

MOON BOUNCE

by

Mary Martha Aubry

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

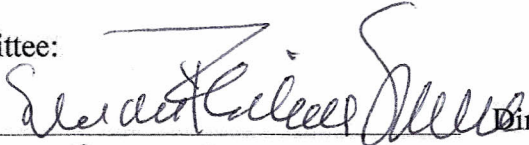
The Requirements for the Degree



of



Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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Date: December 2, 2014  
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Fairfax, VA

Moon Bounce

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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Bachelor of Arts  
Sarah Lawrence College, 2002

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## **DEDICATION**

For Devin.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my family, friends, and the creative writing department at George Mason University for their support.

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## **ABSTRACT**

MOON BOUNCE

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George Mason University, 2014

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This creative thesis consists of nine stories about characters that ultimately surprise themselves with their actions of bravery or cowardice.

## MOON BOUNCE

As Charlie Agreeen pulled up the long bricked driveway to Jerry Frost's house he took a last drag off his Newport cigarette and turned down the rap music on his stereo. He dropped the cigarette into his almost-drained mocha and opened all four windows of his mother's forest green Jaguar a crack, sprayed a shot of air freshener, and grabbed the gift for the birthday girl. Jerry's yard was full of things for his daughter's sixth birthday party: pony rides around the perimeter of the two acre lot, starting at the driveway; a face-painter coloring butterflies and tigers onto smooth, soft faces; and the crowning piece, a great big moon bounce castle.

Charlie Agreeen needed a job. He had been fired from the last four places he worked, including, just last Friday, Einstein Brothers Bagels. At thirty-four, Charlie had a shock of blonde hair, a long lean frame, and his father's deep blue eyes. Despite his good looks, he couldn't charm his way into permanent employment. He'd been casually offered a few menial jobs from friends of his mother, and his mother had encouraged him to get a real estate license, but he had no leads—until last Friday, when his mother ran into Jerry Frost in town. Jerry had been a friend of Charlie's father and a trading contact of Charlie's.

He knew he couldn't go back to smearing bagels. He was a commodity trader, a man whose usual work conversations, when they involved grain, were about September wheat and July corn, not asking someone if they preferred multigrain or rye.



Charlie opened the car door to, “Charlie! It’s so great to see you!” and Lana was swooping in for a hug, her biggest, fakest grin smeared across her face like too much cream cheese coming out the bottom end of a bagel. Lana was a waft of expensive shampoo combined with expensive perfume; her clothes were always painfully soft to the touch, like petting a chinchilla. “You too, Lana,” he said, leaning away from her, patting her back twice to let her know the embrace was over.

Jerry set down Charlotte and stuck out his right hand. “How’s it going my man? You look well. Nice ride.”

“Thanks,” Charlie said, unsure whether Jerry had meant it as a joke or a compliment, since he knew it was not Charlie’s ride at all, but his mother’s car. She kept the old Jag impeccably, the way she maintained everything that she had, living in an aristocratic poverty. This car was a far cry from the cars he owned back when he and Jerry knew each other at the Board of Trade. There he had driven a Corvette, then, when he made more money, a Porsche, then a Ferrari. His mother had only let him borrow the car so that he didn’t have to ride in his own, a beat-up Chevy Aveo, “the ride of the defeated,” as Charlie called it.

“Is that for me?” Charlotte asked, gesturing to the gift.

“Yes, for you, happy birthday. Looks like quite the party.”

The moon bounce castle caught Charlie’s eye. It swayed and folded under the weight of children jumping and the movement of the wind. Charlie had always loved them and for a moment considered which socks he was wearing, a question he always asked himself as a child before deciding whether to go into a moon bounce. White tube

socks today, and they were new and clean. He could take off his shoes and pad into the great thing; that would save this party for him.

Seeing Jerry reminded Charlie about the way his life was ten years ago, when he made markets, was invited to the Globex Gala, and had a name everyone associated with success at the Board of Trade. Back then, people called him “The Boy Plunger,” in homage to Jesse Livermore, a famous commodity trader. Charlie loved the name, as it implied he made only winning bets on the market.

Success isn't everything, but Jerry Frost had more than success. He lived on the old Havenwood Estate which had been developed into a subdivision where only a few old, tall trees peeked above the angular cedar shingle roof lines of the tasteful, imposing homes. Jerry's ample earnings afforded him a home only four blocks from Lake Michigan, tuition for his three children at the Lake Forest Country Day School, and a wife who spent her time playing squash at the Bath and Tennis Club and volunteering at the Gordon Community Center.

Having grown up in Lake Forest himself, Charlie had been to birthday parties like this his whole life. His whole life, in fact, had been a parade of such parties: the petting zoos and clowns, then, as he grew older, laser tag, costumes, parties at nature centers, camping trips to go rock climbing, ski trips. Soon he graduated to parties with red cups when parents were out of town. The annual Thanksgiving gathering during the college years started at a bar and carried late into the night at Andrew Burden's house on the Lake where girls lost their clothes and inhibitions, where Charlie's penchant for cocaine didn't stand out.

Lately, though, he hadn't been to any parties without his mother. New Year's Eve at Hobby Higgins's house was the last official party Charlie attended. There he ate aspic, snuck champagne, and found himself smoking cigarettes and sharing a joint with the Hispanic kitchen staff as midnight approached.

Charlie followed the Frosts over to the food where two cooks were preparing hot dogs, hamburgers, and bratwurst over an open grill. Flames surged up as a sweating man in a chef's hat flipped a row of beef patties. Charlie ordered a bratwurst without consulting his stomach. The trick for Charlie these days was to maintain a low dose so that he never got high but never suffered withdrawals. Inevitably, he would overshoot the mark or find himself consuming less than he had wanted and feel queasiness sweep over him like a horrible shadow. He tried to get a reliable supply so that he wouldn't get dope-sick, but it wasn't always possible to be as controlled as he wanted to be. Days like this were dangerous for him.

"How's your mom holding up these days?"

"She's fine."

"I bet she misses your dad. He was a good guy."

"Yeah." His whole life people were saying what a good guy Steven Agreen was. He was, but it was tiresome to hear it all the time about your folks. It made you feel worse for being the cretin you had turned out to be.

"How about you? How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay. It's better for him that he's gone. That was no way to live." He had been a huge disappointment to his father. Charlie could still remember the speech Steven

gave before brain surgery about how proud he was of the whole family. It killed him to consider that his dad was already so screwed up from the tumors that he really thought he was proud of Charlie.

Three small ponies, each with a handler, fussed and smelled. They had an excess of fur covering them, making them look like impressionist, sloppy paintings of themselves. One of the ponies nearly bit a girl's hand as she offered it a sugar cube, its large yellow teeth grazing her palm, frightening her. The girl shrieked and ran off, tearfully.

Leaves fell from the tall trees with gusts of wind so powerful they nudged the moon bounce, tugging at the four stakes holding it to the ground. With the smell of smoke in the air and all the spiraling leaves, Charlie felt nostalgic. He remembered being six years old, Charlotte's age, and feeling infinite, excited. That was when he still pulled the cord on his toy bear. It wore a black pinstriped suit. With each pull of the cord, the bear would alternately say, "You're a sure winner," and "You're going to be President of the United States," and "You're a success." That little captain of industry bear had been a favorite. He remembered he had dreamed of walking on the moon, of making millions, of building a house on Lake Michigan, of becoming something—a doctor, a fireman, a fighter pilot—when he grew up. It was hard for Charlie to account for the years between then and now.

Charlotte came breathless from the moon bounce to see her father. She whispered something in her dad's ear, looking intently at Charlie all the while. "The moon bounce was always my favorite when I was your age." Charlie said clumsily. The girl smiled,

revealing two snaggles on either side of her wide mouth. Charlotte was no bigger than a whisper, her dark hair glowing in the sun, her knobby knees poking out red from under her purple skirt. She had a broad open face with wide blue eyes that reminded Charlie of a husky for their bright icy color. She disappeared a moment later, running back to a knot of children, laughing. Charlotte was only three years younger than Charlie when he started smoking cigarettes. Then, just one year later, at ten years old, he began smoking pot with Tom, his thirteen-year-old cousin.

Charlie had not yet got up the nerve to ask Jerry for a job, though he was sure Jerry knew why he was there.

After taking a gulp of soda, Charlie said, “Look Jerry, I came here with a speech. I was going to tell you how good my numbers are when I trade and how much I can earn. And it’s all true. I was—I am—a great trader. But the truth is, I need a job.”

“I knew why you came here today. I knew it the moment my phone rang and you were calling,” Jerry paused, smiling.

Charlie thought: maybe my mom was right. Maybe I can get a job with Jerry. Networking, he remembered his father saying. It was a heavy word in the Agreen house, an important word. It was applied equally to getting into the right college as it was to getting the right first job. Networking. He felt himself salivate at the prospect of a job. Then, growing more confident, he thought, of course I can get a job. I have all the right connections, and I have a great track record. Of course Jerry wouldn’t have invited me here to refuse me.

“Are you clean now?” Jerry asked, cutting through Charlie’s thoughts, finding his gaze.

Charlie looked down at his hands. He spread them out as wide as he could, the opposite of clenched fists but somehow the same feeling, his skin a fleshy red with white spots that someone had told him were from smoking cigarettes. He wished he could light up a smoke right now. “Well,” Charlie started; he had lied so much it didn’t seem like it should be hard. “I am clean now,” he said, “and I don’t use at work. I won’t.”

“How long are you clean?” Jerry pressed, a shrewd look coming across his face.

It was a different side of Jerry, one that reminded Charlie of his father. Jerry was the sort of man who was everyone’s friend. It was at times hard to imagine that a man as agreeable and easy-going as Jerry could be as wildly successful as he was. It was easy to forget he had hired and fired many men hoping to prove themselves as traders. Though Charlie at one time had been Jerry’s equal in trading success, it was clear Jerry did not let that bygone time cloud his judgment today. Jerry had the necessary business acumen to survive in the heartbreaking world of trading where men always wanted a second chance.

Charlie looked at his watch, flushing with embarrassment, regret. He had used that morning, like he did every morning. What was more, Charlie knew the drug use was only part of what would keep him from getting a job with Jerry, or what stood between him and future success. Charlie’s failures clung to him like the yeasty smell of the bagel shop: the blow-ups in the office, the small percentage of losing trades that were so large they stripped his weekly earnings in a matter of minutes.

“I can’t hire you, Charlie. You know that.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said blithely, wondering how much longer he would have to stay at this ridiculous party. A pony whinnied. He could leave after the birthday cake, he thought.

“Put together thirty days clean and you have a job,” Jerry offered hopefully, as though he were making a simple compromise with one of his children. As though thirty days clean for Charlie was as easy as Charlotte eating all her soup before dessert, or Adam saving \$100 towards his new bicycle, or Lindsey finishing her math homework before watching TV.

“That sounds good,” Charlie said, forcing a smile. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.” For a flash he could envision thirty days from now, when the weather would turn to freezing, when he would sneak cigarettes in the attic, just as he had in high school. He could go back to AA meetings, or just stop calling Blake, his dealer. Then he remembered the fist of marijuana in his sock drawer, and the other things in smaller supply: the oxycodone, the morphine he got from Sandra who volunteered with hospice.

Everyone was called to sing “Happy Birthday,” and Lana said, “Charlotte, time for cake,” standing over the vanilla buttercream princess that glowed with six candles. Just then, a large gust of wind shook the trees, sending leaves high in the air. Another gust swept up, harder this time.

In one magnificent sweep, the moon bounce began to float. It rose from its place on leaf-spattered grass to a throng of gasps and “Ahs” as adults and children alike wondered at how this had happened. Most of the kids had long since moved on to lunch,

leaving an empty, light moon bounce. Lana counted the kids, scanning the small crowd quickly, trying to account for everyone. And she did. Everyone except Charlotte.

Charlotte was having her last bounce alone before cake. She had all but skipped eating lunch to get to bounce more, feeling the spring beneath her feet to catch her each time, sometimes letting her body flop down onto the floor before getting back to her feet, then trying a cartwheel. Her thighs burned from all the jumping, her heart raced, and her breath was fast and excited. At first, she wasn't frightened when the wind picked her up along with the moon bounce.

That first gust only snapped the last rope which secured the castle to the soft cold earth, pushed air beneath the bright red base tubes, then let up easily, both the castle and Charlotte landing with a quick thud. The next push of wind, though, was fiercer and turned the castle around, rotating it counter-clockwise by ninety degrees, sending it skittering across the lawn towards the far end of Jerry's driveway; Lana, Jerry, and Charlie—the only three adults besides the cooks and face-painter—all ran for the thing. Charlotte was crying, “My birthday cake! My birthday cake!” from inside, a tiny rumped lump in the corner, vaguely aware that the candles had been lit and the time for singing had come, but no one could hear her for the sound of wind whipping the folding chairs over, knocking one unicorn centerpiece after another from the tables.

Charlie was faster than he thought he could be and grabbed one of the large red base tubes. He held fast as the thing moved with the wind, at once bobbing and shaking. This is my chance, Charlie thought. Jerry will have to hire me because of this, he'll have to.



The moon bounce kept moving upwards, caught in a powerful draft that spun leaves of yellow and red beneath it in a spiral. The wind pulled it hard, and Charlotte tumbled towards Charlie, face pressed against the black mesh netting. Tears and panic mottled her face, and she was crying now, “Hold on to me,” pawing at the black netting, trapped.

Without wanting to, Charlie remembered vividly the sensation of breathless bouncing, of screaming out “I’m going to be an astronaut! I will not be a cosmonaut!” as all the other kids bounced on, ignoring his proclamations as the words of a crazy man. He couldn’t have been much older than Charlotte, and he was at Kiddie Land with a belly full of jellybeans and soda. To prove his point, he began naming all the constellations in the Northern Hemisphere, then finished his performance with a cry, “I will not be a cosmonaut!” He was fully alive, all the blood rushing through his little body, his feet snapping fast off the moon bounce floor, and the possibilities to fly, whether on an airplane, in a space ship, or with his own winged will, were limitless.

Looking at Charlotte, he knew he could not hold fast. He could not because he was doomed, just like Charlotte was doomed, to float up, up, up, into a crisp autumnal gust of air like hot ashes flying from a bonfire, unsure of where they might land, what they might burn.

Under that October sky, thirty-four-year-old Charlie Agreen knew to his bones that he had already done the greatest things he would ever do. Charlie had made a mistake thinking that if he rose quickly he could secure a permanent place at the top. He

should have known there was nothing to keep him up, just as there had once been nothing to hold him down.

Charlie realized then it was the closest he'd ever be to standing on the moon. Standing there in Jerry's bricked driveway, struggling with the moon bounce, was as close as Charlie would come to being an astronaut, a cosmonaut, a somebody.

Another strong draft tugged at the moon bounce, and Charlie's grasp on the large red tube was soon to give out. He could hear the sheer power of the wind as it pushed against the moon bounce. The big red tube that Charlie held in his hands shook and lifted with the force of the wind, force more than Charlie had to hold on. Charlotte let out a cry. More than anything, more than the job, Charlie wanted to save the girl. Even as he lost his grip he told Charlotte, "I've got you."

## NEXT THINGS

Three months ago when they got the puppy it was to be practice, or so the girl thought, for the next thing. The next thing was far more important to her than any dog could be, and so, when her husband said what breed of puppy he wanted—he always had such strong opinions—she agreed. So merry was she to be planning for the next thing that she worked earnestly to find a breeder. She believed that the sooner they had the puppy, the sooner they would get along to the next thing.

When the girl imagined getting the puppy, which was to be an Australian Cattle Dog, she thought of the one herding dog she knew: Flower. The girl had met that dog at Hope's Landing, and all she knew of it was its keen ability with cattle. From a distance the girl watched the dog, plying her trade with a quiet herd of Belted Galloways, all black save for a white strip down their middles. The girl had imagined what fun they'd have walking a dog like that together.

For his part, her husband would not even talk about the next thing. He would certainly not speak of it by name, and if she raised it, his right hand would come up, telling her, "Stop." His head would turn away, and he would withdraw from the room with a frown. He even warned her, when he saw her up late poring over breeder's websites, excitedly talking about which puppy would be best, "This puppy might be practice, but it doesn't mean that we're going to move in that direction." And he would

even say, “I don’t want to hear you pressuring me about that. Since I met you I told you I wanted two things: to get a dog and to move west. Those are still the only two things I want.”

“Yes,” she had said, “yes, that’s fine,” though all the while, in her secret heart, she believed the next thing was only a matter of time. Yes, once they had the puppy, he would finally be happy, and once he was happy, he would want her to be happy too.

This evening, after a long, trying day with the puppy, the girl’s patience was at its end. Earlier in the afternoon she had taken the little thing out to pee and it had still messed the rug; she tried to get the puppy to eat its food but it refused. Now that it was dinnertime, the puppy alternately whined and barked from its pen, and with each new cry, the girl felt evermore her mistake.

