though it might've been slush (or it might've been nothing). It had not been an especially bad winter in Chicago, but now it was spring, and the cold air lingered like the end of a sickness. Kathy sat beside the window, reading a book of short stories. She had read them many times before...one of these days she would buy a new book of stories...but she couldn't go out today. Instead she looked at the clock. She wondered about her cat, Lucy, which she'd pushed out onto the fire escape the week before. She wished she could just go to sleep.

Outside a man with snowy white hair and a dark green overcoat stumbled through the city. He carried a box, tall and slender, clumsily gift-wrapped, though its shape gave away its surprise. He wore thin shoes that soaked in the puddles of yesterday's rain and each breath came out a small puff of smoke. In the hand not holding the box he wielded a cane, a simple wooden staff, and when he looked up at the buildings, his glasses slid down his face. There was a grumble in his stomach that wouldn't go away. The smells of the city were his favorite – they reminded him of his son, who had once lived nearby. A deli here, roast chicken across the street; hot dogs with relish and pickles and red tomatoes. He could have gotten lost in the city for hours, following the smells. He was

lost already, shivering in the cold. He watched a few men from the city walking by. The alternating sounds of his sloshing feet and his clicking cane came to a stop.

“Excuse me,” said the old man to a stranger on the sidewalk.

The young man did not reply. He smoked a cigarette. He wore nice clothes like most men in the city, a bright blue sweater with a heavy dark coat over top. The coat seemed a bit too thick for this weather, a coat for shoveling snow. His feet had the clack of expensive shoes. He certainly had the look of a man about the city: a serious glare with short, slick hair and a conscious lack of eye contact.

The old man considered letting the stranger walk by. He could find another, and perhaps this man was in a hurry. But he was late himself and his feet begin to throb. He tried again:

“Excuse me, sir.”

This time the young man responded. He turned and took a drag from his short cigarette and blew an impressive amount of smoke into the air.

“Bless you, sir,” said the old man. He made the sign of the cross against his coat. “I’m wondering...if you can point me in the direction of Monroe Boulevard. I’m looking for the Fair Tower Apartments.”

“Monroe,” said the young man. He kept a small distance from the asker. “Fair Tower.” He flicked his cigarette along the road. The old man placed the stranger in his thirties. A handsome man, blonde: the way, a long time ago, the old man used to be. The tip of the young man’s nose was pink, and his jacket had a lining made of fur. The old man warmed in the young man’s comfort.

“You turn down the next street, up here,” he pointed. “Then you cut left on Washington, two blocks north. Then it’s on the right, about another block.”

The man with the cane followed the pointing finger. He squinted his eyes in the blowing wind and made a slow nod of understanding.

“Thank you,” he replied.

The young man turned away and took another cigarette from his fur lined pocket.

“Excuse me,” said the old man again, leaning heavy on his cane. “I don’t mean to be too much trouble – you’ve been so kind already. But I don’t suppose you could walk me the rest of the way to the apartment? If it’s not too far.”

The city man looked down at the old-timer, at the trenches in his round face, deep and curving. He lit the cigarette and spoke from the corner of his mouth. “I have to get somewhere. Just follow those instructions. Left, right, right. You got it.”

This time he did not let the old man respond, but continued on his way down the sidewalk. The old man leaned and watched him go, breathing in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

When she heard the knock on the door, Kathy was nearly asleep. At first she had forgotten what the knocking meant. She checked the clock on the wall and set the book down like a teepee on the windowsill. She fixed her hair with her fingers along the way.

“Martin,” she exclaimed at the old man in the doorway. As always, she was breathless at his sight – she could barely stand the sight of him.

“Afternoon, Katherine. I’m sorry I’m late.” They embraced in the doorway like two old friends, one of them old enough to be the other’s father, and she took the old man’s coat, cold and damp from the city.

“Nonsense. I was only just reading. Please, have a seat.” She escorted him to his favorite chair, an old leather recliner, otherwise unused. “I haven’t cooked anything. I’m sorry. I thought we could just order in this year.”

“That sounds fine, dear. You’re the birthday girl. Which, reminds me…” he held out the tall, obvious box.

“Oh Martin,” she said in a humorous voice, “you always know just what to get me.” In the kitchen she took down a pair of glasses. “Say, the weather is just awful, isn’t it? Has it started to rain?”

“No, no, not yet – could be any minute, though.” He took off his wet shoes and set them beside the recliner, followed by his socks. When Kathy returned she found him bending over, rubbing at his raw bare feet.

“What do you think, Martin? You like pepperoni?”

“Whatever you like, dear.”

She unwrapped the box as she dialed and talked into the phone. She was barefoot too, still in her pajamas, and she sat across the coffee table on the loveseat.

“So…” said Kathy, setting down the phone. The old man did not look up, but continued his ardent rubbing. Kathy took this opportunity to watch him, to study his mannerisms, his familiar personal ticks. She had to turn away. “How’s Sue?”

“Oh, Sue’s fine, dear, thank you. She says hello.”

“Of course. You tell her the same. Is she still playing the organ on Sundays?”

“Afraid not, no. Not since October. The arthritis,” he said, holding up his wrinkled hands. He looked up at the ceiling. “I told her He’d understand.”

Kathy smiled. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Oh, well. She’s a fighter, you know. She sends her love.”

“I know,” said Kathy.

“I hope you like the wine. I got help picking it out.”

“It looks wonderful, thank you.” She poured two glasses, and they both had a drink.

“Tell me,” said Martin. “How are you, dear? How is your work?”

“Fine, fine, all of it.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Have you been keeping much company?”

She sat up in her seat. “I’d hardly have the time.”

“I see.”

“Right now I’m rather worried about Lucy,” said Kathy.

“Lucy?”

“Our cat. My cat. You remember.”

“Oh, yes. The tabby. Where is the brute?”

“She ran away. Not long ago.”

“Ran away? That’s a pity, dear. You had that cat for as long as I remember. How did it happen?”

Kathy shrugged her shoulders.

“Just one of those things,” she answered.

“You know,” said Martin, “Sue doesn’t usually let me eat pepperoni.”

“I don’t usually eat it myself,” said Kathy.

Martin left before sundown. He had to head back to the L, to drive from the station back to his house in Wilmette before dark. When he left, his coat was still cold, and he didn’t put on his socks again, but balled them up in his pockets.

“Listen, dear,” said Martin. “I want you to have a good birthday. And I want you to have many more.”

Martin and Kathy said goodbye in the doorway. They saw each other’s eyes for a moment before parting.

“Next year,” he told Kathy, and with a wink, he disappeared into the hallway, and was gone.

Kathy thought to watch him out the window, to see him shrink away into the gray-blue evening, still not raining, but looking just as threatening as before. She stepped on a scrap of torn wrapping paper, and took it to the trash. She wondered what the old man thought about as he walked alone through the city. She thought about him back in his house with his fragile wife.

Her telephone rang. She stopped beside the coffee table, took a final sip from her glass, allowing enough time to pass before answering.

“How was it?” asked the deep voice on the other end, acting playful. “He’s not still there?”

“Fine,” she said. “And no, he’s gone.”

“Alright then,” said the man, and Kathy smiled. “I’m on my way.”

SNOW

In the city at night the snow comes down in a gray icy slush. Alice hurries through it in the dark. Along the roads the streetlights shake, and because of the cold, the city at night looks abandoned.

On the side of the road the colors of cars peek out through the slush. Her shoes, thin indoor flats, absorb the wet snow, but she feels no coldness. Her skin is burning up.

Though she lives nearby, the neighborhood tonight looks strange and foreign. It changes before her eyes, all of it drenched in the gray, blinding weather. She feels in some terrible foreign city, lost and unable to speak the language. The wind blows against her, throwing her hair and pushing her back toward the direction that she came, her mother's ground floor apartment. A warm, dreadful place. She clutches her stomach, checks her surroundings, forces herself to look up from her shoes. Her face beats red and wet.