For all her research to find a puppy, she had devoted almost no research towards understanding what kind of breed they were getting and what needs the dog would have once it was in their care. Any warnings she glossed over in her compulsion to move along to the next thing. *It will be fine*, she told herself. *I can prove myself with this dog*. Even though the breed was known for its boundless energy and need for large tracts of land where it could work cattle, the girl focused on how she would impress her husband, how he would see her as capable. But sitting in their kitchen tonight she wondered if it wasn’t all a fantasy that her husband would equate their ability to raise a puppy with the next thing.

This evening she had gotten ahead of herself again, as she often did, worrying about next things. When they were dating, it was the engagement; when they were

engaged, the marriage; once they were married, the house; once the home was secured, furniture. Her husband had admonished her for this many times, asking, “Why can’t you ever be happy with the way things are today? Isn’t this enough for you?”

Tonight at dinner the girl had made a vague reference to opening a savings account “for the future.” When her husband didn’t ask why they needed another savings account, the girl told him, “You know, for our future family,” and smiled.

“I thought we agreed we weren’t going to talk about that,” he said.

“I wasn’t talking about it,” she said, pushing potatoes on her plate, suddenly feeling full from the dinner they were only just starting. She had been making his favorites for weeks. Tonight was roasted chicken, potatoes au gratin, and green beans sautéed in garlic. Her mother’s words echoed in her mind every time she took to preparing dinner: “The way to a man’s heart is straight through his stomach.”

“Am I not enough for you?” he asked, putting his fork down and brusquely wiping his mouth.

“No, that’s not it,” she said.

“Do we have to talk about this once a week?” he asked. “I thought we agreed we wouldn’t talk about it for awhile. Can’t you just be happy with what we have now?”

“I am happy,” she said, though her face was long and her eyes withdrawn. How much longer, she wondered, could they disagree on this topic before the next thing became a question of whether or not she should leave? But the girl cringed at the thought of leaving. For seven years she had loved him. For seven years he told her *not yet* but never *no*.

The word *annulment* came to mind from time to time, casually drifting through her consciousness along with scraps of a grocery list or an email at work to which she need respond. Along with the word always came the image of her cousin, Diana, a beautiful woman with an annulled marriage.

The girl was hardly Catholic. She and her husband had not been “married in Christ,” nor had they ever spoken much of their shared, but distant, faith. Why annulment, then? She hated conceding that this seven years, her *best* seven years, had been a mistake. To annul meant it was invalid from the beginning, and so without mistake.

When she considered her options, she imagined what would happen: if she annulled the marriage, how long would it take to undo seven years, how long before she was ready to meet someone else, and what if he didn’t want children? She calculated a year to leave her husband, a year to be ready to date again, a year before she could be in a serious relationship, another year before she could have a child with the new man. How old would she be by then? Could she have children then? What if there wasn’t another man?

“Are you listening to me?” he asked. “Are you even listening to me? Or are you too busy planning what will come next?”

She didn’t say anything. Then she said, “I’m sorry I brought it up. I don’t want to argue with you about this.” Those words had become automatic for her in response to almost any confrontation with him. The thing was to avoid angering him. When he was angry he could not be persuaded to do what she wanted.

“You don’t want to, but you bring it up every chance you get. I told you before we got married, I told you since we have been married, I have never wavered once on this.”

“Right,” she said, though she didn’t believe him. All along he had said he wanted only two things, and she hadn’t believed him. She thought of how she had one told him she wanted to be a yoga instructor. That had been an off-the-cuff remark. Hadn’t his remark about the dog and moving west been the same? Saying someone only wanted two things in life was just a manner of speaking, she thought.

Lately when their arguments got this way she found herself remembering her time at Hope’s Landing, the farm on the Eastern Shore. Fresh out of law school, the girl had rented the gatehouse of the immense property, swum naked in the brackish water at night by the light of fireflies, walked lazily along the gravel road, pet the snouts of the large cows, gone for afternoon horseback rides with the elderly lady property owner. Flower, the Border collie, had worked the cattle. Yes, when the girl had imagined their puppy, it was Flower she thought of constantly; it was that summer on Hope’s Landing.

The dog whined louder now. The girl began clearing the table, wordlessly scraping food from their plates into the trash. Her husband had taken the dog for a ball throw at a nearby park only an hour earlier, but the dog was anxious and it needed a long walk to settle in for the evening.

Her husband got up to take the dog out, cooing to it as he attached the leash to the collar. The girl set the last dish in the sink, wiped her hands on the damp kitchen towel, and put on her shoes.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“With you,” she said.

He looked at her. “With us?”

Ever since they got the dog “us” took on a new meaning, a meaning that didn’t include the girl. “Yes,” she said.

“I have a lot I could catch up on if you just took the dog.”

“Oh,” she said, “O.K.”

“Great,” he said. “Thanks for doing that. You be good, okay?” he said to the dog.

The girl picked up the leash and called to the dog. Her husband was already settled on the couch with his laptop. She knew without having to look that he was not catching up on work, but instead on a blog reading about upgrades he could make to his car. A year ago the Porsche had been a concession that she thought would make things better between them. How clearly she remembered telling him, “See, I *do* want you to be happy dear.” And then she had asked, “*Now* do you believe me?” and laughed. It had become one of their jokes, but as she fastened the leash to the dog’s collar she thought it wasn’t very funny anymore.

Outside, the girl walked down the steps, almost chasing after the dog as it pulled on the leash. The dog strained to breathe, choking itself against the collar. The girl’s thin, long arm extended as far as it could but still the dog pulled farther ahead.

The dog peed on the grass just outside the town house and sniffed around busily, wagging its tail, happy to be outside at last.



The collar jangled as they walked and the girl patted her pockets for the treat bag and the flashlight, but they were already at the corner, it was too late to turn back. The dog sat at the corner, but when the girl did not produce a treat for the dog, it barked at her in a high-pitched, insistent way, and began to jump for the leash, then for the girl's hands, its teeth bared.

A small drop of blood rose to her hand, forming on the surface, like it had so many times in these past months, her hands covered in scabs. The dog was, after all, a puppy, still with its milk teeth.

Once across the street the dog began sniffing the grass, the shrubs, and the bases of trees. When the leash was slack the girl let out a sigh and her shoulders relaxed.

As one car passed the dog tracked the headlights with her eyes first, then her head, then, just as the car moved past, the dog's body animated to follow it, barking wildly. The girl tried to get the dog to sit.

The girl needed the dog to be nice on this walk. The girl needed to clear her head and walking would do the trick.

Flower had been a good dog. After law school, she had worked for a judge near Hope's Landing. It was a humble clerkship but an opportunity, as she would only work banker's hours, to finally have time to devote to painting. Once settled there, she bought one canvas, convinced she would begin painting that very weekend, but she couldn't bring herself to do it, feeling ridiculous for having had the idea of being both a lawyer and a painter when she saw in her college alumni magazine that all of her classmates had devoted themselves to one vocation. Instead she sketched again and again the Belted

Galloways, hesitating to render them in anything more than pencil. The weeks passed like throat-clearings.

She had all she needed to make a beginning, but told herself each week that on the weekend she would buy brushes from the art supply store across the bridge. Each week had its way of folding into the next until finally, when she found herself gorging on sushi at a place just a few doors from the art store, it was nine o'clock on a Saturday night and the store had been closed for hours. Each night the girl returned to the gatehouse, each night she saw the canvas gathering dust in the corner.

The girl wished the dog would be nice, but instead the dog began barking. Before the girl could get a better grip, the leash slipped from her hand.

Now, free of its leash, the dog ran with exuberance towards a bicyclist who pedaled silently on, a red light blinking on his back, carving an arc out of the pavement as he turned. Instinctively the dog began nipping at the rear wheel of the bike. The girl called the dog's name repeatedly, begging it to come, knowing it was useless. Her heart pounded and sweat covered her palms, her mouth dried immediately. She ran after the dog but could not get hold of the leash. Then suddenly she was holding the leash, the dog still barking and straining, the cyclist pedaling away without leaving the girl a moment to apologize.

The dog panted as the girl talked to it. "You have to come when I call you," she insisted. "You can't chase bicycles." For the dog the time off the leash was freedom, and the look of victory was evident on the dog's face, its eyes glazed from the rush.

The air was cool and cooling, and they walked down the bike path that divided the neighborhood of townhouses made for young couples and empty nesters from the neighborhood of large family homes. Tonight she would leave the bedroom window open, she thought. It was the sort of night for that, an early spring night when it was not yet safe to leave plants outside, when a sweater was required. This was the kind of weather she remembered lasting all year when she'd lived on Hope's Landing. On a night like this she would have read *Leaves of Grass* aloud to herself. She would have baked fresh chocolate chip cookies and eaten them outside, under the stars, chocolate ringing her mouth.

A canopy of new growth, making it darker than the sidewalk, shaded the bike path. The girl walked tentatively, the dog pulled them onwards, occasionally stopping to smell in a thicket. Then, suddenly, the girl heard footsteps and the dog charged and barked, jumping on a woman.

"I'm sorry," said the girl, pulling the dog off, but the woman had already passed, muttering, "Get control of your dog." To the dog the girl said, "Come on now, there's no need for that," but the dog's tail was again wagging, and as they emerged from the darkness of the path to the open street, its eyes met the girl's without understanding.

All the homes in this neighborhood were new, each bigger than the last, with imposing columns, huge doors, great windows, situated on bald, recently cleared land. The homes had been built quickly and didn't have character. These homes were so massive ordinary furniture looked tiny inside them.

In this neighborhood there were lights on inside all the houses, bicycles left on the lawn along with plastic bats, badminton rackets, and soccer balls. It was a neighborhood for families. The girl looked inside the illuminated homes. They reminded her of a doll's house.

The dog picked up something and began chewing on it. The girl knew she must get it from the dog's mouth, but didn't have treats to persuade the dog. The dog's jaw was strong and as she secured the collar with her left hand and began to probe with her right she felt what the dog was eating: Styrofoam. "Drop it," she said, as she pried at the jaw. In an instant, the girl thought she might get the thing out, then shrieked in pain when the dog clamped down on her thumb.

"Then eat the Styrofoam," she said to the dog.

A woman and man were approaching from a half block ahead. The girl crossed to the other side of the street. They pushed a stroller, talking quietly; she could see on their faces the sort of happiness she had once believed came with marriage.

As the girl passed them she raised her left hand to wave and called to them, "Beautiful night," and the dog began barking and lunging. The couple smiled and waved back. The wife said, "Quite a lot of personality, eh?"

"A pistol," the girl said and laughed.

The girl couldn't have imagined how the traits necessary for herding would manifest in a dog raised in a townhouse without room to run. Her husband claimed they were wonderful dogs, intelligent and wily. "Not overly obedient like German Shepherds," he said. Neither of them knew the dog would chew up furniture, bang its head through the

garage drywall in pursuit of a tennis ball, destroy its own crate, attempt to herd cars, trucks, busses, bicycles, children, strollers, other dogs, the list went on. Neither of them knew the dog would nip at them while they walked her, nip at their legs while they sat watching television, nip at their hands when attention was needed. Neither of them knew, but especially not the girl.

After three months of training, the dog still didn't have the hang of its leash. Commands were ignored unless backed up by a treat. The girl and the dog walked on. The dog pulled the girl along, gasping at the end of the leash, begging the girl to go faster. The girl tried to catch up to the dog, hoping she could wrest some control back from the dog, but the girl only managed to stumble on an uneven slab of sidewalk.

The girl began to feel hungry and feeling hungry made her feel weak. What the dog needed was a long walk, longer than anything the girl could give to her. The girl could see that even after this walk tonight, even if they walked many more miles, in the morning it would start all over again.

Finally their walk led them to a two-lane highway. The road ended here in a T.

Across the highway was a great open field bound by a split-rail fence. The girl could almost smell the sweet musk from where she stood. The field was as untouched as a stretch of Midwestern prairie. Tall grass folded over itself. There was a small house at the farthest corner of the field, just next to a dark tree line.

They stood at the edge of the highway. No cars drove by. For a moment the dog was quiet at her side. She looked down at the dog, and a pleasing warmth swept over the girl. "Oh baby," she whispered. "There's a good dog."

The dog broke her gaze. Its right ear twitched, listening to a distant sound. The girl heard it then: a truck's engine roaring up the hill towards them, though still out of sight. The dog's whole body was tense in anticipation of the approaching truck.

The girl tried to imagine returning to her house and her husband for another evening like those that had collected around them. She would settle in with her book on the couch while he stared into the glow of his laptop. She would push against him and he would ignore her, turning his attention to the dog. She would excuse herself to get ready for bed, though by the time she was out of the shower the bedroom lights would be off, and he would already be asleep. The dog might cry or bark from its crate a few times into the night, and they would do as their training book told them and ignore it. But all the while, she would clench her fists so tight her nails would make half-moon marks on her palms.

As the truck crested the hill, it was easier than she thought it would be to let go of the leash. Just like that, the dog bolted into the highway, barking and chasing after the eighteen-wheeler. The dog ran beneath the huge trailer, emerging on the other side unscathed. The girl panicked for an instant, terrified of what she had done.

She wasn't prepared for what she saw: in the field, barely visible but for their white middles, was a small herd of Belted Galloways. Without a beat the dog charged after the cattle. The dog was fearless, just as Flower had been, as the girl had always hoped her dog would be. The cattle trampled the ground. They made loud complaints. As the herd drew deeper into the prairie, the only sign of the dog became a distant barking.

“Come,” she cried. “Come!” No matter how emphatic her cries, the girl knew the dog would not come. Now, it was so dark she wasn’t sure if she could still see the field or if she was only remembering what she had seen. Still, she called to the dog, “Come, come.”

## COLLATERAL

The man looked all around him before he put the note on the windshield of the blue car. Good, no one saw him. Beads of sweat gathered on his hairless upper lip, he heard the sound of his own footsteps as though they were someone else's as he walked away and checked his suit breast pocket, cool and smooth, for his handkerchief.

It was six o'clock in the morning and he tucked into a nearby café. He only had small money left at the house for groceries and pocket money for his wife. The rest was gone. He wanted a hard drink, but he needed to focus if he was going to make it.

He ordered espresso and a croissant, what everyone else was having. The croissant flaked all over his shirt and the espresso left his mouth silty. He took up a newspaper from the bar. His country's despotic leader had made headlines again with ravings over the West and nuclear brinkmanship. He coughed uneasily. His whole life he had been groomed to be one of his country's pride. To think he had once believed diplomacy was important work.

It hadn't taken long, once at his first overseas post, to see past the party line and recognize his work was more or less pointless, that he only did it because it afforded him and his wife a chance to live away from the delusional shores of his home, so he could send money back to their parents and their daughter.



His stomach turned. His wife didn't yet understand the system. There was a vague notion of their promise to return, their promise to their country, their promise, most of all, to the girl. All that had been left unsaid before they departed. He thought now, as the situation was exigent, what he had done wrong had been to inadequately prepare his wife for the consequences that would adhere if they didn't return. He hadn't prepared her for the system of collateral.

At the time of their departure much had been said of the need, for example, for the girl to be in her home country, to stay with what was familiar. Of course, her grandparents played an important role in her life. And then there were the diplomatic receptions and parties, all the entertaining. It would be exciting for his wife, but impossible, he was afraid, for her to manage with a small child underfoot.

"Couldn't we bring my mother?" she'd asked. He met the innocence of her question with all the preparation and training he had received.

"What about your father?" he had said with sincerity, "He'd be lost without her." She caught his eye in the mirror, gave him an easy, trusting, smile. He had done his job, managed to convince her the need for leaving the child behind was innocent. He was protecting her from unnecessary worry. Even then, not knowing what was to come, it made him feel vertigo.

In the time since he lost the money he walked down the cobble-stoned streets again and again in his mind, forever stubbing his toe in the same spots. He replayed the night he met Igor, the Russian: the snow in the square, how jolly and sweet it had looked as he stepped out of the expensive mussels restaurant with a full belly and walked in his

tuxedo to the casino; the moment when he said in his tentative French “*Tous sur le numero sept,*” and the wild sound of the wheel turning, the ball skittering across it.

That first night he won and won and won. His suit disheveled, his tie askew, his whole person smelling of cigarettes, he stumbled home light-headed on the slippery snow-covered streets. His spirits soared the whole way. His wife would be worried but he could calm her with the good news of all his winnings.

The second time he went was a month later. He put on the tuxedo. The casino was near to the opera house in an old, rich part of town. He told his wife he was going to see an opera with Igor. She pouted for a moment; disappointed she couldn't join him. He walked all the way to the opera house, where he saw Igor.

Igor was sloppy and heavy and drank too much. He always smelled of cigarettes and pickled fish, his eyes were always bloodshot, and his nose always blotchy red. Igor wanted to get privileged information from the man about his country's positions on various issues of diplomatic import, but he had been warned of just such advances, so he did what he had been taught to do: he exploited Igor for his money but never returned the favor with information.