A car drives by at the next intersection, the next block up, and Alice waves a bare, cupped hand but the car continues driving. She almost collapses. She leans against a sharp brick wall and tries to control her breathing. The wetness down her legs, the smell of it dulled by the wind, sticks to her pants and concentrates the cold cutting air.

She does not have much time now. No matter how hard she tries she cannot stop. She wishes for an unlocked door to hide in, an empty building, a cold clean stairwell. The

buildings on this road, blocks or possibly miles from her mother's apartment, slouch in the snow, rotten and boarded up, and though she'd waved to the car at the intersection, a guttural reaction, she does not trust the help of strangers in this neighborhood.

In the next alley over she sees a cardboard box, flattened out as a mattress against a wall. No one is in the alley, unless someone is hiding down the way, where the alley sinks into a complete and utter darkness, or in the dumpster beside the box. But where else can she go? She does not recognize the buildings that make this alley, though she might have been able to in the daytime. For now she ducks into the alley to get out of the wind, and once in this dryer place she notices at once both the intensity of the wind, now gone, and the pain all around her, inside and out. On top of the dry box she collapses, banging her knees on the concrete below the cardboard, probably skinning, and as the howling expands she positions herself on all fours, like a sick dog, releasing through contraction a puddle of snow and warm blood and ice and mucous. Beside her she sees a broken bottle, an empty wrapper, a torn pair of boots. She sidles away from the trash. With her palms flat down she crawls beside the wall and feels the weight inside her shifting. She scrambles and pushes and focuses on the pain. Not on these hellish conditions, not on the heated yellow apartment she'd left behind. As she flings her arms toward the button on her pants and begins to feel the sweat on the small of her back freeze and turn to ice, she hears a sudden rumbling, the rolling of a bottle, down the alley.

Alice does not move.

"Who's there," comes the voice. It is a baritone voice that rises from the gut, dry and hungry. A raspy voice of filth.

Alice tries not to scream. She pulls up her pants some and raises her body to the wall.

“I know it’s you, Mike. You motherfucker.”

When Alice tries to stand, the weight inside her drops, begins to twist, and throws her down against the soaking cardboard. Her arm falls flat against the glass and she may have been cut. She has no time to check now. She looks to the street outside the alley but all she sees is endless snow and a small scrap of paper, a receipt maybe, being carried in the wind. With her back against the wall she releases her knees and waits; she gives in to her body.

The man stumbles, she can hear, but she doesn’t look down the alley. She waits as long as she can, but now he stands now in front of her. He wears tennis shoes and dark rags like a parka, and his neck and face, stubbled black, shine a bit with brown scum and slush. He stands before her, his eyes thin and yellow, seeing Alice leaned back, her pants and underwear stained and pulled down again to her ankles, a mass of dead weight at her feet. She kicks the knot of her shoes towards the man and tries to stop it all from happening. She clenches her stomach and tries to force it steady.

“Shit,” says the man. He bends toward Alice with his wide spread lips, and Alice sees his hands, reaching out, his giant’s hands, his bulging knuckles and long dark fingers. Alice twitches. With the toe of her shoe she strikes one finger. “Damn,” says the man. He recoils in pain and Alice shifts her body to the side. Making a strange sound with his tongue, the man brings the finger to his mouth and begins to suck.

“Now none of that, goddammit,” he tells her. When he comes back, Alice discovers that her body is no longer hers. She wants to fight, to struggle and run, to pause her body’s stubborn needs, but she has no control. Her muscles continue to compress and release. Her feet stay put in front of her. She wants to black out, to make her brain as useless as her body, but it won’t stop seeing, it won’t stop forcing her mouth to breathe. When the man lifts her up she cannot roll and she cannot speak. He tucks her pants back under her and carries her down to the black end of the alley. He sings to her. He whispers, “I’ve done this before.”

ARSON

Many years ago there was a fire.

They called me in to investigate. I worked, back then, as a fire scene investigator, which means I was sent out to fires (or places of explosions) to try to name the cause of the incident, or causes. Lots of fires were happening in the city in those days – of course they still happen now, regardless of my not being called in – and I was not the only one in this profession. We worked with the police, though we were paid by a different office. Unlike the jobs of those other detectives – which is what we were, fire scene *detectives* – our first task was to decide if a crime had taken place. Sometimes a fire could happen by accident, or sometimes, because of some degradation, or mishap, of electrical wires, even all on its own. Most of the time there was no crime to report at all, only just some notes to take down, some paperwork to hammer through and file away or else to pass to the next guy down the line.

Not all detective work, I'll admit it, is worth mentioning.

This fire, though, was indeed a crime-fire. My first, in fact – at least to this degree. This particular fire we investigated thoroughly, and finally, after much consideration by myself and by my small team of colleagues at the time, the fire was labeled as “arson.”

The scene of the arson was a residence. A four story apartment building on Woodson Ave. had gone up in flames. A strong, old building, constructed of cement and brick, it didn't look too destroyed from the outside, but the inside had been gutted, all of it turned black and cavernous and ashy. The policemen had roped off the sidewalks around the building. A crowd of curious, or else hysterical, onlookers stood by the edges of the barriers, trying to get a look inside. The firemen had already put out the fire, which must have been a real blaze, I had thought then, imagining the flames, bursting through the windows like dazzling red limbs. Some of the firemen stuck around after, dark-faced and cleaning up the rubble and digging through the soot, looking for any last bits of ember. A good deal of people had lived in the building, it seemed, but most had gotten out in time, luckily; thanks to the firemen. Only one woman had been killed – a miracle of sorts, it had been written in the paper.

We went inside together, us fire scene investigators, after the awful scene had been reported as cleared by the cops and firemen, and began our initial investigation. A terrible business, this particular fire had been. A real thorough job. I'd seen some interesting fires before, both in my training and occasionally on the job (most of the time in abandoned buildings, which often burned down for one reason or another, collapsed into dust). I wished I'd been able to see the thing happen; I'd always been interested in the fire part. Part of me had wanted to be a fireman myself, but I hated to think of that pressure. Also, I was not much in shape. I liked, more than anything, the smell of it after, that hot burning smell that cooked onto the wreckage; though of course it didn't do to share that back then.

Anyhow, to give you some insight, you can find the source of a fire, in some cases, pretty easily, by tracing the path of destruction it left behind. A fire will always leave behind a trail. In this case though, because of the terrible amount of burning that had occurred – think of a liquid drain cleaner in a pipe – it took us some time. Also, by the time we'd got in it was just after midnight. Obviously, the lights in the apartment did not work, and though we set up a few portable lights of our own, it was hard to make out much in the soot and char and darkness. Because there had been a fatality, though, we were under a lot of pressure by the city to come up with a reason, a.s.a.p.

It would have been best if the fire had started up on the top floor of the building – or at least better, and easier to escape, for the folks inside – but in this case, we found that the fire had been started on the first floor of the building. In the same room, it so happened, that the young woman who had not made it out had been burned alive in.

Now, I'm going to stop right there, because I'm sure the reader is familiar with the case I'm talking about. If you're old enough, at least, it's probably already there, inside your head. Think about it for a minute. A husband had caught his wife cheating, you'll remember, right there in his own bed, and had chased her lover out (the man, unfortunately, was never tracked down) and set the woman ablaze. It was in all the papers, real front page stuff. A big deal, I'm sure you'll recall, because the husband had even been a politician in the minor leagues (though I don't remember for which team, or to what degree). Turns out the wife had been meeting up with all sorts of men, which she'd found by placing an ad out in the paper, and apparently for quite a while. A real good city scandal.

At the time we didn't know about all that, but it was clear that the fire had started there, in that room. The dead wife, small and miserable and burned up, the poor thing, had not been moved from the bed when we got there (for procedural investigative purposes) though her body looked inhuman and the sheets had all gone up. An ugly, grisly scene, no doubt about it. And not long into it (just keep in mind, I was a rookie) I left to go get sick in the remains of a nearby bathroom. The other fire scene investigators, of which there were three on this case, each of them veterans in the field, had a good laugh at my expense, but they also helped me get back up to my feet. A swell crew, almost the whole lot of them. I returned to the bedroom. The corpse (because I couldn't look away) had been curled up, skeletal, the hair all singed off the head. The thing I remember most though, was the bottoms of her feet hanging off the bed, two dark little feet, the most human looking parts about her left. I dreamed about those small black feet for quite some time.

Anyway, we called it arson, and the policemen called it murder. It was a very big case, and my boss at the time had even been a part of the trial that came after, many months after, and he told us all about the lawyers and the suit he bought and his interviews with the paper. We teased him about all of it, for he was not the kind to like a big fuss, and we gave him a good hard time. Despite the darkness of that crime, the job took on a levity after. Though I'd never been hated among my crew, this case, in all its horror, seemed to bring the group of us closer together, or at least me, the rookie, closer to all of them, an already close group of workers. Often my older, more experienced colleagues began inviting me out for drinks after work at a local bar called The Rusty

Nail, near our main building. We drank beers by the pitcher full, light pissy beers, and I listened to the gruesome stories of theirs about the even sicker crime-fire scenes they'd investigated, other arsons, the bodies of men and ladies and children, dead pets and burned up street dogs. I thought about the feet I had seen, black and poking and still in that familiar shape of feet, and I told them when it was my turn about how I'd felt about them. No one said much after. Then I said about the smell I liked, the rotten burning smell of the after-fire, a secret and possibly dangerous confession, I'd thought at the time, though I'd been drunk, dead drunk like the rest of them, and the group of them smiled and agreed with me, each of them thankfully fire-heads themselves, and traded their own personal likings of the job. Most of my fellow fire scene investigators were men, but we had a few ladies, too, though most didn't go on actual cases like us, and they talked just as freely as the men did.

Once I had an affair with a lady from the fire scene investigator office. Her name was Candy. She had these big, powerful hips to hold onto (she'd had a few kids) and big everything else too, and she lay down naked on my bed in my apartment (I remember those creaks), and after a while, when we'd gotten pretty tipsy, she let me tie her wrists down to the bedposts, just like that jailed politician had done to his lousy cheating wife before he'd lit her. She lay down with her big feet strewn off the bed and let me kiss them. And afterward, she picked up one of the scented candles I'd put in the room (it smelled, or was suppose to smell, according to the package, like bonfire), and she held out her hand against the flame, right there in it, until I pushed her away and told her to

knock it off. She laughed then and touched me with her red hot hand, and we made love the rest of the night, the whole room rocking, the way she wanted it.

In the time after my first good fire, we continued to investigate fire scenes. Most of them were minor cases, at least in comparison to the Woodson apartments. Warehouse fires, most of them, accidents started by carelessness, cigarettes. A food store had burnt down one winter, and it was suspected that the owner had done it for the insurance money, but we couldn't find enough evidence to label it as arson, not like the other time, though we looked, and it wasn't up to us to investigate motive or intent either way. We drank more beers after hours, and we had a good time. I felt good and confident – like a carpenter's hand, getting harder and thicker as it hammers. We didn't have to work as long of hours as the policemen or firemen, but we were always on call, and it felt good to be so important.

The next time we had a big fire (for we were all kind of itching for a good one) I thought I would be more ready for it, after seeing what I'd seen the last time, more ready for something awful. I remembered how the team had laughed at my throwing up at the arson. This time the building had been a restaurant, a busy diner, a kitchen fire, and a young man, a college student we found out later, had been trampled to death on the way out the door, then burned up afterwards to smithereens. Imagine this: you could still see the hard white shape of the poor kid's skull burned through the back of his head. His limbs were all twisted in an pitiful way. It was the first fatality I'd seen since the woman, about a year before, though this time the crime was not arson. There was no specified murderer, because the stampede had happened so fast and the crowd had been panicked.

No trial occurred, no press or court suits or glory, and that night at the bar some of the old guys drank whiskey instead of beers. Though they didn't seem less cheerful. I saw the exposed skull when I closed my eyes at night, though this time I didn't talk about it, and I suffered a weeklong headache. I thought again of the first burn victim's feet, then of the co-worker woman I'd had the affair with, and, maybe because I couldn't sleep, and it had been a cure of mine for getting tired since grade school, I played around for a while in my bed, and then I felt so sick in my stomach that I threw up, and, fully emptied, I went to sleep.

But the next day things felt better. The others, the senior investigators, seemed fine as ever, too, and I found myself following suit. Time went on and other fires happened, more average fires – a newsstand smoldered, a home, thank goodness empty, outside the city struck by lightning – and things went back to normal. New investigators got hired, and I became a senior member of the team. I told the young investigators stories of what I'd seen, enough to make them look a little green, though at first they never came out to the bar. When some of the other, older fire scene investigators began to retire, a spot became open for the head of my division, and I got the promotion. We celebrated, and everyone, even the juniors, got drunk.

I took the job (now here it comes, though I'd never said it) not just because I wanted more money, but because the chief of my division, I knew, did not investigate the fires himself. He sat at a desk. He sent in a crew and collected the data. To me, at this time, it seemed like a fine idea.

I handled the job okay. It was not without its perks or migraines. One particularly bad fire, I recall, burnt up a small bookstore on Lee Rd. one summer. A tremendous fire. I looked at the photos later, out of necessity. Two older victims, who worked in the back of the shop. I did a lot of paperwork for this case, and congratulated my team for a job well done investigating.

Years went on like this and I became more removed from the field work of my former position. At first it felt freeing, and then, over time, I began to miss the smells of the buildings. I went out drinking with the investigators and listened to their stories. I tried to pull more details out of them, but they seemed less easy to talk to now; I guess from me being their superior. They often told me to check out their handed in reports, as if I'd been asking out of professionalism and not my own curiosity.

My first fire back on the fire scene squad was another apartment.

It was the first real murder by arson case in my district since the politician. Many fires happen in a big city, but very few with the intent of killing. Probably because there are easier ways to do it. Guns are easy to come by. Poison. Knives. Lots of tall buildings. The victim in this case was a teenage girl. Her boyfriend had hit her hard in the stomach and burned her down. It was a terrifying ordeal, and a nightmare to see the aftermath. We did our jobs well and went out for a drink that night at The Rusty Nail.

It is strange the things a person can get used to.

FROM THE BLEACHERS

His feet loop in cursives, a dangerous speed, cutting and spraying the waste. Troy and I watch him from the bleachers, chewing gum, slapping out tongues at the roofs of our mouths, our fingers and elbows curled into our jackets. We're tired and have changed into our regular shoes as we wait in the cold of the building.

The man behind the counter Dad calls Rod.

Hi John.

Hi Rod.

Just took em off the machine, says Rod. Sharp as knives. He winks at us. And shiny too. Hiya boys.

Hiya.

Hi.

You men heading down this hour? Have the whole place to yourselves.

That's the idea.

Well, he pulls them up from under the counter, there you go, fellas. That's the usual.

Here you go, Rod.

Thanks, John. You boys watch him close now. That ass of his will break the ice if he tries those moves he used to.

Ha.

Ha.

He winks again, a smile across his leathered face.

His skates are white with thin lines of blue. They wear bruises and loose threads, and they smell like hell in the back seat beneath us.

It's a school night, John.