They walked through the doors, polished brass bright and cold, and through the heavy red velvet curtains that gave way to the Imperial Room. He had studied the brochure about the casino since visiting a month ago, since his big win. He knew this was the Imperial Room, for example, and he knew that Napoleon had visited here, along with dozens of other famous world leaders. The power in this room was palpable. It trumped

the sense of power in the *Salon des Delegues* where he smoked cigarettes and drank espresso with representatives from all over the globe.

Over the months he came to say that Igor was helping him with his country's bilateral relationship with the Swiss. He would explain to his wife and his colleagues that, "The Russian can open doors," or "The Russian introduced me to so-and-so," and they would nod with understanding.

After a few months of intermittent meetings at the casino where Igor pressed the man and the man made promises of "maybe later," Igor showed up one night empty-handed and the man had to change his own money for the chips. By the time Igor caught on the man had grown to love the casino.

At the casino the world was alive. The carpets were bright red and the waitresses were young and beautiful and wore black and white uniforms and called him "Sir." It was like a movie, being at the casino: the brass chandeliers hanging and sparkling, and the clattering of the ball on the wheel, the quiet thunder of dice rolling across felt. Glasses clinked together, lined up next to one another on silver trays, chips made a satisfying clack against one another as they moved from pile to pile, your chips are mine, my chips are yours. The green of the felt contrasted with the black and white and red of the chips, the rings on them denoting different amounts, 50, 100, 500, 1,000.

Never mind that it was forbidden for a diplomat to gamble. Of course, his country forbade diplomats from all kinds of things he knew his predecessor and colleagues had done and were presently doing. They all had their vices: none of them sent back the money they were supposed to from their side-businesses; everyone smoked the cigarettes

they imported and no one charged them off his account; he had seen his boss in a compromising position with the cleaning woman; his predecessor had left early for drinking too much.

Each of them, in his way, blew off steam and allowed the smaller larcenies in his heart to bloom. This was what kept them from falling prey to the bigger larceny, the biggest one of all, which was for each of them the same. They had seen past the curtain and knew now precisely how insane and pathetic their leader was, that their mission was a joke. They knew any sacrifice they made was not for their country but for their own benefit. They worked now to live away from the beleaguered capital, so that their daughters and sons might one day know the world away from their home.

Before he knew it he was there every night, at the table, going for the magic. He borrowed all the money in his wife's vacation jar; he took all the money from the register at his side business. He borrowed from his friend. He took some small money from Igor that he promised to pay him or tell him one of his country's negotiating positions before the next plenary session.

Then one day at the office he was left all alone to finish writing up a report to send back to the capital. He knew no one would be back for the rest of the day. It was the beginning of a long holiday weekend. They had enough money for groceries but nothing more for that weekend, and they wouldn't have any sales at the shop since most shops were closed for the holiday.

He could win the money back. He would return the money to the safe on Monday, while everyone was still on holiday, and finish up his report. He looked at his suit: rumpled. It was a long time since he'd worn his tuxedo to the casino.

Three thousand Euro was the most he ever changed at the casino. Last night the table had been hot. That was why he lost—he was at the wrong table last night. There were patterns to things like this. There was a pattern to when a table was hot and when it was not, and there was a rhythm to the casino. The Imperial Room would be hot tonight, the next night it would be the quietest room in the place. The key was to see the patterns and stay ahead of them. They were almost elliptical, almost the sort of thing you couldn't discern if you looked at them straight on. Better to see them from the corner of your eyes. That was the key, to not stare directly and look for a pattern, but to sense it.

For those first moments when he sat down at the table and set his pile of chips in front of him, feeling their heft and substance, he felt sure he would win tonight. He got that same feeling every time he started off an evening: palms and fingers almost itching, as though there was electricity in them, anxious to get started, his mouth watering for a vodka martini, his first inhale of a cigarette in the casino thrilling, as it filled his lungs with excitement.

He was sure the number tonight was seven. Or maybe it was three. He changed three thousand Euros. That might be significant. But it seemed too direct. It can never be that direct, he reasoned. It just doesn't work that way. The math of luck is not basic, it is quadratic equations. So three doesn't mean three. Three means something else entirely. If you think it's three, you're wrong because you're thinking. It's seven.

To start off slow was to be a fish and tonight he needed to break his fish streak and bet like a whale. Before he knew what he was doing he instinctively moved his chips forward and heard himself say, "*Tous sur le numero sept.*"

The hook carried the chips to the center of the table and in fewer than sixty seconds all of the money was gone.

His hand shook. He finished a glass of water, reread the first sentence of a newspaper article again and again in French. He went to the W.C., a wood-paneled room with a Turkish toilet, the kind of W.C. that belonged on a small boat.

When, at last, it was time, he walked to the park. He sat on the bench and waited. At length, he saw the American. The American offered only a slight nod; the man stood up, noticing the wrinkles in his pants with some embarrassment. The American said to meet him at a hotel three blocks from the park and handed him a plastic key card wrapped in a piece of paper with the number 433 written on it.

The American's name was Kyle Smith. Before he came here he was told Americans were his enemy. He was told Americans were stupid and fat and selfish. But one look at Kyle disabused him of yet another of the litany of lies he had been told. To think he had ever considered this man his opponent was laughable. The man bested him in every category.

That was the heartbreak of it all: he was sent with little money on what amounted to a fool's errand, to relay the completely outlandish desires and views of his leader. Yet it was the only way out of the country, so he did it. Now, though, he wished he'd stayed put like his brother, perhaps chasing a posting with the Ministry of Finance.

“You’ll see,” his brother had warned him, having traveled out of their home country to negotiate contracts with neighbors for fuel, “we are the laughingstock. You’d be better off staying put. You’ll not be happy to learn who we really are.”

In contrast, Kyle Smith was always clear-eyed and well rested, he was strong and calm, the sort of man who ran five miles every morning before most people were awake. His smile was American: straight, perfect teeth.

But today Kyle did not smile or take pleasure. He had been right to choose a man who had previously spent time in Moscow and Beijing, places of considerable diplomatic gravitas. He knew how to handle a person in a predicament. He was quiet and sure.

“I received your note,” Kyle said. “I have the money you need,” he said, “but before you go to replace it, can you tell me a few things?”

The man nodded, looking away.

“How long ago did you take the money from the safe?”

His mouth was dry and as he parted his lips to speak he could feel his tongue stuck to the roof. “Three days ago,” he said.

“Did anyone see you take it?”

“No.”

“Who else has access to the safe?”

“My boss, the other representatives,” he trailed off. Who else did have access? He wasn’t sure. He thought his boss was fooling around with the cleaning lady. Hadn’t he seen her opening the safe once? And what about the camera? The recorder only saved four hours’ worth of film, but what if he was caught taking the money?

“What I am trying to ascertain,” Kyle said patiently, but firmly, “is whether you can replace the money safely or if you cannot.”

“I’m afraid,” he said, voice cracking, “I cannot.”

“I see. Do they already know that you took the money?”

“No, but I did not go into work today.”

“And is there no plausible reason for you to be gone?”

“My wife called for me, saying I am sick, but if they check the safe and find the money is gone, then they’ll know.”

Kyle took a drink of water. “Please,” he said. With shaky hands, the man struggled to open a bottle as it slipped in his sweating palms. Kyle took it from him and broke the seal easily, setting the bottle down in front of him.

Kyle took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair, crossing his leg, revealing a dark sock and leather shoes supple such as the man had never seen. “I am sure you have already considered what comes next. I can help you and your wife but I cannot make any promises about whomever you left behind. Your daughter, I presume?”

The man looked down at his lap. Yes, his daughter. He nodded but did not speak. He took another drink of the water. When they left she was just learning to play the violin. She liked to carry the little black case with her everywhere she went, and had cried more when she couldn’t take it in the car to drive her parents to the airport than she cried when kissing them good-bye.

“We do not have a mechanism for retrieving people left behind. We will do the best we can but if you do this, you may never see her again. Do you understand?”



The man nodded again.

“We have to get you out of here before they begin looking for you. Once they come to your apartment it will be too late. You understand that this will be permanent? You will never go back to your country. We cannot let you.”

The man nodded again. He swept his gray handkerchief over his forehead. Tears began to fall from his eyes onto his lap. The room was quiet. He found that once across the precipice of his emotion he could not collect himself.

“You are doing what is best,” Kyle said. “There aren’t any good options, but this is what is best.”

He was right. If he didn’t leave now, he would be called back to the capitol for “consultations.” They would interrogate him about the money. Gambling, for all their leaders did it, flying to Las Vegas and blowing untold millions in his country’s paltry capital, was strictly forbidden in his work.

“If we don’t get you and your wife out now, it will be harder. They will begin looking for you soon.”

The man nodded.

“You must go to your apartment and get your wife. Keep her calm. Do not tell her what you are doing; just ask her to come with you. We will have a driver pick you up and take you to the airport. He works for the Swiss but is a friend of ours. He will have the papers you need: passports, plane tickets. Do not bring any baggage to check, bring only what you can carry.”

The man was silent.

“I will see you in America. I am leaving today, too, but on a different flight.”

The man had questions swimming in his head but now was not the time to appear weak to Kyle Smith. He did not want to seem stupid. He wanted Kyle Smith to know he was not making a mistake by helping him. So he nodded.

“You must leave now. The car will be at your apartment in an hour. Here’s some money. Buy your wife some flowers and tell her you have a great surprise for her. Don’t tell her where you’re going. Say it’s a special trip. She doesn’t need to know what your errand is.”

The man was trapped in his own inability to tell her of their troubles anyway, and Kyle’s words were a salve to him. Good, he needn’t tell her what had happened. He was sparing her from worry, he told himself.

Out on the street the man threw up in front of a dry cleaner. She was dark, Portuguese, like almost all the dry cleaners here. She looked at him, shook her head, and walked back into the store, the jingle of the bells beating against the glass door behind her. “*Désolé*,” he called to her.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “*Désolé*,” the word rang in his ears. Sorry. He choked for a moment on his own emotion. Now, though, he must find a florist if they were going to get out in time.

## INSTANT, PAINLESS

From the beginning there must have been signs that something was wrong. The trouble was, he was blind to her faults and saw only his own. She was skittish around people, but could he blame her, when he was shy himself? Perhaps, like him, she just needed time to warm up to people. When she growled at children he thought she was right for her contempt: he too found children to be threatening, unpredictable.

The problem was compounded because she was smart. She was the first to pick up a new command in obedience class, making him brim with pride. She learned all the commands so quickly that before long he trusted her off-leash. He took such delight in calling her name, commanding: “Sadie, come!” and watching her turn from whatever she was doing to rush to him, grinning as she came, vacuuming the treat from his hand, tail wagging, licking his chin as he turned away from all her effortless kisses.

There were incidents that gave him pause: at the field where they played fetch she’d run up to a strange man, viciously barking and jumping on him, ignoring when he called to her. The man, an enormous, six-foot obesity, had been kindly enough. Even still, he could have been less lucky, so he put her back on her leash, chastened.

Still, Sadie gave him an excuse to talk to his neighbors. Since getting her he had learned the names of all the dogs and their owners: Discus the Golden Retriever and her tall, thin owner Jackie; Bounce and Beacon, the Jack Russell Terriers and their human,

Jack; Stella the hefty English Bulldog and Chris, her soft-spoken, gentle custodian; Sasha the overweight pug and Lucille, her petite owner. Since Elizabeth moved out the friendly hellos and waves from across the street passed as human contact. It felt like too many blessings when neighbors waved at him from their barbeques and porches.

By the time she was six months old the incidents began to develop into a pattern. His confidence in her began to erode as Sadie again and again behaved aggressively. He'd tell her on walks, "You have to be good for me," but he excused her bad behavior with his own inability to communicate with her.

He was pained every time new instances of Sadie's aggression arose. Each one seemed different and justified. The kid ran up to her, the door opened suddenly, the guy was staring right at her, they were walking behind us for blocks, she was merely being protective. He had begun to tally the offenses, but couldn't make sense of them: he couldn't assess whether they warranted concern. He redoubled his training efforts, working with her on each walk, leashing her up in the house, obsessively drilling commands, spending more and more money on treats, reading books, taking her weekly to the vet to acclimatize her to the office, taking her to the park and practicing meeting people, taking her to the dog park every day, and doggy day care, and hiring walkers, and on and on until he started looking at houses in the country, thinking of changing jobs, thinking of all the things he could do for her, nothing was enough. She barked uncontrollably still, and any hope of progress was usually tempered by a new outburst.

The first two people Sadie bit were barely hurt. Her teeth grazed a woman's hand, snagging her coat before he pulled sharply on her leash, heart pounding, yelling, "No!" to

her. He was relieved when the woman kept walking, shaken but not angry, shaking her head as she passed into the chilly November night. Next she nipped a man's leg as he ran past when they were walking early one morning in the park. "Jesus," the man said, "get your dog under control," but he did not stop running. Again, the rush of relief, the sweat flush of heat through his body, he whispered to her that she didn't need to be afraid because he would protect her.

On the day that it finally happened, they were only a block from the condo. She was on the leash and he had treats at the ready. It was a quiet, lazy evening in late summer. Most of the neighborhood had emptied, everyone on vacation at the beach. He thought he might take Sadie to the beach over the weekend. Maybe they could even camp someplace near the water. In his airtight life of work-dog-home such breaks gave him an almost dizzying shot of oxygen.

"Say-dee, Say-dee," sang a girl's voice from behind. He knew it was Olivia, the little girl who lived across the street. Her parents—Mary and Tom? was it?—had a large, old Rhodesian Ridgeback named Goose. He smiled to himself; Sadie liked Goose and had always been sweet with Olivia. For all her quirks, she had her favorite people and dogs and could be trusted with them, at least. Sadie wagged her tail, looking up at him with her impressionable brown eyes.

And then, just as the girl was about to pass them, Sadie sprang up so fast, mouthing the girl's jaw. In that moment, as he reflexively tugged her back, he hoped she had only licked the girl's face. But just as quickly as her paws were planted back on the ground he saw the garish red blood, almost beautiful against the girl's crisp pink dress.

Then all he knew was abstract: Olivia, blood running down her neck, her face red from screaming, tears streaming down, her cries endless. The dog, moments ago vicious, now looked dumbly innocent. Her tail wagged, she was conciliatory. Her eyes gazing at him asked, "What did I do, boss?" She whined, craning to kiss the girl, tail wagging an apology. "So, so sorry," she seemed to say, "oh, I didn't know, so, so sorry."

In his mind he heard the dog's tongue lapping at his cheek as though amplified, and the sound of his heartbeat. He could faintly hear the mother soothing Olivia, the father talking to him, angry. He scooped up the dog. She licked his face. She struggled to get free, her tail hitting his arms. He stood mute.

Then there was an ambulance, there was exchanging of information, he felt his cell phone in his pocket, there was a call to the insurance company, animal control. He watched it all happen. The vet was called. He called the vet, but it seemed someone else did the dialing, the talking. The dog was sedated. He sedated her with the pills he procured from the pharmacy, as prescribed by the vet, but in his mind he watched all this happen. She should be evaluated in the morning, the vet said. In the night he wondered what would happen. He worried they would sue. He worried they would demand she be put down. In his sleeplessness he thought of losing her and that was too impossible to bear. He was willing to do anything to keep her.

At the vet's office, he heard what he had been dreading: "I know this is hard to hear, and certainly no dog owner goes into this relationship expecting this to happen. I'm so sorry, but you should seriously consider putting her down."

"I can't do that," he said.

The vet looked at the dog again. She had to be muzzled to go to the vet—that wasn't new, she had snarled at the vet since she was small. "She's a sweet dog, but she was very poorly bred. You can't fight genetics."

"If you could just see her with me at the park, the way she goes for a tennis ball or listens to me when I call her. It's just the leash makes her so aggressive."

The vet washed her hands in the small, stainless sink in the room. The visit was over. "Well," she said as she dried her hands, "I sure hope you can sort it out."

For several months while he awaited a lawsuit he hired another dog trainer. He hired a dog psychiatrist. He began giving Sadie heavy doses of prescription drugs. Anti-anxiety, anti-depressants, so many different types of drugs at different times of day, it was necessary for him to draw up a chart and check off each pill. In an effort to keep her, he began taking trips to the dog park early in the morning to avoid other people. He muzzled her every time they left the condo, even if for a quick pee at eleven o'clock at night.

He began looking online at houses in the country. He asked his parents if they could take her. He put a call in to old friend who rescued dogs, but she never called him back.

The obedience trainer suggested an animal refuge in Texas and his hope rose. For an initial donation of three thousand dollars he could send her, and his continuing donations would support her thereafter. He imagined plenty of dogs, acres of space to play, handlers throwing tennis balls and Frisbees all day.

The website, cheery though it aimed to be, told a different story. The dogs lived in runs made from cinder blocks and chain link fence. They were left all day outdoors alone. They were fed by “keepers,” they were open for visiting hours. It was a prison; the animals there were better off dead, he concluded as he slammed shut his laptop, muzzled her brusquely, and took her out for a long walk.