We won't be long.

Did you finish your homework?

Yes Mama.

Yes.

At least stop on the way back. There's no paper upstairs.

Yes Mama, he imitates. We'll stop after. You boys ready?

We nod.

The rink is old. It slumps behind a neighborhood, and even in the summer the dumpster outside is filled with snow. I carry the skates pinched together with my fingers. They feel about ready to crumble.

The locker room has a thickness to it, a fog of smells and shower puddles. Sometimes men are changing there. Troy and I stay in the corner. Sometimes Dad will shower too, and walk out into the main part of the locker room, hairy and beaded, and all of him will go up and down with his footsteps, and the hair on him will hug the drops of water, making him glisten.

We won't stay long tonight. Drug store closes at ten.

Troy brings his game out. He does this sometimes after he gets tired, and I listen to the clicking of his thumbs against the plastic, to the sirens of the artificial action, to the focused breathing of my brother. The sounds of the machines above the ice, which make the room cold, are loud and always coughing. The gum we chew is first dry like paper, then thins with saliva, and eventually it turns to a wet sort of mucous in our mouths. During this transformation he will skate. Moving around the oval, his legs rowing a perfect rhythm. When the cooling machines kick off to recharge, the blades cut the surface with a crisp slicing sound. With each turn, he scrapes up a layer of the ice, scarring it and bleeding it white. This makes a job for the Zamboni, the man whose job it is to clean up the ice afterwards, to medicate the cuts and grooves our father has dug into it. This man has a great heaving belly, and dark hair that shines underneath the hanging lights.

My feet stick to the floor of the metal bench below me. The coldness makes me shrivel in my skin. While he skates, he never looks up at us, only down at his feet, or ahead at the ice his feet will soon skate on. Sometimes he skates forwards and sometimes

he skates backwards. Sometimes he skates fast, so it seems like he's going out of control, and sometimes he skates slow, catching his breath and letting the blood in him settle.

Sometimes when he skates I think I can see him best. It's when, it seems, he's thinking. The breath breaths out of him in clouds above the ice and his feet seem to stutter. Sometimes he wipes his face free of the sweat, the cold sweat from the ice. Troy will keep busy, but I will see him lower his head down, his feet barely seeming to glide. These moments are private. While Troy is playing, I wait for these moments. Our father, tired out, alone on the ice, his feet old and calloused and rotten, at home in their skates. When my father does this I see him. It seems there's nothing between us, that though he isn't looking up and into the stands, we're both kind of exposed, and he's sweating his secret thoughts into me. I listen with all of my body. The lonesomeness of his body, the thirstiness of mine. These bodies seem together, meters and bleachers apart.

Do you think he's going to be done soon? My battery's almost run out.

Afterwards he joins us. He peels off his skates, one foot at a time, letting his black socks air. He towels off his face, which has pink stains mixed into the white. He drops the towel on the ground and not in the bin beside him made for the towels.

Toilet paper, toilet paper.

At the store he buys us candy. He buys one for himself.

Don't tell Mama. It's almost time for bed.

The candy he buys us is sweet and hard and it always gets stuck in the cracks
between our teeth.

NAOMI

-- Naomi Leigh White, says my mother. We're playing cards at the table again.

The rain comes down in a constant pour, making a pool in the slant of our backyard.

In our PJs and barefeet we go back and forth.

--How come 'Leigh'?

I've heard the answer before, but I like to hear stories lots of times. She looks up with her big mother's eyes and I add – Go fish.

-- Leigh was your grandmother's name, she tells me.

-- I thought her name was Jeanie?

-- That was your other grandma, she says. She takes a long sip from her mug, blowing on the lid, and I take one from mine. The powder feels grainy on my tongue.

-- How about fives, I ask.

-- Go fish.

I draw my cards with a false look of anger. I study them or at least pretend to.

-- What's so special about Grandma Leigh? I ask. Why not Naomi Jeanie White?

-- Nothing special about Leigh, says my mother. But definitely better than Naomi Jeanie White.”

-- Naomi Jeanie White, I repeat. My mother is right.

-- Do you have any jacks? she asks.

-- Go fish. Was Grandma Leigh *your* mom, or dad's?

-- You know she was mine.

-- I know, I say.

-- Well why ask questions when you already know the answer?

I look at the rain coming down outside. It collects against the side of the house, blocking the sliding door so we can't go outside. I ask my next question.

-- Where do the squirrels go when it rains?

-- In their trees, says my mother.

-- I knew that, too, I say. They live inside their holes. But don't they still get wet?

-- Have you ever seen a wet squirrel? she asks. Both of us laugh a little, picturing it. Your turn.

-- Hmm, do you have any sixes?

She gives me one card. I raise my cheerful arms to bother her, because I know she doesn't like to lose.

-- How old was I when Grandma Leigh died? I ask.

-- You were two, she says.

-- How old am I now?

-- You know I'm not going to answer that, she says. Do you have any kings?

-- Go fish, I say. How old would she be today?

She stops to think, then answers. Seventy-one.

-- No, I tell her. Naomi Jeanie White.

-- Naomi *Leigh* White, she corrects me.

-- Naomi *Leigh* White.

-- She would have been eighteen months in September, says my mother.

-- That's still a baby.

-- You're still a baby, she tells me. Now take your turn.

Sitting up in my chair, I try to defend myself, but just then my father comes in from the rain and he stamps his rainy boots on the floor. He makes a lot of noise and I cover up my ears. My mother gives me the look that means for me to stop talking.

-- Hi Rick, says my mother when he comes into the room.

My father grunts. He smells like the lake because he works as a lighthouse keeper, and when it rains he has to make extra sure the lighthouse works just right.

-- Raining like hell out there.

-- Language, says my mother, looking at her cards. Take off your coat.

My father goes into the kitchen and takes a beer.

-- For some reason one of the lights is acting spotty, says my father. Something with the wiring. I got it for now, but it's not going to last.

-- I'll fix it, I tell him.

-- You can't even tie your shoes, he teases.

-- Yes I can, I shout. I reach for my feet but I'm not wearing my shoes and my mother stops me before I can run off to get them.

-- Just take your turn, Tommy.

-- What are you two doing? asks my father.

-- What else, says my mother.

-- Do you have any kings? I ask.

My mother gives me two cards, then stops.

-- Hey, she says, I asked you for kings last turn. I'm not going to play with any cheaters.

-- I didn't hear you, I say.

-- Tommy, play fair, says my father, who has come up behind me. I can feel his cold wetness without him even touching.

-- Give me your kings, says my mother. My mother and father both watch me. I fold my arms across the table.

-- What's for lunch? I ask.

My mother puts down her cards.

-- There's frozen lasagna in the freezer.

-- Frozen *Leigh*-sagna, I say. My mother stares. I know the rule but I don't like being called a cheater. I look again at the rain water in the backyard.

-- Dad, have you ever seen a wet squirrel?

-- A wet squirrel? I don't think so. I think they're too smart to get wet, he says. Not like me. He takes a long drink from his beer.

I take a long drink from my mug like my father does. The chocolate has cooled down.

-- Not like me, I say, sing-songy. Not-like-me. Na-o-mi.

-- Tommy, says my mother. Really, what's gotten into you?

-- I'm not a cheater! I tell them both.

My mother looks at my father, who only continues to drink from his beer. Then for a long time no one says anything. I go look for my shoes, but when I get back, my father has walked across the room to the kitchen counter. Still no one is talking.

I try to pick up my cards to keep playing, but my mother only looks down and at her small veiny feet.

When the phone rings my father answers. I listen to the rain drop in splashes. The sky looks as gray as it has all week. My father doesn't talk back to the phone. Then:

-- Goddamn fucking hell, he says after. He slams the phone down, and with his coat on he storms away and out the door. The door closes hard then everything gets quiet.

My mother does not say, 'language,' but I'm thinking about those swear words. I repeat them over and over in my head. They stick around in the kitchen long after my father has gone – cold, fishy words, like the way my father smells.

I finish my chocolate and pick up my cards in the quiet of the kitchen.

-- I'm ready to play again, I finally say. But my mother only keeps looking down and away from me, and I tell her again and again with no response, until I leave the kitchen table and run to the kitchen door in my barefeet, opening the door, though it isn't easy, letting in the water that has built against the side of the house.

SAFARI

A couple enters an oyster bar in Michigan. It's nighttime and snowing, and they stamp their wet feet. With the man in the lead, they head toward the bar. He orders a full plate of oysters, and, holding out his fingers, two beers. The bar is cold and dimly lit, and the couple leans against the bar in the nearly empty establishment. A hockey game plays overhead.

Brett: (Squinting) What's the score?

Rebecca: (Looking up) 3-0.

Brett: Wings?

Rebecca: Sharks.

Brett: Jesus.

Rebecca: (Nodding her head)

Brett: (Looking around the empty bar, then back to Rebecca, grinning) You look like you're going to be sick.

Rebecca: I'm just not that hungry.

Brett: You don't have to worry. They put hot sauce and lemons on the side, if you like.

Rebecca: That sounds somehow worse.

Brett: Don't be silly. You'll like it.

Rebecca: I won't like it.

Brett: How do you know you won't like it?

Rebecca: I know what I like.

Brett: You can't *know* if you've never tried something before. You might like it.

Rebecca: I'll just drink my beer. You can have them all.

Brett: I don't need twelve oysters. I ordered enough for both of us.

Rebecca: So take some home.

Brett: Now you're being silly.

Rebecca: (Smiling and bowing her head) That's me. *Silly*. Always silly. Remember?

That's why you love me.

Brett: One of the many reasons.

Rebecca: How sweet.

Brett: (Watching her) I wish you'd be in a better mood.

Rebecca: Why? I'm in a *fine* mood. This beer is delicious.

Brett: You have to try just one, though. For me. Just close your eyes. (Imitating the motion) Down the hatch. It's easy.

Rebecca: (With a sigh) If I have to.

Brett: You have to.

Rebecca: Well I guess if you say so. Just for you.

Brett: (Smiling) If you want to spit it up, you can.

Rebecca: I will.

Brett: Good.

Rebecca: Good.

They drink for a while without talking. The bartender, a tall, blonde woman, middle aged and in a black polo shirt, comes by with a rack of condiments, then walks away to the empty end of the bar, so as to not listen in on their conversation. The woman watches her go, and the man looks up at the television, craning his neck.

Brett: Did something just happen?

Rebecca: (Turning back) Penalty.

Brett: On who?

Rebecca: Zetterberg.

Brett: Zetterberg? Come on.

They watch the instant replay.

Rebecca: You know (looking at him), some people eat grasshoppers.

Brett: (Still squinting toward the TV) Sure.

Rebecca: My dad's friend, Roger, when he goes buck hunting, he eats everything, even the dick.

Brett: What? Why?

Rebecca: Some people like it.

Brett: (Nodding his head) I suppose.

Rebecca: Would you ever eat a deer penis? Or what about a spider?

Brett: It's not the same thing.

Rebecca: What if I asked you nicely? If I asked you to do it for me. Would you eat a dick for me, sweetheart?

Brett: Jesus. You don't have to try it, then. It's not a big deal.

Rebecca: I know it's not a big deal.

Brett: I'll eat them fast and we can go.

Rebecca: I don't want to go. I kind of like it here.

Brett: It's kind of freezing.

Rebecca: Would you like my coat?

Brett: You're hilarious.

Rebecca: No, I'm *silly*.

Brett: You're ridiculous.

Rebecca: I'm serious. I like it here. It's not so cold. It feels kind of nice.

Brett: If you say so.

Rebecca: I do.

Brett: Then let's get another round.

Rebecca: Alright, then.

Brett: (Looking across the bar) Try to get her attention.

Rebecca: (Looking at the waitress then back to him) I'm sure you'd have better luck.

Brett: I don't think so.

Rebecca: Well, you certainly have a way, don't you?

Brett: Here she comes.

Bartender: Two more?

Brett: (Smiling and nodding) Thank you.

Bartender: Sure thing.

Rebecca: She's kind of pretty, don't you think?

Brett: Another commercial.

Rebecca: I like her hair.

Brett: They need to get Zetterberg back in there.

Rebecca: And she has nice shoes.

Brett: (Sitting back) Why don't you just ask her number?

Rebecca: I might.

Brett: They really need to turn things around next period.

Rebecca: I'd like to turn her around.

Brett: (Laughing into his drink) Really? I think you'd be cute together.

Rebecca: She's more your type, though, Brett, don't you think?

Brett: I've never dated a blonde.

Rebecca: I'm not talking about dating her, *silly*.

Brett: Maybe you don't need another one.

Rebecca: Ha! Too late! Here she comes!

Brett: Thank you.

Bartender: Yup. Your plate should be out shortly.

Brett: Thank you.

Rebecca: (Once she has gone) Thank you, thank you. She's really a great waitress, don't you think? Very friendly. Attentive.

Brett: You know, David's going on his safari next weekend.

Rebecca: Is he?

Brett: I'm jealous.

Rebecca: A safari must be exciting. I wish we could go too.

Brett: I'd love to. Maybe over the holidays we can go somewhere.

Rebecca: The holidays? That's too far away. Where's your sense of adventure? We could go tonight! Kenya or even Egypt. Somewhere new and exciting. I know you like new experiences.

Brett: We'd have to go the doctor. Get shots. David came in with his arms all puffed the other day.

Rebecca: Well, lets not do Africa then. How about something easier. The Grand Canyon. Neither of us has ever been. Or Yosemite. Or Mount Rushmore.

Brett: I've been to Yosemite and Mount Rushmore. When I was little.

Rebecca: I didn't know that. (Frowning) Which one was better?

Brett: I didn't really care about either one when I was nine.

Rebecca: Cute little nine year old Brett.

Brett: I was a mess of a kid.

Rebecca: All kids are messes.

Brett: Some more than others.

Rebecca: All kids are messes, though. That's why we're never having any.

Brett: Fine by me.

Rebecca: Good. I'm glad it's settled.

Brett: I'm getting hungry.

Rebecca: Good thing you ordered so many oysters.

Brett: Would you like to go anywhere else after here?

Rebecca: Wherever you'd like to go, love.

Brett: No where in particular.

Rebecca: If you'd like, we can see what time she gets off.

Brett: I'm sure you're interested in getting her off.

Rebecca: (Laughing) That's funny, sweetheart. But you know, she's not really my type either.

Brett: I didn't think so.

Rebecca: Don't be *silly*. It's just that, I don't go for anyone I've just met.

Brett: It's too bad Marcy can't go with David on safari.

Rebecca: I'm sure she'll find things to do while her man is away.

Brett: Jesus, you're relentless, you know that?

Rebecca: I just mean maybe the two of us will see a movie. I'm not sure what you thought I meant.

Brett: It was just one time. Once. I don't know how many different ways I can say it.

Rebecca: Don't get so upset, love.

Brett: If I wasn't so damn hungry I'd say we should just leave now.

Rebecca: Poor hungry man.

Brett: We'll go after the oysters.

Rebecca: All twelve of them.

Brett: I could probably eat a hundred.

Rebecca: Well (looking down the bar, toward the kitchen), here she comes. (They wait)

Bartender: Here you go, guys. Enjoy!

Brett: Thank you.

Rebecca: God, just look at them.

Brett: (Lifting one up) Let me know if you change your mind.