Short of moving to a new state and buying a large property they were out of options. True, he’d always wanted to move someplace rural. But it was hard to justify without a job or any clear idea of where they could go where she wouldn’t be afraid. Even at his parents’ home in rural Maine he was confronted with her constant anxiety around people. She chased them around their own house, nipped his mother more than a few times, barked incessantly when his father talked. To unfamiliar people her behavior was frightful.

Still, she was so good on some walks: barely reacting to anyone they passed, looking up to him for a treat every now and again, scampering playfully across freshly laid mulch, not pulling on her leash at all. He often lamented that if she’d been any other dog she could be trusted completely off-leash after all the training they’d done together. Just last week he’d taught her how to “roll over” and he had delighted at seeing her sweet, freckled belly. It was endearing that she only ever rolled to the left.

One evening, when they returned from a walk, there was an email from a woman who owned a small farm two hours away. She had rescued a dog nine months ago of the same breed as Sadie. Now that he was settled in, she was ready for another. She thought Sadie would make a great match for her dog.



He took the very next day off work and drove out to the farm. As he pulled up the long driveway, lined with trees, he saw a clearing with a small white farmhouse. It must have been one hundred years old, and the way the light hit the metal roof, he knew it was the place for Sadie. Behind the house a split rail fence enclosed two horses, one white, one chestnut brown. Chickens scratched for bugs and worms around the house. Before parking he wished he could stay in this place with Sadie.

Sadie was exhilarated by the tall grass of the country and seemed her gentlest self with all this land and no leash. The woman came out of the house and walked up slowly, gravel crunching under her feet. She introduced herself to him and ignored Sadie who sniffed everything, tail wagging as things met her approval. They talked a little, he explained how they came to be in this position, he explained about Sadie, what he had been telling countless people for months: she's fine off-leash, she's usually indifferent to other dogs, she's wonderful, she's very quirky, she bites.

The woman was quiet but unafraid, having grown up around dogs and livestock. She was a true country girl. Sadie sniffed her and wagged her tail, then turned her interest to another patch of grass. Confident Sadie was settled enough, the woman brought her dog outside. He was huge: almost three times the size of Sadie, with a boxy head like a pit bull or Rottweiler. At first the dog was interested in smelling and greeting him, then the dog turned his attention to Sadie. She was afraid, tucking her tail under, trying to beg him off.

Then, it wasn't clear what happened, but suddenly there was a snarling sound and Sadie was pinned to the ground, emitting her three-alarm fire scream, desperate, and the

other dog wouldn't let off. The dog growled viciously. He and the woman sprung to action to pry the dogs apart.

Once her dog was safely inside they talked it over. They concluded it would be impossible to trust them alone together, and since the woman worked days, well, she was so sorry. He said, "I understand. Thank you for thinking of us."

"You'll find a place," she said.

"Thanks," he said, and he turned to Sadie, "come on girl, let's go. Into the car," he said, the wind out of his sails.

In so many categories of his life his decisions seemed to be much less decisions as they were inevitabilities, eventualities. Elizabeth had often criticized him for being too passive. "I am lusty for life," she had said once, in the midst of an argument over what came next for them, "and what about you?" she asked. It always seemed a betrayal when she asked him hard questions. He was ambivalent, he thought. Which was why he was in the job he currently held: his former boss recommended him to a manager from a different division, and that manager created a job for him. He didn't apply, never interviewed, just walked in and sat down at his new desk. He stayed in the condo Elizabeth had found for them. He didn't especially like it, but it was an easy commute and it suited him well enough. In fact, the only major decisions he could recall had all been reversed or wrong for one reason or another: buying his car (which he had to return because it was a lemon), marrying Elizabeth (she left), and now Sadie.

Two days after the failed visit to the woman's farm, he was sitting on the sofa, drinking a beer, and petting Sadie while he looked online for jobs in rural New

Hampshire. He and Elizabeth had talked about moving north before they were married. She loved his parents' house and the northeast, she said she wanted to quit her job as a lawyer and teach yoga. When she admitted this to him, as she took a watery sip of her mojito on their first date, he thought he could really see himself with her. He'd always felt he was set on a track but hearing her talk about yoga made a part of him hum with the excitement he felt as a child before heading out to ski on a perfect morning of fresh snow.

He sat in the glow of his laptop, the condo dark around him. Sadie sighed. He took a last pull from his empty beer. He looked at the clock in the right corner of the laptop: after eleven on a Thursday. He had to take Sadie out one last time for the night, then work early tomorrow. In the four hours he had searched for jobs he had found nothing suitable. He was thirty-seven, too old to start over.

"Fine," he said, looking at her. She wagged her tail, hoping for a treat. He thought he could at least be man enough to make the decision about Sadie.

After that it only took a few calls to make the arrangements. He would have a vet make a house call for the procedure. He would pay extra to have her ashes returned to him.

He filled the prescription for a heavy sedative. Early on the morning it was to happen, he took her to a favorite park where an inlet of the Potomac flowed slowly, the spot where she first swam. He threw the tennis ball for her many, many times. Carrying it in her teeth, water pooling in and out of her mouth, she pointed herself to him. He loved seeing her come back to him every time.

When they got home he gave her the sedatives in several pieces of cheese. Her mouth watered and she took such care in taking the cheese from his palm.

She was winded from the sedative so that when the man arrived with a toolbox and a briefcase to do the thing, she clumsily rushed to the door, breathless, tongue hanging out. She was like a bad drunk, and the gasping barks were terrible, the sort of thing you wished you could forget hearing, the sort of thing that echoed for a long time in your mind.

The vet was trim and taller than him, very fit, muscles showing easily as he set up the toolbox on the floor. He explained what would happen as he had done on the phone. First he'd administer anesthesia that would cause her to go unconscious. She would lie down after that shot. Once she was unconscious he would administer the euthanizing drug. Her heart and breathing would slow to a stop. It would be painless, he assured him. He warned she would be upset with the first shot, but after that, totally painless.

He braced her against his body as the vet instructed. She was totally tense, panicked, tail under her legs, breaths coming sharp and labored. With the stick of the needle and flush of injection she howled. Tears sprung to his eyes, burning as he followed her running, disoriented, to the bedroom.

The dog couldn't walk right, her movements had the weight and incoordination of a child with cerebral palsy, and she found a corner, between the bed and the closet, where she circled. She was unable to settle, but each step was more difficult, her head wagging, her tail completely limp. Her mouth was an exaggerated version of itself, open wide, her

tongue protruding more and more, until finally she had the strange appearance of a dumb, poorly executed taxidermy, her tongue out in permanent anticipation of licking her nose.

The vet knocked on the door. "All set for me?" he asked.

"Yes."

He carried the dog into the living room where the vet had placed a cheap vinyl tablecloth, its soft, white side up, in the middle of the rug. He knelt on the floor to place her in the middle of the cloth. He pet her head.

The vet had to give her two injections of the euthanizing drug. It was torture to watch the vet fumble with the needle. In the final moments he had set his head next to hers, unable to hear her last breaths. Through his tears something gold caught his eye far back under the sofa, against the wall.

When it was finally done he asked the vet for a few minutes alone and said his goodbyes to the dog, though she was already gone. The landlocked channel between his heart and mouth opened for a moment and he found himself uttering to her sweet things he had longed to say to people.

The vet left with the dog duct taped in the vinyl tablecloth. He didn't know what to do with himself. Then he remembered the gold shine under the sofa and wondered what he might find back there.

After Elizabeth left she only called a few times, usually to talk about signing paper work for the divorce. Once, though, she'd called to ask if he'd seen an earring she couldn't find. It wasn't valuable, he knew that, having spent only \$80 on the pair, but it was a favorite of hers. It was a small gold leaf on a gold French wire with a tiny cubic

zirconia on one side of the leaf like a dewdrop. He'd given the earrings to her for Christmas two years before they split and she'd worn them almost constantly until the three months before she moved out.

It had touched him to know she still wanted to wear the earrings, though it pained him to think of her wearing them without him. At the time, he'd told her he'd look, but was soon distracted by some other thing—Sadie needed to be let out, or the deliveryman came with Chinese food—and he soon forgot to look. It was easier then to forget things like the earrings than it was to remember the way she looked in them at Christmas.

But here it was after all, not lost altogether. He plucked it up. He blew off the bits of fur and dust that clung to it.

He looked at the clock: it was seven in the evening on a Sunday. On Sunday evenings when they were newlywed, they had gone to a yoga class together and then after, gone out for Indian food.

Her phone rang three times, and he inhaled, preparing to leave a message, when she answered.

“Elizabeth?” he said, voice cracking. His normal poverty of words was replaced with a throat full of things to say to her. He started with the earring.

## AURORA BOREALIS

On Friday morning Steven Agreen woke up at 5:30, as he did everyday, and made his round to get the *Sun Times* and the *Tribune* from the gas station, where he also bought himself a Bavarian Crème donut. He ate the donut in the short car ride home, holding it with the waxy paper bag, leaning forward, his mouth opening wide to try to keep powdered sugar from covering his lips. Even as he took big greedy bites, he held his lips apart until he was chewing the soft dough.

Once home, Steven deposited the navy polo shirt and khaki pants he had been wearing around the house all week into the laundry basket. It was an important day, a day when he wanted to look nice. His son, Charlie, was to be coming home from rehab. He showered and shaved, something he hadn't done since Monday, and donned a fresh pair of khakis and a green polo shirt, the one he wore on a father-son golf outing with Charlie seven years ago.

When the phone rang at two o'clock he was sure it would be Charlie, and he almost dropped it as he answered. "Hello?" he said.

"Still no word?" Evelyn asked.

"Not yet." They were both silent. Steven and Evelyn thought he was to be discharged from the Hazelton Adult Recovery Center in Chicago that morning.

“Well, he should be calling soon. And if he doesn’t, it’s his choice. We can’t rescue him again.”

“Right,” he said, though he hated it when she said that. Lately Evelyn seemed almost determined Charlie would fail. It was as if she invited bad fate.

Steven was in involuntary retirement from a CEO position he lost to a hostile takeover. The last three years had been hard on him. While Evelyn left the house each morning for her job, Steven stayed in, passing his days following his stocks and reading *The Wall Street Journal* online. These past few months he couldn’t seem to focus on the articles he wanted to read and found himself looking at pornography instead. He had never been much for pornography. It passed the time and he had bought expensive software from the computer store to wipe his computer clean each time he did it. The whole ritual could take an hour, maybe two, depending on how much time he wanted to kill. Once he had been startled to hear Evelyn’s car in the driveway and realized he had lost three hours and ten minutes looking at naked bodies greased and pumping into each other.

This morning he told himself that he wouldn’t indulge today because today was a day of celebration, because today could be the first day he would be freed of the need to pass his time in so crude a fashion. With Charlie home, getting his life together, Steven would have a companion. He could take Charlie to look at apartments, help Charlie buy a new car. By 2:30, though, his resolve faltered.

Then the phone rang. It was the Charlie, he was sure of it. Steven stood up from the chair at the computer where he was about to enter his password for the porn site.



“Hello?” he said, a smile on his face, relieved to hear Charlie’s voice at last.

“Collect call from Charles Agreen,” the operator said, “do you accept the charges?”

“Yes,” Steven said, blood draining from his face, an irrepressible need to swallow aching in his throat.

“Dad?”

“Charlie?” Steven said.

“Dad, I was arrested late last night and I’m in Cook County Jail. It was a mistake. I’ll explain everything. You’ve got to come bail me out. You should see the guys here. I’m dead meat if you don’t come get me. They’re closing up for the weekend and told me if you could get here by five--”

Steven’s mouth was dry and his right hand went methodically for his forehead, pinching either side of his broad, wrinkled brow as though he could squeeze reason out of himself from just this spot. Charlie had gotten into trouble before but never like this. This was the phone call both he and Evelyn feared most, the reason they had sent him to the expensive rehab.

“Dad, they arrested me with this big time dealer, the guy I buy from? They charged me with what they charged him. But I wasn’t dealing. I promise if you pick me up I’ll get sober. You just can’t leave me here.”

Steven looked outside: it was a gray winter day, with orange tones washing over the sky to the east. He knew Charlie was right: that Charlie, his thirty-year-old, commodity-trading, piano-playing, polo shirt-wearing son wouldn’t survive a night in

jail. Evelyn would be home in two or three hours. He knew Evelyn would disapprove, but Evelyn didn't understand the brutality of men who could easily destroy the little dignity his son had left.

“Where do I need to go?” he said at last.

“Cook County Jail, the guards say you can follow the signs for bail. Bring a credit card and ID.”

“I'm on my way,” Steven said.

“Thank God,” said Charlie.

Steven would have normally taken the train downtown because traffic on a Friday afternoon was murderous. But he worried that taking a cab from the train to Cook County Jail would only land him and Charlie in the precarious circumstance of waiting for a cab together outside the lock up. Cook had a reputation for being the worst jail in the country, and Steven didn't want to think about waiting around that kind of place.

He made his way through the house. He pulled a navy wool sports jacket from his closet, something Evelyn brought home for him, like she did with most of his clothes in these past three years, one evening after work. “I found it on a great sale and couldn't resist,” she explained, though he knew she was lying about the sale. She foisted new clothes on him because she wanted him to look less shabby.

Within minutes, Steven was on his way. Ask questions later, he told himself as his mind filled with opposition to what he was doing. Still, he couldn't help but think of Evelyn and how angry she would be later on, how she would put down Steven's decision. “Did you think you were helping when you did this, Steven? Is this what we discussed

with the counselor? Didn't the rehab tell us that he needed to suffer his own consequences?"

It was not a matter for debate. If Evelyn wanted to leave the boy wherever he was, if Evelyn was determined to let the boy ruin his life, then that was Evelyn's decision alone. He was of a different mind.

Steven traveled south on I-94, a route he had taken many times to go downtown with his family. This time of year, when the kids were younger, they would drive down to go to Marshall Field's on State Street to see the window decorations, to eat underneath the Christmas tree in the Walnut Room. This time of year, they might all pile into the car to take in *The Nutcracker*. This time of year, Steven would buy Evelyn a new fur coat or a new gold necklace. But that was years ago.

Now, as he passed Skokie, where he and Evelyn had first moved when they were married, he wondered what ever happened to their neighbors, a couple who seemed to be so aged when he and Evelyn knew them, though he realized now they were no older than he was today. Were they still alive?

As he approached the exit for Lincolnwood, the skyline for the city began to emerge in the distance. When was the last time he had driven through Lincolnwood on a December night? Tonight on the way home it would be the perfect thing to do—he and Charlie could cruise through the streets lined with houses decorated competitively, one grander than the last, Christmas lights shaped into figures on lawns, Christmas lights covering roof after roof, carols blaring from speakers proclaiming joy to the freezing, dark world.

Then he passed where Charlie used to live, the Gold Coast, and he wondered how Charlie had gone from a high rise apartment, driving a Porsche and out-earning Steven at only 23 years old, to Cook County lock up. “Drugs,” Evelyn would say, “Steven, it’s the drugs,” though Steven wondered what role he had played. Was it something he had done to his son to bring him to this?

He exited the I-94 and followed the directions to Cook County Jail. It was a miserable neighborhood. Crows pecked the meat off chicken bones, dropped on the pavement and fallen into the gutter. Garish cups from fast-food restaurants rolled lazily in the street, occasionally flattened by trucks or cars. Wrappers for candy and empty cigarette boxes were pressed flat along with aluminum cans. The scent of burning street nuts stung Steven’s nose. There were people on the streets that looked more hopeless than Steven felt about his son. Trash blew around in the cold wind and people turned their faces from it.

Steven turned the car into the jail parking lot. He found a spot and pulled in. As he was about to put the car into park, he found he couldn’t get his hand to move the gearshift. He concentrated but to no avail. Steven panicked. He willed his hand to touch his forehead but nothing happened. He watched as his body started to move, felt the hugeness of his own tongue in his mouth. He couldn’t make it stop when his bladder emptied, a warm rush onto the cloth seat. The radio played quietly in the background, the weather report predicted a clear night and the possibility of the Northern Lights.

Then everything was calm. He put the car in park. He tried to get his hand to pull the keys out of the ignition. Then another seizure began, this time with more force, paving its way through the already ruined neural pathways.

The cell phone rang. It was 5:13 p.m., thirteen minutes after the lock up was closed for the night. Charlie was stuck inside for the weekend. *Shit*, Steven thought, *Fuck*. The light was fading fast out of the northern winter sky, giving in to the eerie orange glow of sodium vapor streetlamps. Steven was still in his car, strapped in with his seatbelt taugth around his momentarily still body. The phone rang again, insistent this time, and Steven, between seizures, found it within himself to pick it up and answer it, though a line of drool sluiced from his half-open mouth down the side of his chin.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Steven?” Evelyn asked.

“Yeah,” Steven said again, unable to utter any other word.

“Did Charlie call yet? I’ll be home soon. Have you gone to get him yet?”

“Yeah,” he forced out again, trapped inside his own body, his brain afire with words he wished to say but couldn’t.

Evelyn pressed on, “Steven, are you on your way back already? Do you think Charlie will want something special for dinner?”

“Yeah,” Steven said again. The air in the car was getting cold now. The link between Steven and Evelyn was tenuous, impossible.

“If you don’t want to talk to me, you can just say so.” Irritation was clear in her tone, and a hint of the sort of threats she had long made in the family. “I’ll hang up if you say ‘yeah’ to me one more time, Steven. You can find other words to speak to your wife.”

“Yeah,” Steven said.

“That’s it,” she said. And she hung up the phone. He knew that if he could get home, he would be confronted with her usual scornful silence until he made amends.

Steven would have said something more useful, like “help me,” if he had been able. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t because something had happened to him here, in this car, something he couldn’t explain, that had reduced him to this one word. Something had interrupted his train of thought, had interrupted his ability to move, had so interrupted him that he could not now end the call with Evelyn any more than he could make his left hand pull on the door lever to open it, or make his legs move from the car so he could go inside the building and post bail.

*It was December and very cold. He was in his footed pajamas, in his bed, when his mother came to wake him. She held one finger to her lips, gesturing for him to keep quiet.*

*His mother was a woman of considerable size and yet she could move soundlessly through their crammed house. Steven followed her, groggy from sleep and thrilled to be beckoned alone. The oldest of six, he was accustomed to sharing her attention, being an afterthought. Her robe brushed against either side of the darkened hallway, as though she lit their way with a torch.*

*In the kitchen one light over the sink cast a shine on clean pots and pans. Shadows caught objects in unfamiliar angles, and little Steven barely recognized the room where he had only hours ago cleaned his plate of chicken pot pie and settled in to do his homework.*

*His mother kept walking, to the back door, the wooden Dutch door that opened to their small backyard that was normally a minefield of dog poop.*

*It was a quiet winter's night and when Bacia opened the door it crackled and a rush of freezing air quickly followed. Tonight, the yard was covered in snow: beautiful, fresh snow. She took up her slippers and pointed to Steven's father's slippers. "Put those on," she said as she held the door open for him and stepped out.*

*Steven followed, pulling the door just barely shut behind him, worrying now if his mother was crazy, wondering why she was out in her robe and slippers. Should he run to get his dad? She was gazing up at the sky and Steven finally did the same. It was green and moving, it was so clear outside and bright.*

*"It's the aurora borealis," she said without looking at Steven. "People also call it the Northern Lights, but you're the brains in our family, you should know the real name: aurora borealis."*

*Steven stared at the phenomenon in wonder. It was incredible and strange. He wanted to ask his mother why it happened, what it meant, but the sight of it took his words away.*

*“Time is running out, Steven,” she said at length, both of them shivering in their sheepskin slippers. “You aren’t going to be a little boy forever, and our time is running out.”*

*His heart clenched at this, worried that his mother was going to tell him some bad news, that she had woken him not for the aurora borealis but for something else.*

*“No,” she said, as though she heard his thoughts, “I’ll be around a lot longer, but time is running out while you’re a boy. Soon you’ll be a young man and you won’t follow me out in your pajamas. I wanted you to see this and share this with you while you’re still young. And I wanted you to see this especially because you’re my bright boy, my smart boy.”*

*Steven had long been expected to be the first in his family to go to college. When she talked about Steven, his mother talked about how intelligent he was, how his head must have been so huge at birth because it was holding all his brains. It wasn’t a pressure on Steven to be the smartest in the family; he accepted his intellect without question.*

*Then neither of them said anything for a time. Finally, his mother asked him, “So, what do you think?”*

*He stared up at the night sky and said the only thing he could, his mind clear, as crystalline as the night, as powerful as the magnetic forces making the swirling green auras. “Yeah.”*

A knock on the window. Overheard, “Sir? Sir?” then sirens and a tow truck. Then “Grand mal seizures,” and air passing over his face, his body, as he was rushed from



gurney to hospital room. Beep-beep-beep-beep and nurses “Steven, blink if you can hear me,” and another nurse, and a doctor and the words “CAT scan,” and “cause for seizures,” and “bleeding on the brain.” Then “brain tumor” and ping-ping-clang-ping of the MRI, and drawing on his head with a marker, oh, the felt-tip tickled.

And words to his family, and tears, but he couldn't speak, the words weren't right. And Evelyn and Charlie.

And from the hospital room he tried to see out the window. And from the hospital room he wondered about Christmas. And from the hospital room he wanted very badly a good pair of sheepskin slippers and a snowy night.

## **POOKIE**

The letter came out of the blue from an attorney on fancy stationery. They addressed him by his real name, Moses Pulman Brown, and asked for him to sign the enclosed documents and return them. They were adoption papers for Pookie's only son. Pookie hardly believed anyone could find him at Angie's, but he also figured whoever did meant business. The only person he knew who might know what to do was Charlie.

Charlie was a commodity trader, one of those Board of Trade wizards, who long ago blew all his success and his money on drugs. He had been scraping at the bottom with Pookie and Angie for almost a year now, disappearing for a week here and there to get cash from his parents or make some money trading, but spent most of his time with them. Pookie knew from the early days with Charlie that he had grown up rich and educated, that beside his heroin problem he didn't belong on the West Side.

When Pookie showed Charlie the letter, Charlie's eyes caught fire. Charlie spotted the return address on the letter and helped Pookie finesse a meeting with the adoptive parents. They were going to cash in.

"So you think I could get some money out of these people?" Pookie had asked.

"Ha! Some money? Thousands, Pookie. We could get thousands. You'll be my meal ticket for a change."

When they first met, because Charlie always had money; lately, though, the supply was fading along with the color in Charlie's skin, the shine in his hair, the cleanliness of his clothes.

"Pick up the pen, let them think you're signing, and then tell them you'd really like to see the boy. Remember," Charlie said to him, "these people have tons of money. Remember you've hardly ever seen this kid."

The morning they went up to Lake Forest to scam the adoptive family for money Charlie and Pookie both woke up at Angie's to the sound of Angie's cell phone alarm. The TV blared in the living room; Pookie rolled over on the sagging couch and rubbed his eyes. Angelay padded into the room in filthy bare feet carrying the phone to Pookie. "Wake up Pookie," she said gently. She was wearing an old t-shirt of her mother's as a nightshirt with milk stains down the front and the neck reaching both of her tiny shoulders. Her hair was a knotted mess, just like Angie's, and under her nostrils a crust of snot had formed. Angelay was four years old and her slender arms bore between them three cigarette burns, at least one intended, along with one small tattoo of a miniature heart that her mother had let an ex-boyfriend do when they were both high on crack.

"Thank you Angelay."

Pookie sat up and Angelay jumped into his lap. "Can we get pancakes?" she asked, because once, a month ago, when Charlie was over, they went for pancakes. Now it seemed she only remembered that one time.

"Not this morning," he said to her quietly. "Pookie needs to get in the shower and go to a business meeting today."

“Okay. But next time?” she asked. Angie was always promising the girl things this way—next time we’re at the store I’ll buy you a doll, next time we go out I’ll carry you home if you are too tired to walk, next time we’ll get something for dinner besides splitting a bag of popcorn and a soda.

“Next time,” Pookie said. He stood to take a shower and passed through Angie’s bedroom, where she lay, limbs akimbo, face-planted into the bed. He turned her on her side to make sure she was breathing. She was. Her breath smelled rotten and her face looked terrible. Tonight, Pookie thought, I’ll bring home dope for all of us. Tonight we’ll be kings.

Out of the shower he called to Charlie to wake him, then resorted to shaking Charlie awake. Pookie laughed watching Charlie smacking his lips twenty times to try to wet his mouth. “Need some water white boy junkie? You better hurry up, we have to leave soon.”

Back in Angie’s bedroom Pookie leafed through the hanging clothes that belonged to him. They were few. Thankfully his cousin had died only three months ago in a shooting so Pookie had a nice pair of black pants to wear along with a bright orange shirt and matching tie. His mother had gotten the clothes for him and made him change in the church bathroom when he showed up for the funeral.

“Pookie?” Angelay said, tugging at his pants.

“Not now,” Pookie said reflexively.

“But,” Angelay said, and Pookie looked down at her. “I brought you something for your business meeting.”

It was a black fedora with a dark green feather tucked into the black ribbon. “Thank you,” said Pookie and he tried it on. It felt like a disguise. Without the hat, Pookie was a nobody junkie, but with the hat, they might believe he was someone who could take his son home and raise him.

Out on the street twenty minutes later, the July sun already beating and heating the asphalt, Pookie began to sweat. Charlie was coaching him on how to scam these people. Pookie wondered: didn’t Charlie know he scammed Charlie all the time?

“Tell them you want to see him regularly. Hell, invoke God and tell them you have been praying over this and you still aren’t sure whether to sign the papers. Give them a chance to offer you some money. Tell them you’re late on rent, that if you had \$500 you could find a way to scrounge up the other \$500—let them get the idea to give you \$1,000. That’s chump change. Set up another meeting. They need the papers signed by August to enroll him in school. It’s only early July now—I figure we can get a few thousand out of them before you ‘make your decision.’”

“Yeah,” Pookie said, his mouth watering at the thought of all that money. He was hungry for it. When he was half dope sick anything seemed like a good idea. Pookie really did need the money. He didn’t owe rent, since he crashed at Angie’s. But he had a pile of debt and he still hadn’t kicked. Last week he stuck up a taxi driver for all the cash the man had—two hundred dollars—and all of that was gone.

The El thundered into the station and twenty pigeons launched off the tracks, flapping their nasty wings, leaving feathers in the stinking air. The city smelled of piss

already and it was only nine o'clock in the morning. By noon the fire hydrants would be cranked open, kids jumping through the water to cool off.

It would take them a couple transfers to get to the train station, and then a long train ride up north. The El wasn't air conditioned, and inside the train it smelt of hash browns and spilled coffee and more piss. The car was crammed and someone whistled when Pookie and Charlie got on. Pookie quickly pulled off the fedora and loosened his tie. He looked like he was trying and that would get him in trouble around here.

Pookie was relieved to get to their final transfer. His shirt was nearly soaking and he could smell himself past the deodorant. He noticed a small stain on his shirt; his stomach turned, half hungry, half nauseous. He should have eaten breakfast, he thought, but the thought was quickly followed by the knowledge that there was nothing to eat in Angie's apartment. She and the girl lived off the vending machines downstairs, the same ones where Pookie saw mice when he walked in late at night.

Once on the final train heading north along the tracks, the dingy of the city disappeared, the white bright sky transitioned to blue. Even the air in the train car faded from the stench of cheap fast food to a mild smell of soap, and as the air conditioning grew stronger, Pookie's shirt dried. By the time Lake Forest was announced as the next stop, Pookie's eyes were wide, watching tree-lined streets and mansions as they passed in the window.

"So you lived here?" Pookie asked.

"Yeah."

"Your mama still lives here?"

“Yeah.”

“Man,” he said, “I bet she’s real rich.”

“Ha!” laughed Charlie.

“You know where we going then?”

“Yeah.”

The town looked like something out of a TV show. There was a fountain directly opposite the train station and not a single child had their feet in it. There weren’t any pigeons, the air smelled like the flowers and trees that lined the square. All the shops’ windows gleamed in the bright sun.

Pookie’s deep black skin was as out of place in Lake Forest as Charlie’s bright blonde hair was on the West Side. Charlie walked Pookie to the sandwich shop where he was meeting the couple that wanted to adopt his son. “Here it is,” Charlie said. “Just come back to the town square in an hour.”

Pookie hardly had enough money in his pocket for a sandwich and train fare home, but he was very hungry and the place smelled very good. He ordered a tuna sandwich since it was the cheapest one and took an orange soda from the cooler. He grabbed a bag of barbeque chips. That was when he spotted them waving to him.

The man was wearing a white pressed shirt under a sport coat and khaki pants. The woman was wearing a blue sweater over a white blouse and navy pants. They both wore welcoming but concerned looks on their faces. Pookie walked over, suddenly aware of how itchy his nicest pants were. The orange shirt and tie that seemed handsome when

his mother gave them to him looked garish in this tiny shop. He could see his own dark flesh through the thin material.

“I’m Moses Brown,” he said as he walked up, holding out his left, sweaty palm. His own name felt unfamiliar and distant under his lips. When was the last time he introduced himself, first and last name?

“Ann and James Dupree,” the man announced, taking Pookie’s hand awkwardly and shaking it. “Please, have a seat,” he gestured. It was then that Pookie realized neither of them had any food.

“Go ahead,” Ann Dupree said, “You must be very hungry after the long train ride. Thank you for traveling all this way to meet.”

He ate the whole sandwich and chips in six minutes, taking nervous bite after nervous bite. When he finished his sandwich he wiped his mouth with a napkin, so wide he wiped first his lips back and forth, then swept broader, from cheek to cheek. What was left of the napkin he used to try to get the grease from the potato chips off his fingers but succeeded only in making the napkin stick to his fingers in bits. He thought to go to the bathroom to wash his hands, and with that thought a need to relieve himself washed over him, but he was so nervous that he stayed in his seat, afraid his clumsy body might somehow fail him, afraid these people who called themselves his son’s parents would leave him here alone. He fingered the fedora in his lap, sitting up straight.

“Mr. Brown,” James Dupree started.

“Please, call me Moses,” Pookie said.



“M-m-moses,” the name came out from the man’s mouth in an uneasy stutter.

“We would like to fully adopt Avery.”

“Yes,” Pookie said. He felt in control the way he did before a stick-up, or before he took Charlie’s money to score. A lifetime of scamming white folks for drug money had prepared him for this. That in-control feeling went a long way towards propelling Pookie’s use. When everything else seemed unmanageable, when he recycled dirty clothes as clean by picking from the bottom of the pile for a pair of shorts, or when he received another 180-day notice on a bill, or when he scraped his pockets finding only a comb and lint, he could wrest control back by scamming for cash and getting high.

“Avery’s mother has already signed the papers. We were hoping you would do the same.”

James Dupree produced the papers, blobs of black on page after page, and there was Melissa’s signature, complete with a heart over the “I” in her first and last names, Melissa Miller. The heart made it look like Melissa was thrilled to get rid of the boy. As he settled his eyes over the papers, trying to look like he was really studying them, he wondered how much she had taken from the Dupree’s. How many months’ rent had they covered for her in exchange for her son? What kinds of expensive gifts, or better, how much cash had she gotten out of them? If they only worked together they might have really gotten something out of these people.

Pookie cleared his throat, furrowed his brow, and turned the first page. “I need to review these before I sign.”

“Our lawyer sent the papers to you a month ago, Mr. Brown,” said James Dupree. “Was that not enough time?”

“This is my son we’re talking about,” Pookie said. Now he had the hook he needed. He could see Ann Dupree’s brow moved in with worry, her eyes widening. He had them. “I wanted to meet with you because, you see, it’s complicated. I haven’t always been able to be there for Avery, but, as a father, I have done what I can. Times have been hard for me.”

Pookie glanced up at their faces, noticing a steely cast coming over James’ eyes. He still had Ann, and she might be enough. “You might imagine it’s hard for a man like myself, with only an eighth grade education, to get a job. And I have struggled with my demons,” this was his favorite euphemism for drugs, one he often used with the pastors and ministers his mother sent him to see.

“Let me stop you right there Mr. Brown,” said James. “Ann and I understand hardship. We understand you have wanted to provide things for Avery that you simply haven’t been able to. But that’s what we want to do: give him the life he deserves. We have taken Avery from a troubled toddler to a thriving young boy.”

Pookie fingered the fedora in his lap again. This time he thought of Angelay, of her dirty face and her empty stomach.

Ann said, “Jim, give him a chance to think. You don’t need to tell him that we’ve worked hard for Avery. We really have, Mr. Brown, we have given him all of our love. We want only the best for him.”

The letter from the attorney outlined all the Dupree's had already invested: a speech therapist, a counselor, extensive dental work, not to mention the frequent trips to National Parks and museums to broaden the child's mind. Avery had the sort of life every kid ought to have. Still, Pookie needed their money. He would need a hit when he got back to the city.

"You can't replace blood," Pookie said, remembering something his mother used to say to him when he sided with friends instead of his siblings in a fight. "I just need time to think about it. I wish I could focus on this decision, but with my rent late and just losing that janitor job..." he trailed off. He had lost the janitor job a year ago, but it was the story he told every time he tried to get money out of someone.

James Dupree said, "For the last four years we have fostered Avery we never heard from you, Mr. Brown. In fact, we had to hire an investigator to find you. I know you have a lot on your mind, but Avery has to come first. I hope you will at least do what is best for him now." James stood and excused himself to the restroom. Ann got up and browsed the shelves of the shop, looking at tins of cookies.

Pookie sat at the table and looked at his skinny arm beneath the thin orange shirtsleeve. Underneath were burn marks and scabs. Avery would have these too, just like Angelay did, if he lived with Pookie. Avery would be just like Angelay: Foul words came from the tiny girl's mouth, and she clung to him desperately, held Charlie's hand too tightly when they crossed the street to score dope. He knew he couldn't take the boy home. Pookie slept on a couch in front of a TV that no one ever turned off.