Rebecca: Of course, love. But I wouldn't want to deprive my hungry man.

Brett: What's the score? Anything change?

Rebecca: Still 3-0.

Brett: Shit. Well, bottoms up.

Rebecca: Cheers, love (picking up her glass, she takes a long, heavy gulp)

THE FOX

The fox behind the cow barn died the winter she turned ten. For a while it had been lying still, tucked beside the wood of the barn, bonded to the frostbit earth. Lizzie's father, removed from his breakfast, slow and unshowered, found he had to break the ground with the shovel before it would move.

When the shovel cracked into the dirt – a crack that echoed toward the house, its windows lit, its chimney clouded – the paws of the fox began to paddle.

-- Shit, said Lizzie's father, the shovel coming loose in his hands.

He checked behind his shoulder, but Lizzie had not seen the movement. She'd turned her head towards her boots, the insides cold on the bare skin of her feet.

Lizzie had found the fox that morning on a visit with the Turner's cow. In the winter, and especially now that the cow would soon be giving birth, Lizzie had made it her duty to see that the animal was safe from the cold. The idea had come at the start of the season, brushing its coat on a clear, bright day, when she'd claimed to have felt the cow shivering beneath her.

-- It's going to get sick unless we take care of it.

Her father was in the kitchen beside her, poking at the remains of last night's meal.

-- A cow is a warm blooded animal, he told her, his teeth clicking down on the metal. You don't have to worry.

Lizzie folded her arms and tapped the floor beneath the table. She'd imagined her father's concern.

-- I'm warm blooded, too, she said. And I'm freezing even in this house.

Her father swallowed and belched between his teeth. The cow was old and its hair was showing pink in certain places.

-- I guess we can see what we can do.

Through his connection at the farmer's market, a woman was found who specialized in blankets made for horses.

She only needs the measurements, he reported back, so write them down and I'll see how much she's asking.

Lizzie put on her winter boots and headed toward the cow barn. Once or twice a day she did this, making it routine. The blanket her father had brought home was nice, but not quite right. Sometimes the straps – designed to hook around the animal's legs, allowing it to bend or lie without the risk of sliding – got caught, or rubbed too tight against the base of the udders, and the cow would be forced to shuffle its hooves, or else remain squatted, still and uncomfortable. This was a flaw of the blanket, but it had to be better than nothing, the poor animal, alone in that ancient barn. She pulled the straps around the less tender parts, the cow standing quietly, waiting for its meal.

Lizzie felt pleasure in keeping the cow protected. Watching it eat the grains and bits of vegetables she would lay out, she thought of the calf that would emerge. She had

seen it once before, when she was little. Her father had hunched beside her then, and Lizzie had watched as the calf was patiently pushed out from its mother, slick in a film, its head showing first, limp and giant, slowly onto the hay of the barn floor. When the birth was almost finished, it looked to Lizzie like the calf had stopped moving, and she'd clutched her hands against her chin until her father had yanked the knobby front legs of the calf and dragged it from its birthing hole. He removed some of the film, and she saw the calf breathing; the animal had looked grown up in his arms. She looked forward to greeting this new calf, of delivering.

Once the cow had been brushed – she'd noticed a patch of knotted, unkempt hair around its hindquarters – it would be time for her brother's morning bath. The farm was full of new life. She pricked her fingers on the cattle brush's bristles, anticipating her next chore. Sunday mornings were bath days for Buck, and Lizzie's mother, who liked to sleep in, allowed her daughter to lead during bathtime, as long as her father was in a nearby room. In the kitchen, with her brother inside his plastic baby's tub, Lizzie would dab the washcloth with water, adding a drop of the lotion used only for him, and clean her brother gently, watching him squirm and fuss as he swatted her. Of all of her duties, Lizzie enjoyed Buck's bathtime the most, taking a pride in his fresh baby's smell.

During her planning, the brush still poking at the pads of her fingers, the pregnant cow, without warning, began to huff and stomp its legs, almost knocking Lizzie back onto the floor.

-- What is it? What's the matter? She guarded herself and withdrew so the cow could not back into her.

Shaking its head and ruffling its blanket, the cow reversed quickly toward its stall. Lizzie, caught off guard by the sudden commotion, surveyed the barn. It might be a snake – a snake had once gotten into the cow barn, a harmless garter, and had frightened the cow something like this – but she couldn't see any movement besides the scraping of the hooves. She waited for the scene to settle.

When the cow retreated safely to its pen, Lizzie heard the faint scratching of wood beside the cow trough. Watching the ground in front of her, she sidled toward the sound, making her way to the corner of the barn, listening closely between each step.

By the time she got to the source of the scratching, the barn seemed very still. The wind through the creases of the wood made a creaking, and a new sound, a chewing from the cow, the slap of its tongue and teeth against the hay, filled up the silence, eating perhaps to calm its nerves, but no sign of the scratching remained. Lizzie watched the wall in curiosity, wanting to solve the puzzle before she left.

After a few moments of tension, she eased her shoulders. Wait till I tell Dad, she thought. Crouching for the brush, which she'd dropped on the floor in all the excitement, she imagined a ghost in the cow barn, some unnamed spirit fussing with the cow, playing a trick on the both of them.

Then the scratching – or was it even scratching? – returned. The cow began to stamp once more, and Lizzie looked again towards the corner.

-- Where in the hell is it coming from? she asked the cow.

Then she had an idea.

-- Hold on, will you? Lizzie left the barn.

Outside the air was crisp and bitter, the sky in a howl through the trees. Her hands were bare so she kept them bunched inside her coat pockets, and a chatter came over her teeth. Being warm blooded in Siscowet, she thought, walking toward the back of the barn, doesn't mean a goddamn thing.

As she neared the corner of the barn she continued to watch her step, curving her feet strategically so that nothing could jump out at her. She remembered the family of groundhogs that had lived beneath the porch all summer, the ones that had driven the dog crazy, barking and pawing at the floor – she smiled – but she hadn't seen even one of them since the changing of the leaves. Whatever it was behind the cow barn, if anything at all, Lizzie would not be caught unready.

The fox lay stiff and strangely crooked, its wild hair combed with a filth. Its head was slacked inward against its chest, its ears bent low to its neck. It was the first fox Lizzie had ever seen in person.

She remembered her father, earlier that season, claiming he'd found a fox hole somewhere off in the acres – or rather the dog had; had staked it out for days – but a fox hole in the acres was different than finding an actual fox. Until that point, a fox had seemed a queer animal, much like a grizzly or a lion, an animal that only existed in books and on TV. Still, there was no mistaking it. The roughed orange fur, the sharp doglike face. Lizzie hadn't pictured a creature so small – the dog would have made quick work of it.

But the surprise of the animal did not compare to the fright of its awful condition.

As handsome as the fox's tail – thick and peppered dark and light – and delicate as its tiny head – no bigger than her hand outstretched – the animal seemed too sick to even notice her. A gash had formed on its shoulder. Its paw looked twisted inside out. How could this have happened? Circling toward its front she saw the twitch that had created the scratching. Now it could hardly make a sound. Keeping her distance she looked into its slivered eyes, black and unseeing, and ran towards the house.

By the time her father arrived to the spot, tired and groaning, the fox's eyes had shut.

-- It's dead, said Lizzie's father, bending to his knees.

-- It kicked before, Lizzie told him. It scared the cow.

He waited beside the frozen animal, his shovel leaned into the ground.

-- It's dead now, he repeated.

Lizzie stepped back, tucking her arms into her coat sleeves. Her father lifted the shovel, with the intent, she thought, to poke the fox, and she turned away, looked down at the ground in front of her, at the clean shine of her boots. She did not see the fox's swim as the shovel cracked earth around it, and she did not understand when her father turned back and told her, Go inside.