Yet when they returned to the table Pookie said, coldly, his mouth watering with the prospect of dope, “I hate to ask you folks, but I am sure you can understand. I think I need another few weeks to settle this in my mind. Of course, it’s very distracting being in the way I am right now—“ he trailed off.

They were all silent. Then Ann spoke. “We are willing to do whatever it takes to ensure Avery can stay with us. Isn’t that right, Jim?”

“Yes,” he said, a heavy sigh coming out with his consent. He would let Pookie scam him if it meant they could keep the boy. At length he said, “We love him; he is our son. What do you want, Mr. Pullman? What do you need from us to let us keep our family together?” The words were clear and sharp.

Once, when he was sticking up a cab, the driver’s eyes iced over and he said, “You are taking my money. Fine. Take what you must.” Now, as then, Pookie felt a twinge of guilt.

Impulsively, Pookie asked, “Does he know about me?”

“I’m sorry?” James said, tilting his head to the right and furrowing his brow, as though he was scolding Pookie.

Pookie cleared his throat. He was surprised that he would cry soon. He knew his voice would break if he repeated the question. The truth was he didn’t want to hear the answer. “Does he know where you are?” Pookie asked instead.

Ann piped up. “He knows we are signing papers so we can fully adopt him and he won’t have to be in foster care anymore.”

“Can I see him? Like, after I sign the papers?” Pookie asked, his face hot with confusion.

“Well, Mr. Brown—Moses—we’re not interested in an open adoption. We did want to meet with you to talk to you, but what we want will be, for the most part, a closed adoption. That means you won’t get to visit with him. Avery’s counselor thinks this type of arrangement would be the best for him.”

“So I can’t see him.” Pookie said.

He touched the fedora that Angelay had given him this morning. Pookie smiled at the thought of the foolish little girl, clinging fast to the notion of having pancakes with him and Charlie. There would be no pancakes for her. “Alright,” he said, and picked up the pen, “now where do you need me to sign?”

There were three signature lines and ten more places he had to initial and date. It reminded him of his release papers from prison. He felt no better signing the papers than he did before. His stomach felt as rotten now as his breath with tuna salad. He would have to find some way to get money. Maybe he would roll another cab driver, or risk dealing for a few weeks, or he could hustle Angie a couple Johns and take a cut.

After he finished signing they all looked down at their hands for a moment. Finally Mrs. Dupree spoke, “Thank you very much, Moses,” she said.

“Do you need train fare?” Mr. Dupree asked.

“No, thank you,” Pookie said, though it was a lie.

“We wanted to give you something to thank you for helping us,” Mrs. Dupree said. “Jim, do you have the envelope?”

“Just a little something,” he said as he handed it to Moses.

“Thank you.” He was sure it was cash and at once was relieved. He waited until the Dupree’s left before he opened up the envelope, and then he only peered inside. Had it been what he expected he would have folded it into his front pocket and told Charlie how much they had paid him.

But it wasn’t cash. Inside the envelope were three photographs. The first photograph was of a boy in khaki shorts and a pink polo shirt. He held a golf club, poised as if about to swing, but smiled gamely at the camera instead, with a mouth full of large, disorganized teeth. Just like Melissa’s, Pookie thought. A set of children’s golf clubs stood off to the side, a tree-lined golf green and open blue sky of early spring as a backdrop. On the opposite side, Ann Dupree had written, “Avery, 24 April.” The picture was taken only three months ago. Pookie squinted at the photograph, examining it for clues. There was nothing to distinguish this boy, his son Avery, from so many other boys his age. He looked just like anyone else would. Pookie was relieved that the boy looked normal.

The next picture was the boy’s school portrait. It had a blue background and Avery wore a shy smile. Though Avery still bore the facial features of a black boy—a broad nose, full lips, and almond-shaped eyes—his fair skin would make life easier for him.

Every advantage, Pookie thought. He will have every advantage. What advantages had Pookie had? His mother wasn’t a whore, even if that’s what he told people. In fact, his parents had stayed married until his father died of a heart attack when

little Moses was only ten. Until then Moses had been told he would go to college, albeit a historically black college in Chicago, but there had never been any doubt. Once his father died, though, things got hard. His mother sank into grief and the meager life insurance policy didn't keep them from sinking into debt.

Pookie stood from the table before looking at the third photograph. He had seen enough to know signing the papers was the worst right thing he had ever done.

Outside was a bright July day. The street was lined with luxury cars and as Pookie walked towards the town square a pack of kids rushed past him on scooters. One of the girls screamed—a playful, racing scream—scaring Pookie. He looked around: no parents were in sight.

He sat on one of the many green benches facing the square and waited for Charlie. He lit a cigarette, taking a deep drag into his lungs. So the thing was done. The boy Avery, his only child, was now officially gone. Then he pulled the envelop from his pocket.

The third photograph depicted Avery with the Dupree's and their family dog. It was a glossy, professional photo taken in front of Lake Michigan at sunrise, the sun barely cresting behind them, the water black with sherbet tones reflecting from the sky. They all wore khaki pants with crisp white Oxfords. They were all barefoot. The dog, a sympathetic-faced golden retriever, looked at the boy with love, while the other three subjects, the Dupree's, gazed squarely at the camera, away from the lake. This was the newest of the photos, dated 12 June and labeled Ann, Jim, Avery, and Bear.

“Did you get the cash?” Charlie asked, grinning, as he walked up, looking impatiently at Pookie.

Pookie stood from the bench, tucking the photos away, feeling weary.

“Next train leaves in five minutes. We have to hurry.” Pookie could see the beginning of dope sickness on Charlie’s face. He would need it once they got back to the city.

“What happened at the meeting, Meal Ticket?” Charlie asked once they were seated on the train, leaving the station.

“I’m not your meal ticket,” Pookie said, irritated.

“They stiffed you? They stiffed the Meal Ticket?” Charlie had a way of pushing all your buttons when you were already down.

Pookie’s eyes narrowed. You set me up, he wanted to say. You knew, you must have known, that I couldn’t pretend to compete with them for my son. “Is this a joke to you?” Pookie finally said, shifting his weight forward, towards Charlie’s seat, silently reminding Charlie who was bigger and tougher.

“I was just sure of it is all,” Charlie said. Then, after a few minutes had passed in silence, Charlie said, “These train tickets were a waste of money.” He slumped impatiently back in his seat. It would be a long trip back to the city, a descent from the glittering sun to the shade of sky-scrapers, then the grime of old row houses and projects rotting from the inside out, abscessed teeth that needed to be removed.



## **A TERRIBLE YOKE**

They had just the one baby, though she wanted more. She wanted a lot of things that she wasn't sure about. For example, she had been sure she wanted the one baby though now that they had it, she was feeling the loss of her freedom in a way that crushed a person.

It wasn't just the loss of basic freedoms, like determining when one might go to the bathroom, or when one might make dinner, but the fact of the baby being tied to her as it was, entirely dependent. Breastfeeding was enslavement.

When she was working she had traveled internationally for weeks at a time, alone in foreign cities, calling her husband only once a week to check in, wandering streets and carving her own routines. She navigated new places easily, her friendly demeanor welcomed, her ability to pick up new languages appreciated by her hosts. Of course, it had been her decision to leave her job after the baby came. She couldn't see herself enjoying far away travel while her infant waited in a daycare of strangers for her return. Now she only operated in a two-mile radius when she left the house alone.

It wasn't just the baby's arrival, though. Ever since she was pregnant she felt tied down. She had married him years ago, but with the child, every commitment was increased by a factor of ten, or one hundred. Numbers, though, did not adequately express the stifling feeling of obligation that had come over her.

Last summer, back when only her breasts bore evidence of her new status as mother-to-be, she had met a most intriguing artist. He was handsome with a brooding, deep-voiced quality to him. He talked to her with a bemused smirk on his face. He was a visual artist, a sculptor from Vermont who owned a farm there, and a loft in SoHo, and had come to California to work on installations. He had brought with him ten white t-shirts and ten pairs of Levi's, a pair of Ray Ban sunglasses, two pairs of Converse, and driven his cherry red Ford F-150 cross-country.

Nothing had happened between them. She had considered it, but with her swelling belly, the time for marital infidelity had passed.

Last week the artist let her know he was installing a new project in Richmond and would be there for three weeks. "I'm staying at the Jefferson," he had said in his note, "it would be lovely to see you."

She didn't feel lovely. Anymore, all she had time to do was shower and brush her teeth once a day. She had gotten an atrocious haircut some months back and instead of getting it fixed decided to let it grow out. More and more things were like that lately. Her eyebrows went unwaxed, her make-up, unworn, grew dry in its small containers, her cuticles cracked and bled.

On a night like this, when she and her husband fought, she would drive her car to the gas station and fill up her tank. This was how she could get out of the house. There she would take in deep breaths, relishing the smell of gasoline as she had her whole life. She would drive for a little while after getting gas, making circles and loops, weaving in

and out of neighborhoods, trying to keep the car from having to stop at a light, and then eventually turn home. The whole affair only ever took thirty minutes, and it calmed her.

Sometimes in the car she would pray out loud to God, asking Him to save her from her anger towards her husband. She was often angry him. He was the sort of man who could lose a day doing only things for himself, never raising his head once to look at her. He was often critical of her cooking; he was rarely helpful around the house. But he was a kind man, and never meant anything by his carelessness.

But she knew she asked more of him than was fair. He supported their family, he had given up a promising career to marry her, he had been willing, in short, to give up anything for her, and yet she was so trivial, mad at him for leaving his dishes on the counter instead of putting them in the dishwasher. Still, the quotidian had a way of overtaking her sometimes.

Tonight, they had screamed loudly, their faces red. Before her son could wake from his slumber, though, she left the house. The night met her as a wall of heat. It was cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof kind of weather, that hot sticky weather that makes a person crazy.

She drove to the gas station. Music blared and the lights shone bright at the gas station, and it reminded her of her days before marriage, when she would drive to the beach with a friend on a night like this and arrive in the wee hours. They might stop at an up-all-night diner for pancakes at two a.m. and listen to the twang of truck-stop country music.

Neither of them liked living where they were, and for years they talked of moving, but the time had not yet been right. For the last year the metro was being built

and the work on it was constant. Floodlights were brought in to illuminate the workspace and orange cones were so ubiquitous they didn't stand out anymore. The area was covered in various construction signs so that it was hard to see anything but caution.

The light wasn't the only thing. It was like the middle of the day for all the noise caused by the constant construction. There was a whole other world out here at night. When she and her husband had been newly wed, they drove down to the Outer Banks one weekend. On the way, the traffic on I-95 south was so intense that everyone ended up at a standstill. People got creative, sharing Frisbees and beach balls, playing impromptu games of catch and tag to pass the time.

The place would be so much better once the metro came in, everyone said. To her it felt like the place, already an eyesore, was being ruined. It would only mean more people, more traffic, more lights, more noise. She longed to live in the country on a quiet road, to raise chickens and bees and a decent garden. There wasn't room enough for her here.

She started off for Richmond, the interchanges to get onto I-95 were harrowing during the day, packed full of cars and signals turning every which way, but at night there was an ease to driving this stretch of road that she found satisfying. The highway was intoxicating. She couldn't remember the last time she drove at eighty miles per hour, her car handling the speed easily.

Suddenly she was very hungry, but she planned to wait until she got to Richmond to eat. It was a Thursday night so not everything would be open late. There was a place called Sticky Rice. They had sushi that tasted almost nothing like sushi, sweet, and

covered mayonaisy sauces. Or there was the Paper Moon Diner, a favorite of hers, a place that had dolls and toys glued to the walls and ceiling in interesting designs. The artist would appreciate that sort of place. They could talk about influences; they could talk about other installation artists, like Sarah Sze.

After two hours she got to her exit. The exit was a short ramp that fed immediately into an underpass. From the bright lights of the highway and billboards that lined it, straight off to an exit that didn't have a single light illuminating the underpass.

When she got off the highway something terrible happened.

The car before her barely braked. She could hear the terrible thud from her open window. She heard the strange sound the glass made, too, the crackle, and then the car's tires in front of her screeching to a halt. She stopped suddenly. She pulled over, put on her flashers.

She bolted out of her car, her breasts suddenly leaking milk, as they did now whenever she felt a powerful emotion. "Are you alright?" she asked the driver of the car.

He didn't even roll down his window. He had a short haircut like her father's, parted strongly on the left side. He had thick hair that required taming with hair spray, just like the way her father's did, and it was stiffened at the top in the inartful way he had combed again and again to force the cowlick down, to encourage a part in hair that might otherwise prefer to stand straight up, crowded as it was on his large head. He was driving a forest green Buick, an old one from the nineties, and he wore a Timex watch on his left hand, gold-plated bracelet with a black face.

The man on the concrete didn't move. She took one look at him and knew that if his heart was beating it was only beating blood straight out of his head.

She hadn't brought her cell phone. This was a stupid mistake she realized after she left the house but resolved that, since she'd only be getting gas for the car and turning around to come home, it was of no consequence.

The man on the concrete had wild hair, as though someone had repeatedly electrocuted him, or as though he was an extra in any number of zombie-apocalypse movies. He looked like he invented the genre.

The man in the car didn't move. He sat there, rubbing his forehead, as though he would momentarily regain focus and be able to see what it was had happened. His windshield was completely shatter-cracked and the car was undriveable, in the way you almost never see in real life.

She walked towards the man on the concrete. It was so hot the concrete was giving off heat. She knelt down. Blood had pooled around his head, and his hair, already white and knotted, was soaking it up like a dishtowel soaks up a wine spill.

“Sir,” she said, “Can you hear me?”

She had had some emergency medic training through work since she was supposed to go to Iraq. That was before she got pregnant. In the training they were taught to “stop the bleeding and start the breathing,” since someone could bleed out before they would die of lack of oxygen. She could hear the instructor's voice telling her “stop the bleeding, stop the bleeding,” so she stripped off her sundress and wadded it up. She

moved him to expose the gash in his head. It was gory. She shoved the wad of her turquoise jersey dress onto his head.

It was always one of her husband's favorite dresses, with its plunging neckline and open back.

The man groaned. She was optimistic. Maybe the driver had only hit him at a slow speed, maybe this sort of injury looked much worse than it was. She remembered that the head bled easily, and remembered being small—maybe four years old—when, on a family vacation, she had fallen off a bed and knocked her head on the sharp corner of a nightstand in the hotel. Her head bled profusely and her parents rushed her to the emergency room. But in the end, it was nothing more than a minor cut and bruise.

She held the cloth fast to the man's head, applying more pressure than she wanted to, remembering the training, again. "You're going to have to push hard, Cupcake," the trainer said to her, "doesn't matter if you hurt the person while you're saving their life, you hear? That blood is going to gush unless you push hard as you can."

She pushed hard as she could, and the heat from the street snapped off her, and she sweat. She couldn't tell if the man was breathing and it didn't matter. The cloth was getting soaked. There was blood on her hands.

"Call 9-1-1!" she called to the man in the car. She couldn't see him but she could tell he hadn't figured out what to do other than put his car in park. Another car exited the highway. The lights illuminated their shadows, long across the pavement, the glisten of the man's blood, the blood darkening her dress. She was only wearing a bra and panties, kneeling down, pressing the dress against his head.

The car stopped. It had tinted windows, spinners on the rims, and a loud stereo system. The passenger window rolled down, revealing two huge thug-types.

“You okay lady? What happened?” the passenger asked.

“That car hit this man,” she said. “He’s bleeding bad. Can you call the police?”

“Yeah okay,” he said. But he shook his head as he rolled up his window. She knew he wouldn’t call.

She thought about her son. In three or four hours he would wake up, quietly at first, expecting her milk to come to him in the safe, quiet darkness of his room.

“Can you hear me?” she asked. “Can you open your eyes if you hear me? Or blink your eyes?”

He didn’t move. Still, she could feel a faint pulse, very slow, very gentle, like a distant question about life, a bass note playing two doors down at a jazz club. “Listen,” she said, “I am doing the best that I can. And you are doing the best that you can. I need you to hold on. I need you to stay with me, okay?”

At length, the man in the Buick rolled down his window. It squeaked as it rolled down, as if irritated to be up this late. “He looks homeless,” the man said, “I think he must have been a drunkard.”

“Did you call 9-1-1 yet?” she asked. The man in the car was right: this man had not had a warm bed or a hot meal in a long time. His skin was filthy and he stunk of booze. He was the gray color of someone who had begun to blend in with his concrete surroundings, as though he was starting to wear his own sort of camouflage, a protective layer of grit to match the roads, alleyways, and underpasses where he lived.



“I’ve seen them here before,” the man in the car said, his left arm out of the car now, revealing that he was wearing a powder blue golf shirt and a decent tan. “There is a Greyhound bus station not 100 yards from here, and someone told me there is a half-way house around the corner.”

She felt the warmth of the cloth and kept pressing the wound.

“They get out of that house and head to the bus station to buy drugs. Or they can get to the liquor store and hang out under this bridge here. Bet he was drunk as a skunk, didn’t even feel me hit him.”

“Please call 9-1-1,” she whispered. The man in her arms smelled of rotting trash. His clothes had been worn too long without being washed.

“You see what he did to my car?” the man laughed. “It’s worse than if I hit a deer! Guess a buck coulda done worse damage, but honestly, this windshield’s a mess.”

The man’s breath was audible now, in horrifying gasps. Her mother had told her that when her father died, he drew in great gasps; she hadn’t understood that at the time, but the memory came to her vividly now. “Don’t go don’t go don’t go,” she said.

It was June and the honeysuckle had bloomed something fierce that week, and a gentle wind brought a waft of honeysuckle to her nose just when she most needed it, as the man stopped his heaving breaths and fell silent.

“You sure are doing more than you should for that drunk. He probably thinks he’s in heaven, seeing the likes of you hovering over him half-naked. You wasted a pretty dress on that. Better take a good shower when you get home, you hear?”

She thought of her husband. When he was small he had gone with his mother to Florida on a cramped Greyhound bus. He had never been outside the state of Wisconsin before that trip. It was momentous for him to travel so far. He knew Disney World was in Florida and he hoped that his mother was planning a big surprise for him, seeing as his birthday was only two days away.

When they arrived, though, they took a taxi to a police station. His Uncle Otto was waiting there, and after they paid for his release they went to a cheap motel that didn't have working AC. The heat was murderous and Uncle Otto smelled like booze.

No one talked and finally he asked what he had been wondering all day. "When are we going to Disney?"

His mother patted him on the head. She said, "Maybe not on this trip," as though there would be another trip to Florida next month. His Uncle Otto had said, "Come on, Diana, can't we take the kid? He came all this way."

When his mother said no he had hit her. He was so angry and for years couldn't understand why she wouldn't take him, especially since Uncle Otto said it was fine. He realized later, when he was a young adult, that his mother didn't have any money to spare on such an extravagance and that, if she had, she had already spent it bailing out her brother.

She prayed over the lifeless man. She set his head back on the ground and backed up, leaving her dress bunched on his head, closing his eyes, green-blue, cataracts covering them like fog.

The man in the Buick got out of his car, finally, and walked around the front of it. “Really ruined the window. I can’t see through it to drive. I’m going to have to call a cab to get home tonight. My wife must be wondering what’s taking me so long.”

She didn’t say anything. She walked back to her car. She started it, closed the windows, and blasted the AC. She remembered there was a bag of old clothes in her trunk she had meant to drop at Goodwill last week. She left the car on and walked back to the trunk. She pulled out a t-shirt and a pair of jeans.

“You would have thought he would leave a bigger dent on the hood. Bet I can pop that out myself in my garage,” the man said. “But they’re going to have to tow it to a shop to get that windshield replaced. Looks like some hair got caught in the glass. Can you believe it?”

She got back in the car, rolled down a window. “You said the Greyhound Station’s a hundred yards? Which way?” she asked.

“You can’t miss it. Up on your right.”

She drove for less than a minute and parked illegally at the curb. She left her flashers on.

Inside the Greyhound station smelled of urine and newspaper. The lights were too bright. A small black boy, no older than two, trailed his father, a leash in his right hand. Trailing the boy on the leash was a small white puppy; it must have been a Maltipoo. The father turned around to the boy, red-eyed and furious, “I said hurry *up*,” and grabbed the boy’s thin left arm. The boy shuffled faster, silent. The puppy had stopped walking and

dragged along the floor. It looked back at the girl, confused. Its eyes were filthy, the fur around them red.

All the ticket windows were darkened. There was a closed coffee stand in the middle of the room, and benches around the perimeter. All but one of them was taken, makeshift beds.

A man in a wheelchair held out a paper cup. His stumps for legs were fitted in panty hose, and on his face was the up-all-night look of someone stricken with methamphetamine addiction.

She approached him. His hair was in long dread locks like a prophet. When he looked up at her his eyes were gray-blue, arresting. She took a breath as if to speak but it caught in her throat.

She had come this far to realize that she had to go home. There was no use calling the police. There was no use going back to the accident. There was no use going to The Jefferson Hotel to see the artist.

She felt pained by the distance between her and her family. They were, after all, *her family*. They were hers now, as she was theirs. It was a terrible yoke at times, this family. It was a terrible yoke.

More than she wanted to call the artist, more than she wanted to call 9-1-1, she wanted to go home, to pick up her son from his crib, to cradle him in her arms, to nurse him back to sleep. To see her husband and to have him come up next to her, gently, and put his hand in her hair the way he did when she was caring for their beautiful baby. To have him hold her that way, gently.

In the last moments of the bum's life it was clear that she had the choice of making two mistakes that night or only one. As she pointed the car north and blasted the AC in the car, streaming over her face and cooling her, she felt relieved. She would go home. What was more, she would stay there.

## SOLOING

He kept the windows open. Ah, the air felt good. He liked the air on his face like that. It was crisp in the morning. The grass was still wet with dew. The air felt good on his face. Yes, it was nice to feel the air on his face.

It was early, and the sun hadn't yet warmed the earth as it would for the day. He was barefoot, having set aside his flip-flops, enjoying the sport of driving, shifting the car through its gears, listening to the engine rumble.

The winding roads, the national park signs, their cursive script announcing the White Mountains, white paint against brown, the air in the car, the windows open, the loud sounds from the road. Perfect morning for a climb.

He stopped for a breakfast burrito and a large cup of black coffee in North Conway. The kid at the burrito stand had curly, wild hair and a sharp jaw. He wore a Carhartt jacket that hung loose on him.

“Going up Cathedral today?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Which route?” the kid asked.

“White Horse,” he said.

The kid wrapped the tortilla quickly. His fingers looked cold and hot all at once. Food service was hard work. On your feet all the time, small talk with strangers.

He'd passed two impoverished winters teaching skiing in Taos and waiting tables on the weekends. He knew the drill: earn enough to live close to the mountains so you can spend every spare dime and minute doing what you love. He'd been the one to tell Troop to come West.

He'd left for a job, a real job, a government job. Nine to five, health insurance, paid leave. He was still young enough to explain unconventional employment for a few winters.

He stood and ate the burrito, just a few feet from the food cart, steam rising as he held the aluminum wrapper and salsa sluiced down its sides onto his hands, making them red like thin blood. Two black beans crumbled off to the ground and a greedy bird came and pecked at them, taking them in whole one by one.

The coffee was hot and good. He looked towards Cathedral. It was illuminated with the first light of morning.

He stopped into Wilcox's to see if he recognized anybody or anybody recognized him. He looked idly at their wares. He already had shoes, ropes, webbing, pitons, cams, chalk—you name it. It had been a pleasure to amass the gear he needed, especially after he had the government job. Once he had all his gear, he started sending gear to Troop.

Only this past summer he'd sent Troop several hundred dollars worth of new climbing gear: cams, pitons, carabiners, all of them made from titanium; ropes and webbing the newest and best. Troop had never used it even once. It sat new in its packaging, shining, gleaming back at John when they went to settle his affairs. It was then John learned that Troop could have used the money in quarters to do his laundry, in

cash to pay the drug dealer, or a gift certificate to the gas station or the grocery store, or indeed for clothes. Instead, he'd sent a luxury: a tin of caviar for someone who hadn't eaten in days.

But John loved gear. With the right gear he found he could summit almost anything. Not that he wanted to summit just anything. He wasn't the type of climber who sought summits. Climbing was its own reward. Solving a hard problem, perfecting a crux, executing a pitch without fault, these were things that drove him. Learning each piece of his rack by heart, pulling out just the right size cam for a crack the first time; carefully, scrupulously executing command after command; perfectly removing placed gear, these were the pleasures he sought from climbing. He found himself returning again and again to the same crags, matching himself systematically to their challenges, meeting them with desire and then satisfaction.

He walked back to his car, dumping the empty coffee cup and aluminum wrapper in a trashcan. His belly was full. It was a good breakfast. He drove out of town and towards Cathedral. Across the bridge, taking the fork in the road towards the right, where the heavy canopy darkened the road ahead.

There was the river, cold and sure. Later today, on his descent back to town, there would be families, feet in the stream, fishing, watching the rainbow trout swim, children playing, banks full. But for now it was empty, the way he found it most mornings he went to climb.

He found a place to park. The base of the rock wasn't far. The hike up was steep, but he does it in flip-flops, like he did in college, like he did before. The pine needles and



dirt and grit get on his feet as he goes. They are welcome. He has a bag of water on his back, nothing more.

He has climbed Cathedral hundreds of times. He climbed it all through college. One night, he and Tim Callahan were here too late, climbing after the sun had set. They had no headlamps, no flashlights. Just their memories of the route and barely enough light to see the next anchor and the next after that. When they finally got down it was with gratitude that they ate the worst pizza either of them had ever had, thankful to be alive and to not have spent the night on the rock.

His climbing shoes were clipped to his harness. He would trade the flip-flops for them once he got to the base. He has never soloed up Cathedral before. In fact, he's never soloed up any route in his life. He's only ever bouldered without the benefit of a partner. Sure, there were weekends where all he did was hit bouldering problems at Rumney. But traditional climbing was his bag. Anyway, it was foolish to solo. All the great solo climbers died on the rock, their sure hands reaching for a hold they would never grasp.

The pattern and redundancy of the system ensured safety. Climbing was calculated risk, but not *actual* risk. It was thrilling, he supposed, but more than a thrill it was satisfying. Hard work that required training. Strenuous effort rewarded with summit. It was through precision that he could turn his attention to ascent. But he did it to toughen and challenge himself, to feel his own exertion, the tense muscles in his forearms, the numbing of his toes as he jammed them into holds, then later, his sore back on his bed, as he drifted to sleep recalling the day's crag.

He felt bare without any gear or rope. He dipped his hands into his chalk bag, dusted them off, looked at the many chalk marks on the rocks. It hadn't rained in three days. He stood back for a moment, his hands flushing with sweat in anticipation. The route was an easy one. He began.

He moved up quickly. The rock was cool to the touch and rougher than the holds at the climbing gym he had been going to lately. It was tougher on your hands, pressing fingers into the rock, finding ways to grab onto a tiny ledge or jam three fingers into a crack to hold. As he got higher, past the shade of the trees, the rock was warmer where the sun shined. There, it was nice to feel the sun at your back.

A breeze blew past. The wind always feels more intense on the rock than on the ground. No trees to protect you. It was good to have a nice breeze like that, but it still reminded him of the first time he felt the wind on a climb. He was twelve and fearless, ascending quickly. He was powerful and he knew it by how fast he could go up. Then a gentle gust came past and for a second he felt the enormity of the mountain and the elements. His hands shook. It was invigorating and humbling.

Without rope or anchors, without cams and nuts, he was light. It was as if he could float up the rock. Normally the weight of those devices slowed him down. They would jangle and clang against one another, strange disharmonious wind chimes. But today he moved in the eerie silence of the solo ascent.

Soloing was a divisive word in the climbing community. Traditional climbers called it stupid. He was a traditional climber. He would spurn anyone who told him soloing was perfectly safe as long as you knew yourself as a climber. To him, it was

justification for unnecessary risk-taking. And it wasn't just the risk to the solo climber, but to the others around him. If he fell, he put them at risk, too. It was selfish besides being stupid.

When he got to the first bolt he clipped in with a loop of bright red webbing and two carabiners. It was good to let your arms rest for a moment. No need to climb it in one long jag. He had nothing to prove.

He sat on the ledge, letting his feet rest, too. He knew if he loosened his shoes now he would regret it when he had to start climbing again. It was always harder once your feet got hot to get the shoes on right. No reason to rest too long. He was strong enough to press on. Four more pitches to the top.

The next pitch was cruxy. It required you to maneuver to get past an overhang. It didn't ask you to defy the laws of physics, but required core strength and a little faith. He had long since mastered the sequence and had done it without fault at least fifty times in the years since mastery. Still, it gave him pause realizing he was without a fail safe.

There were chalk marks denoting each of the holds to get past the crux. That was the trouble with Cathedral: it had become increasingly popular in the years since his childhood. Didn't he remember days when he and his father were the only folks on this route? He never remembered this much chalk on the wall. Now the mystery of the climb was gone. He didn't need to think about where he might put which hand since the marks gave away every hold. Still, much as he found them a blemish, on a day like today, they were a comfort.

He took the holds easily, getting his feet under his hips, relaxing as much as he could while still holding on. He needed to reach for the next hold. It wasn't too far past his range, just a slight jump. Again his hands flushed with sweat. He dipped his right hand into his chalk bag instinctively. His mouth watered. Was he thirsty? He kept his eyes trained on the next move, rehearsing in his mind where each foot would go. He wanted to get through this problem fast.

He pushed off with his right foot, rocking then springing for the hold with his left hand. He grabbed it and firm, the friction between his hand and the rock satisfying. He sighed, taking in for a moment the small victory. Then he pulled himself over the hanging rock and onto the ledge. It was narrow but space enough for him to stand on. He took a breath. No need to slow down now.

A bird flew past just as he turned to face the rock again. Even after all these twenty years it was still a thrill to see birds flying so close. From its shadow it was large, and he hoped it was a hawk. But when looked he saw it was a turkey vulture.

Up he went, the sun brightening and warming the rock as he made his way on its gray face. Here and there branches grew out of cracks in the rock, and weeds too. When he was a novice climber he had to be told more than once to avoid the temptation of grabbing onto a sturdy branch. Now he wouldn't think of touching them, knowing how easily they slipped from their roots.

His veins showed with effort. He took great greedy gulps of air, his neck and head red as he held breath in and blew it out his mouth with a *pfft*. It was noisy stuff, breathing

this way, laboring. When he climbed with a partner he didn't notice his own sounds this way, having to listen and respond to the other end of the rope.

The commands were important, vital, even, to the success of the system.

“No, no,” he said, “I say, ‘Ready to climb,’ and you say, ‘On belay,’ and I say, ‘Climbing,’ and you say, ‘Climb on.’”

“Climb on,” his brother parroted back.

“Do you mean it this time, Troop?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, “Climb on,” pulling up the slack in the bright blue coil of rope, his hair falling in curls around his eyes, somehow looking as disheveled as he had looked two hours ago when he woke up.

He clipped into the bolt. There wasn't much of a ledge to stand on here. He used his feet to push off the rock in front of him and sat into his harness, his back to the open air, the sounds of the road below. The third and fourth pitches of this climb were easy. He remembered that vividly now.

Troop had said, “This is cake here. Barely even need to place any gear.”

“It's fast climbing, that's sure,” he had said.

“You're just slowing us down, placing all that gear every ten feet like we're going to fall. Come on already. I don't want to take all that out, clean up after you.”

“You in some kind of hurry?”

“Maybe I have other things to do besides sit here watching your ass in that harness as you place six pieces every five feet so we won't fall on rock that's so flat you might as well walk right up. Like placing gear to cross a parking lot.”

“It’s not just hard pitches you need gear on,” he had said.

“No, we should probably be placing gear on our bouldering problems, too.”

“Quit it Troop.”

“We could be up already if you’d hurry it. I’m not going to fall; you’re not going to fall. Just get over it already.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Here we go again,” Troop said, shifting his weight.

“Up rope,” he said. “There’s enough slack in this line to drop us both to the bottom. Come on, take this slack in.”

“God damn it, quit being such a baby. I’ll take it in.” Slowly the rope pulled away from him.

“How’d you get that much slack in the system anyway?”

“Just kept feeding it out. I trust you, John. Maybe that’s how. ”

They were silent then, for a while. Finally Troop said, at the end of the fourth pitch, “How many kiloNewtons of force could be applied to the system right now before it would fail?”

“Well, let’s see. The carabiners are rated to nine, the rope is a nine, the cams are optimally placed so they are probably each at a nine or ten, and all of the gear is relatively new, so I’d say,” but he trailed off before he finished his calculation, because Troop was cracking up laughing.

“If you divide the kiloNewton by the force, and then add  $y$  to  $\theta$ , you get a maximum force load of what, exactly?” Troop said in his nerdiest voice.

“This isn’t a joke,” he said. “This is for our safety. The system only works if you take all this stuff into account. It relies on precision. Why do you think there are so many climbing accidents?”

“People make mistakes.”

“No, Troop, that’s just it. No. People are lazy. That’s why mistakes happen. People think they don’t need to consider kiloNewtons or place gear every ten feet as is recommended. People break one little rule, then another.”

“You really can suck the fun out of any adventure sport, man.”

It was no use. He couldn’t talk sense into Troop about these things. Most people, he found, were slipshod about things like this, uninterested in exercising their minds with math and logic, wanting to go by feel instead. But feel wasn’t enough.