-- Aren't you going to bury it?

-- I am. But you should go in. It's cold.

-- I want to see where you do it. So it's not alone.

-- I'll show you after I've finished, he said.

But as she sloshed her feet in her boots, loose without socks, the corners of her eyes picked up another jerking movement.

-- It's still alive!

-- It's going to die.

-- Well can't we help it?

-- I'm going to, her father said. He did not look at his daughter. But you have to go inside now.

He headed towards the cow barn with the shovel. Lizzie did not know where he was going. The fox's legs were still again, and she thought she might be sick. Her father emerged with a blanket – not the cover made for the cow, but an old, ragged blanket kept stuffed inside the barn. With Lizzie still beside the body, Lizzie's father spread it on the fox.

-- You don't know if it's really dead.

-- Go inside.

-- Are you going to leave it.

-- I'm going to help.

Lizzie's father paused, his dirty hands around the shovel's handle.

-- It's in pain. It's all we can do. Again he did not look up.

-- But it might be okay.

-- I'll show you where after. I'll dig it deep.

He waited for a moment, both of them in silence, the shape of it beneath the cover, the wind a steady whistle through the field.

He waited until the slam of the house-door carried toward the barn. The back door of the house was an old one, metal and off the frame. Another task that needed his attention.

ON THE NIGHT OF THE PARTY

They had gone to the party and left soon after, not wanting to make a big scene. Because he had driven, she'd left by foot, walking without direction and finding herself in a nearby park, or really, a field beside a hill with no benches. Beneath the cold starless night they sat side by side on a pair of abandoned cinderblocks, which seemed to sprout out from the ground.

"It won't be so bad," he told her, his feet on the grass, a cloud of white breath in the air between them. "And not for so long. You really don't have to worry."

The girl laughed. She could hear the party from a block away, an elaborate get-together for a friend who'd been promoted to some high company position. She felt sick.

"I don't have to worry," she repeated. "Well that's good to know."

"I mean it," he said. "It's perfectly safe. And I'll write letters. It won't be for so long. You'll see. It might even be romantic." She laughed again. "Writing letters...like young lovers across the sea."

"*Like* young lovers," she said. "Well what exactly are we then, anyway?"

"I'm not so young."

"You make me want to vomit."

"Alright, just settle down now, will you? We've both had a bit to drink tonight."

"Not hardly enough."

“I’ll agree with you there.”

“*You’ll agree with me there.* Jesus. You try to be so cute when we’re fighting.”

“Just stop it, Becka.”

“Oh, mister problem solver,” she said. “Why don’t you make me?” He looked at the ground while she talked to him. “You know how. Like after Maria’s. Like after Gary Mitchell. Don’t you remember? Honestly, I don’t know which I prefer. The drunk boy who once slapped me out of jealousy, or the man who makes cute jokes to make things better.”

They sat and listened to the party across the way. It sounded like a lively time. Becka combed her fingers through her hair and looked toward the hill. Every so often there seemed to be someone in the darkness, a tall shape atop the hill, but it could have been a trick of the eye.

“You know I’m not like that. I never was.”

“So you say.”

“Of course I say. It was a long time ago and we both know it. Years ago.”

“But you miss the past, don’t you? And now you’re going back. Back across the world, and you have no good way of telling me. You don’t sit us down so we can have a good discussion. You try to be cute and show me like *this*.”

He touched his head, recently shaved and cold in the late night sky. He’d left the hat he’d worn to the party inside. “I thought it might be a good way. Not so serious. You used to like me this way.”

“Yes, you know so much about me, and what I want. What I like.”

“Look, it’s perfectly safe. I’m just going to be consulting on a few things. No danger this time.”

“You’re going to be a consultant. Because you’re such an important man. A big engineer like no other.”

“We can talk about this when you’re finished lashing out.”

“Because there’s no engineer like Charlie Harper. No sir. You’re one of a kind. Forget your other responsibilities, your family and your friends. Your country needs you, and Mister Charlie Harper needs to prove himself.”

Charlie stood up and gave Becca his keys. “Here,” he told her. “Drive yourself home.” He stormed away and out into the subdivision. After all this time, he could get her so wrong. He walked and walked. He didn’t feel cold now, though he wore a light jacket. He walked and walked until eventually he found a liquor store at the end of the street. He looked at all the bottles. He bought some whiskey and went back to the park and found that Becca had not gone.

He sat down beside her and twisted the cap.

He could not tell if she’d been crying, though he looked. She took the bottle from his hands.

“You’re welcome,” he told her. They drank for a while without talking.

She leaned against his shoulder and he finally began to feel cold.

“I’ve been watching this hill,” she said. “I think there’s someone on it.”

“Where?” he asked, and she pointed.

“Could be a pervert,” she said, giving him back the bottle.

“Could be,” he told her.

“Some solider,” she said. “You left me alone with a pervert on a hill.”

“I don’t see anyone.”

“Me neither,” she squinted. “You must have scared him off.

THE BOXER

If you cook them just right, you can practically drink them down. This was a trick of my father's, who was not a chef of any kind, but was, once upon a time, a boxer.

Wet and bursting with yolk, I stamped them between my tongue and the top of my mouth and swallowed them down. Because of my condition I thought of him. (First of him then, and then of him now, one of the youngest men in the place he stays). I slurped the eggs slowly, letting them slide down like mucous, dreading the rest of the day, wishing I could go back to sleep (not that anyone was stopping me, I'd just never been the type to sleep past the morning). Another day here in the apartment, on the couch with the fabric peeled up over the cushion, too cold to go outside for a walk, too sore to talk to anyone on the phone, though I had no where to be, no plans with anyone, or any intentions.

It felt strange that the pain should last so long. I spent some time tasting what was left in my mouth, screwing with my jaw and recoiling, advancing the pain and retreating. The doctor had said that the pain might go on for a couple of weeks – it was a routine procedure, he'd explained, usually easier with children, that should have been done some years ago, decades probably...haven't you felt the pressure? Sometimes, I'd said, but usually over time it goes away. The doctor huffed. People with their phobias, he'd said, his face all lines. It's amazing what a person will suffer out of obstinacy.

Still toying with my jaw, I pulled out some paper from my wallet, an old receipt for some groceries, maybe even the eggs. I wrote down some calculations: I had gone last time in November – then Nancy, Egan, Jeffrey – so I had until March before my turn again. He had been a real pill to Egan, she'd told me a few weeks ago. It's better, she'd said, on the bad days, when he hardly remembers your name. I thought some about Egan. Her twins and her fat slob of a husband. Lucy was smartest, in California: you couldn't get farther. I went through my wallet. All of it junk – punch cards to places I couldn't remember going, business cards long since relevant. I wanted, more than anything, to go back to work. For something tangible to eat up my time. But you can't, said Mr. Rankine, sell insurance with no voice.

“I have to do something”, I said out loud, like some kind of lunatic, especially since it came out mostly a groaning. I decided to brave the cold and go for a walk.

Outside the snow fell in a chopped, fine mist. I had no discernable goal, no errand or final destination, nor did I ever; I walked without prejudice down sidewalks, following whichever path took my fancy. I had walked most of it before, since walks had become my method for wasting time or clearing headspace, but a mile up I managed to discover a few alleys I'd never turned down before. That, I suppose, is the beauty of the city. I glanced up and at people as I walked, but no one traded glances. In New York they all go out walking in the middle of the day. I wondered if any of them were wasting time like me, but they all seemed quick and determined in their steps. Despite the snow, it didn't seem as cold as I'd thought it might ahead of time, and my jaw even felt better outdoors.

An hour into my walk (now the cold had ceased to matter entirely, allowing the pain to regain its strength) I came across (for this always happened, regardless of the odds, with someone or other) my brother, Jeffrey. I looked up at the street sign nearby before he'd seen me, and noticed I'd ended up on the block my brother worked at. Fateful feet, I moaned.

"Brother," said Jeffrey, when he turned my way.

I waved in his direction and he came over.

"What brings you to these parts?" he asked me.

I choked a bit, and pointed to my mouth.

"That's right," he said with a tsk. "Does it still hurt?"

I shrugged.

"I see," said Jeffrey. "Listen, I'm on my lunch break. Just started. You want to see Dad? We could do it together."

I shook my head.

"We won't stay long. Just enough to pop in. And listen, you won't even have to say anything, because of the tonsils. You see? An easy visit."

I shook my head again and told him, "I go next month, it would throw everything out of balance, the whole cycle." I waved my arms for emphasis. It came out a mess. Try talking without letting your lips touch, that's how I sounded, but he must have understood because he sighed and said goodbye and kept on walking. How strange, I thought after he'd left, that I'd just been thinking of our father this morning and then I run into Jeffrey on the street. Jeffrey was first-born. I watched him walk off down the sidewalk and turn

left around a building. It's true it would have been an easy visit. I regretted the missed opportunity. But by then the snow had begun to come down stronger, and I decided to walk back home.

MONTJUIC

In 1987, Robert Montano witnessed the death of the young Tomas Ruiz at the Palazzo del Montjuic in Barcelona. The palazzo stood at the top of a hill, surrounded by antique cannons (decades since fired, pale and graffitied with peace signs, initials), and looked out over the city from the sky.

Montano had been drinking in the corner and reading from a copy of an old American novel, which he was working to translate into Catalan. It was a fine day in Spain, and though Montano had hidden himself in the shade of the palazzo, the main space in front of him – filled with running children, a young schoolteacher trying to command attention – was bright from the sun, the ground stones a thick sunlit yellow at his feet.

From his seat in the palazzo, Montano observed the crowd. One child in particular stood out to him: a girl with the slightest of features; tight, pinned up hair. She wore white shorts that glowed against her sun-bronzed body. She carried her shoes as she chased a boy to the roof of the palazzo.

The schoolteacher, who moved to sit at a table beside Montano, smiled his way. Robert Motano smiled back. Pleasant to watch in her own way, the teacher had no comparison to the children with their bony arms and hairless features. This seemed obvious to them both. The woman called the children to settle. Lunch would soon be

over, and they would be returning to their lesson. Montano watched the barefoot girl as she chased the boy overhead. He listened for the stamping of her feet.

The wine the translator drank was dark in color, a powerful red, nearly black. He drank it often and so the taste was smooth. He enjoyed the drinking and occasionally returned to his book. The Palazzo del Montjuic was not a quiet place this time of year, but Montano found a comfort in the fountain of life around him.

He watched the schoolteacher reach for a cigarette, lighting its end and puffing in the sunlight. Turning his head, he could almost taste it himself, the smoke in her lungs, rising inside them both like a slowly opening hand. Robert had quit some decades ago, but the sight of a woman smoking brought him pleasure. He watched the middle-aged teacher (for it seemed she was less young in the changing light) wondering if perhaps the smoking had aged the woman prematurely. Turning the page, though he hadn't actually read to the end of it (he hadn't even brought a pencil today for notation) he tried to imagine the schoolchildren smoking. He looked for the girl. They were only twelve or thirteen of age, but he, Robert Montano, in his home state of Michigan, had started at ten, swiping a stick from his father.

With that thought in mind he took a deep swallow. He held the book out without studying it. His copy was worn, and its spine held onto the pages without conviction. At sixty-six, the translator felt his own body weakening, losing its grip. The work itself, the author's last completion, was a personal treasure of Montano's. No one had paid him or encouraged his translation, but he'd imagined the challenge of the particular piece for years. It was not a linguistically difficult translation (it had been worked into Spanish

some time before), but one that required a certain dignity. Again he thought of his father, Amancio Montano, and finished off his glass.

He poured himself the remnants of the bottle. The schoolchildren continued their eating, their cursing, their flashing of coffee-colored thighs and windblown hair. Montano felt sleepy in the shade of the palazzo and he looked again for the barefoot girl. American tourists had entered the palazzo and Montano could not see around them. He could always spot them easily. They stood close together, fair and curious, a wide range of ages (most of them families), well behaved, trying to act respectful. Montano thought briefly of the violent history of the fortress (what he had read on the plaques on the stone walls, heard many times from the snippets of the tour guides) eclipsed by the beautiful day. When he found the young girl again she was running, still on the roof of the palazzo, across the way with the young boy in front of her. The boy also wore a pair of shorts, longer than the girl's, and his legs were as bald and skinny (a child in every sense, thought Montano). He let it go. The girl's fine features could be seen at a distance. It was not a strange thing to notice. He remembered a girl from his own childhood, a sister of a friend long forgotten, but she had no name now. The young nameless beauties in Montano's life amazed him. He watched the chase.

"*No corrent,*" announced the schoolteacher below. She pointed her head and tried to peer around the tourists, who had stopped in the center of the palazzo and were listening to the accented English of the Catalonian tour guide. The bright sun made the schoolteacher squint and purse her lips, and, closing his book, Montano decided she was not longer pretty. In fact, she had aged greatly since his first sighting. He adjusted his seat

in the shade of the palazzo. With his eyes closed he listened to the shouting of the children, the grasping voice of the Americans' tour guide, the mixture of the languages, the pulse of his own heart. Inside his eyelids Robert Montano saw the color red with all its intensity.

When he opened his eyes again, some ten minutes later, he felt a jarring pain from the sunlight. The sun had reached its highest point in the sky, and now it peeked into his corner, invading his private space. In that time Montano could not distinguish much of anything, and time itself seemed to have slowed. He felt a nervous vulnerability.

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It happened just in time. His eyelids adjusted to the sunlight, and everything around him became clear. Tomas Ruiz came down, Montano witnessed, like a bomb onto the stony ground. The sound of it was startling: powerful and whole, a slap on the cheek from an incensed god; and disorienting: it seemed to come much later than the sight.

It had been an accident, thought Montano. As the boy fell from the sky, the translator became aware of two separate things: One, that this unknown boy (the name Tomas Ruiz would not be declared in the paper until the following morning) was going to be killed from the impact. And two, that the entire palazzo was going to watch him die.

Robert Montano could not have done anything to save this boy from dying. He was far, far away, and anyway the wine had dulled his mind and body. When the boy reached the stone of the palazzo, Montano had dropped the bottle to the ground, spilling

the small amount left in his glass, breaking it among the commotion. Before long the body of the boy Ruiz had been surrounded and people were crying and hiding their eyes. From his corner in the shadows, Montano sat and followed the attention of the crowd, the panicked schoolchildren, the gawking American tourists, then, looking up toward the rooftop, he watched the girl on the edge of the palazzo, the young girl who had caught his eye, her dark brown skin and clean white shorts, watched her stand at the tip of the rooftop with her arms wrapped up around her own frozen body. He looked to the crowd and back to the girl, barefoot and alone, feeling for this girl on the rooftop, the girl who reminded him of a girl from his past, wanting to slip his arms around her, to take her away from this violence, from this soon to be chaotic scene.

But this was not a possibility for Montano. With luck he managed to escape the palazzo before the arrival of the police. Taking his book, but leaving behind the broken bottle, he left the palazzo and hurried down the steep road back to the city. From time to time he looked back to see if anyone was following close behind him, but, of course, no one was. Robert Montano had done nothing wrong.

BIOGRAPHY

Alex Haber graduated from Stevenson High School, Livonia, Michigan, in 2005. He received his Bachelor of Science from Eastern Michigan University in 2010. He received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from George Mason University in 2014.