Now, as he pulled himself up the rock without a system, he felt a shot of anxiety pass through him. He had trusted the system, the surety of repetition and redundancy. See, there were rules to the ascent. Rule number one: you must have a partner. Rule number two: you and your partner must train and learn all the skills you will need before you need them on the rock. Learn how to tie knots, how to use quick draws, nuts, carabiners, cams, and other tools on boulders and perfect your skills. Rule number three: you and your partner must communicate. The simple commands of “ready to climb,” and “on belay” will one day save your life. Rule number four: follow all the rules, like how frequently to place gear (every ten feet is the maximum recommended distance, because at ten feet, you’re facing a fall potential of twenty feet should something go wrong). Rule number five: follow all the rules all the time.

He hung back at the last bolt. It had a large ledge and plenty of space for him to squat down. He didn't want to wait too long to finish, didn't want his muscles to release the lactic acid that would slow him down, or for his mind to wander too much and begin playing tricks on him. How many feet to the bottom? No matter.

It was very sunny out now, and not too warm yet. The day was going to be perfect. He stood up again and stretched for a moment, still hooked into the anchor. When he was ready he unhooked and dipped his hands into the chalk bag. He began again. The last pitch wasn't too long. No rush, no pressure, just easy climbing. One foot after the next.

"Ah!" he cried as a mouse ran over his fingers on his right hand. He almost let go but his body held fast to the rock. His hands flushed with fresh sweat. He breathed deeply. Only eighty more feet to the top.

It had been too long since he'd climbed Cathedral. He wouldn't let this much time pass again, he was sure. If he were with a partner he would take another burn up the rock today, maybe take a different route, something harder. Then they would gorge themselves on a steak in North Conway. But for now, only twenty feet left. Then ten, then five.

Once he was at the top he looked around. He took a long pull of water. He stood there, panting from exertion and accomplishment, gazing at the expanse of mountains around him. At the top you could hear wind and cars far below echoing up. It sounded like nothing and airplane jet engines and everything all at once. It was the sound of separating from earth. The old excitement came back and it stung only a little. He



wouldn't take another burn up the crag today. The next climbers wouldn't be up for another thirty minutes.

He took out a candy bar. It had nuts and caramel and was covered in chocolate. He opened the wrapper and took a huge bite. "Mmmff," he groaned, crunching the peanuts as he chewed loudly, his mouth open, gulping air.

## IN RUSK COUNTY

The rifle, a Browning .22, was given to Richard by his mother for his thirteenth birthday. It was easily the best gift he ever got. When he rested the stock on his cheek, he felt in command of his life. As his right hand held the ridged fore stock and his left index finger bent to meet the elegant curve of the trigger, Richard's attention was rapt in anticipation of what he loved most of all: the quiet expelling of a bullet from the muzzle.

The first thing he killed with the Browning was a squirrel. One afternoon, when his mother took Tommy to the doctor, Richard had laid on his belly in the backyard for three hours. He watched as the squirrel darted back and forth from the base of a tree taking evasive paths across the yard. Its tail twitched, its nose twitched. He even watched it, acorn in paws, making a strange birdcall sound up one of the oak trees. He traced every movement in his sights, training his breath to work in and out slowly. At length, a word rose up in him like a command, then coasted through his consciousness as smoothly as an echo: shoot. Shoot. For a moment before he pulled the trigger, the moment when he drew his last smooth, long breath in—you had to exhale when you pulled the trigger, it made a more accurate shot—he thought what he was about to do was unfair to the squirrel. But it was too late, by then he had already inhaled and on the exhale, he pulled the trigger with his left index finger, the bullet expelled, and the squirrel was gone.

Next he would kill a deer. His mother deposited Richard and Tommy at their uncle's cabin in Wisconsin for a weeklong hunting trip.

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*The nonrequited—or was it unrequited?—loves were the very best kind, the most yearnful kind. It wasn't hard for her to write about nonrequited, yearnful love. Take her and Weston Booker, for example? He sat behind her in four classes each day, because of the alphabet, and she pined for him. She pined all day for him, worrying over the smell of her hair, the way the nape of her neck looked when she swept her hair to one side, the way her voice sounded when she answered questions in class, the way her skin looked (pizza face last week, better after the apricot scrub she commandeered from mom's cabinet).*

*When she wrote her poems she wrote them for him. When she read Yeats—her main influence, if anyone was asking—she thought of him. They would go to the dance together. During a slow dance, they would gaze into each other's eyes. His lips would quiver. They wouldn't exchange any words. They would kiss. He would probably touch her bosom. Her knees felt weak at the prospect.*

*My smelling salts, she thought, as she reached into her satchel. In her satchel she carried a modest smelling salts, a tiny sample vial of perfume by Jessica McClintock, a hand-stitched leather totem purse containing her favorite bead and a Susan B. Anthony dollar. She also carried a pair of glasses with plastic, non-corrective lenses in them, and a sample tube of lipstick from Clinique that her mother gave her a few weeks ago. It was*

*called "Plum Spice," and stained her lips a dramatic dark red. Her lips are huge. They are her most prominent feature, after her eyes, which are also huge.*

*It was her hope that her lips painted this color would get Weston's attention, but he only teased her for wearing makeup. She had nearly wanted to cry when he teased her, it hurt her so. If only he knew her feelings!*

*Her other efforts to convey her feelings, through her poetry? She was too oblique, her friend Sushila remarked. She had had to look up the word "oblique," because Sushila was always using words like that. When she saw what it meant, she agreed. But how much more direct could she be other than naming a poem after him?*

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The first morning, Richard's uncle had scolded him when he asked if he could have hot chocolate with his breakfast. "Turd Bird, you gotta stop eating like a girl. Men drink black coffee." Richard choked down the coffee but it tasted like cigarette butts and burnt leaves.

To Tommy, their uncle gave a warm cup of milk with Ovaltine, saying, "We need to put some meat on your bones."

Up in the stand they went the whole day without seeing a deer, and Richard's uncle wouldn't let him track squirrels.

"Only thing we point at with our muzzle is something we're willing to shoot, Turd Bird. Squirrels are a waste of ammo. And you know what else?"

"You'll scare the deer away if you shoot," said Tommy, without looking up from the owl he was whittling.

Richard's rifle stayed in its tan padded case all day. He grew so bored he began shaking his leg.

"No more sugar for you," whispered his uncle, putting his hand to still Richard's right knee.

"But," Richard said, the word as a question, as a puff of breath floated out with his weak objection.

His uncle was right. In fact, sitting all day made Richard all the more aware that his pants were too tight, especially around his thighs. They were hard canvas, a purchase from the Army Surplus Store, something he had specially asked to get instead of normal pants for school. The buttonholes on the fly were stiff and even after six months hadn't given; the pants were next to impossible to button and unbutton.

Sitting up in that stand reminded him of how the kids at school teased him, poking his belly and calling him Doughnut. Then they'd dip a hand between his legs and punch his balls, calling them the doughnut holes.

Everyday they started with breakfast, then three hours in the deer stand. They would break for lunch, then hike to a different segment of the woods for target shooting, then back to the deer stand until sundown. They would hike back to the cabin, which was drafty and freezing by this time of day, and their uncle would start a fire and put on dinner. He would send Tommy and Richard out to play in the clearing by the cabin, and in the near darkness, they would chuck stones onto the gravel and use matches to light leaves on fire.

Over dinner they would talk about that days' time in the stand, and about the plan for the next day. It was always the same. Richard wished everything didn't have to be so monotonous.

After dinner Tommy and Richard would sit on the couch and watch TV while their uncle smoked his pipe in his recliner. On the coffee table before them were the rifles they carried hunting each day. Each night the cleaning ritual took thirty minutes, as their uncle showed them how to clear the bullets, disassemble the rifle, run the oily cloth through the barrel. That was Richard's favorite part, dropping the tiny weight into the barrel and pulling with satisfaction on the weight to drag the cloth through. Tommy was meditative, using the pipe cleaners to work out the tiniest bit of grit from that day's target practice.

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*The Rusk County Prairie Museum gift shop was the only place she ever wanted to visit when they came to Wisconsin. Her mother always made sure they went. Instead she was left along the side of the road, waiting for her brother and father to finish one of their "driving lessons," illegal since her brother was only fourteen. Her mother, sick again today, had stayed in the motel, curtains drawn, sending Lindsey out with the boys for the day.*

*Lindsey kicks the gravel at her feet. She enjoys the sound the gravel makes under her boots. Her wooly socks keep her feet dry if not warm, and her long skirt and petticoat and pantaloons beneath keep her legs warm.*

*Looking to the woods, she knows what she must do. She must find inspiration for her poem, the key that will open it up and make clear all the things that were foggy before. Once she has found the key to the love poem, and once she completes it, she can give it to Weston as a gift. She will do it as a secret admirer sort of thing, but he will instantly know it was her because*

- 1. She is the only person brilliant enough to have written that poem; and*
- 2. He feels the same way about her, he will confess, so of course the poem was written by her.*

*Once that happens all she will have to do is win the writing contest with the poem and win the \$100 to buy the dress at the Rusk County Prairie Museum, which is the dress she will wear to the dance that Weston will invite her to after he reads the aforementioned poem.*

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The trip hadn't been what Richard thought it would be. He thought hunting was about shooting and killing animals. He learned from his uncle it was mostly about tracking. Richard didn't like the tracking part of hunting at all. He didn't like the long, quiet stretches in the deer stand, didn't like how cold his hands got, or how boring it was when the woods were still. He wanted action. He wanted to hunt animals and wear their pelts.

Moreover, with all the time outside and all his uncle's prodding, Richard was constantly starving on the trip. His uncle would say, "Turd Bird, you don't need but two bites from that sandwich." Or, "Turd Bird, you should be eating nothing but grapefruit."

He was pained as he waited for his uncle to open the thermos, always obsessing the warm cider and turkey sandwich that waited in their lunch.

Tommy, on the other hand, moved soundlessly through the woods, carrying a long stick that he had carved into a smooth scepter. Shooting didn't interest him. He was quietly interested in the mushrooms and moss growing on the forest floor, in tracking the deer from their droppings, which he picked up between his right thumb and index finger, analyzing for warmth, moisture, and softness, to determine how fresh it was.

While they waited in the stand, Tommy would whittle like their grandpa had taught them. Tommy could sit for hours up in the stand, asking no questions, not ever having to pee, not ever getting hungry. He would whittle away, a capacity for silence moving in him like clouds.

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*She began to feel especially winsome and downtrodden, and a gust of wind bit through her layers, blowing her hair onto her face. She ran across the road, leaving fallow cornfields behind her, and rushed into the woods. She could feel the flush coming across her cheeks. They did look enchanting this way; pink to contrast the sea glass green of her eyes. Like a forest nymph, she plucked her way deeper and deeper in.*

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The whole week drew to disappointment as deer evaded them. By turns Richard was relieved to not have to shoot and face the potential of missing, and angry that they had such poor luck, though it did not surprise him. He was at once happy to be up in Wisconsin, happy to have the rifle, and yet as each day passed without shooting a deer,



Richard began to be filled with anxiety. His return to Chicago loomed, as did his return to school. He saw now it was foolish for him to have believed he would turn around unpopularity by shooting a deer. Still, he clung to the idea that he had succeeded in spurring genuine interest from some of the other boys, who were not blighted as he was with a roll of fat, when he told them the story of shooting the squirrel.

Before long it was the last day. The morning had been rainy and their uncle complained of an aching knee. The night before Richard's anxiety stole some of his sleep as he fretted over the possibility, now inevitable, that they would not shoot a deer. "It's the last day, Turd Bird," he said to himself. "No time to waste."

As they sat by the fire watching the rain clear and the sky turn a warm hue, his uncle called off the last day of hunting. "Too wet out, won't see anything today. Besides, I can't bear the hike with this crick in my neck and this sore in my knee."

Richard's heart sank. Today was going to be the day! Now that was lost. Now today was nothing. After lunch, when the thermometer had climbed to 45 degrees, his uncle said, "Balmy out there! You go out and play. I'll make my famous beef stew for our supper tonight."

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*She stops when her ankle gives out on an uneven patch of earth. She looks for a place to sit and finds a large rock with a welcoming slope. She limps to the rock and unlaces her right boot. Every time she stumbles it's this ankle gives way. She had wanted to be a ballerina but with ankles like this she couldn't finish one lesson without nearly collapsing. She concludes the ankle is fine but that it might bruise later.*

*She takes out her satchel and removes her pencil and notepaper. "Pine needles blanketing the forest floor," she writes. "Tree branches creaking in the wind." She holds her breath, eager to hear what she might be missing. A distant sound of water dropping. No, that won't do for the poem. A birdcall. Too cliché. She lets out a sigh, then draws in a deep breath. "The cold of the rock, untouched by the sun," she writes. It is so silent she can hear the pencil on the paper, scratching across. She pauses to smell the air. "Clear, cold," and notices something that makes her wrinkle her nose. There, at her feet, is a small mound of dung, glistening like oily coffee beans.*

*Just then she hears something. She perks up, standing from the rock, peering in all directions for the source of the sound. Deer? Bear? Wolf? What wild animal will she meet? What will she learn? An animal would be a perfect symbol in her poem. A wolf seems like the kind of animal Weston would like. A wolf. "A wolf, alone in the wood. The pine needles under his paws, the scent of wild in his nostrils."*

*She sees the fur first, and wonders what kind of animal it must be, so tall with that kind of fur. Then she hears voices. She ducks behind the rock.*

*"With the cold rock at my face,  
I feel alone, lost without a trace."*

*She takes the notepad out and scribbles it down, even as the voices draw nearer. When she is done, she holds her breath, her pencil poised above the paper, listening. She can't make out what they're saying, but she is able to see them, just barely, as she peers around the rock, a boulder, really, she thinks to herself:*

*"With the cold boulder against my cheek,*

*Missing you has me feeling weak.”*

*She scribbles that down, too. They are young boys, she sees, and they are heading deeper into the woods. Are they ghosts? They look like they come from a long time ago, and she aches with envy. She still has her ski jacket on, ruining the romantic look of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It is always like that for her, something ugly intruding on her. Like when she got her first pimple after finally getting her braces off. Their clothes are dusty colors, khaki, gray, faded army green, and the bigger, older boy wears a Daniel Boone hat.*

*She follows them at a distance, careful to tuck behind trees and boulders and brambles. The forest is not yet completely bare as it will be by winter’s end. Branches are still half covered in brown, dry leaves. If only her jacket weren’t so dreadfully bright! Purple and blue, better than the previous ski jacket she’d had the last two years that was fluorescent yellow, the same color as the coats garbage men wore in her town in winter. Weston had teased her for that, too. It took her until this winter to convince her mother she needed a new one. She was too embarrassed to say why.*

*She is so clever and hiding from the boys. Such excitement made from a dreary, boring day! Her mother sick at the hotel, her father with her brother, but here is she is, garnering inspiration for one of her poems, what will surely be her finest poem, and having an adventure to boot! Focus, she tells herself, don’t lose your focus.*

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To avoid the brambles that they had been caught in before, they walk the length of their uncle’s driveway to the road and turn right. They follow the road, skirting the edge of the woods, until they get to the spot where they tuck back in. It is a clear shot from

here to the ravine where they like to play best. There, half the rocks are fossils, and Tommy searches incessantly for good ones to put in his pockets. Richard can practice sighting and tracking.

Richard hunkers down at a stump and unpacks his rifle from the soft case. It is the first time this week, apart from target shooting and cleaning, that the rifle is out of the case. It is the first time since being up in Wisconsin that Richard rests the rifle against a log and looks for prey to lock in his sights.

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*At last they stop in clearing. She waits behind a downed log. She kneels, damp leaves at her feet. The younger boy, who looks the way she imagines Tom Sawyer would have looked—thin, scrappy, with a smudge of dirt on his face—walks along the edge of what she sees is a huge ravine. With a long walking stick, he taps the rocks that rim the edge of the ravine. He seizes upon a rock and bends down to examine it.*

*“What did you find?” asks Daniel Boone.*

*“A fossil,” says Tom Sawyer.*

*“Bring it here.”*

*“Nah, it’s not a very good one. We should leave it.”*

*“Bring it here,” Daniel Boone says again, more insistent. “Maybe I’ll want to take it home.”*

*Tom Sawyer does as he’s told, carrying the rock over. He gives it to Daniel Boone. Boone holds it in his hands, looks at it up close, then from afar. He tosses it behind him. “It’s a crappy one, alright,” he says.*

*Daniel Boone looks around him, finally heading to a huge stump where he unpacks his rifle from its soft case. He begins tracking—a squirrel? She wonders—in his sights, but she cannot figure what he is focused on. He is intent. She writes:*

*“The young hunter cannot know,  
How I see his work with arrow and bow;  
For I have tracked you in my sights,  
O’er many days and many nights.”*

*She recorded more of her sensory observations: “A crow cuts across the sky above, black and verboten. The sky is white and high, pregnant with rain. Water seeps into your clothes, draining warmth from you. The forest floor is wet, the leaves slick with mud.”*

*She looks up again at the boys. What good luck to have stumbled upon these subjects! She thought of the time, realizing that it must have been twenty or thirty minutes already, and that she needed to get back to the road if she was going to meet father and brother. They would never understand her trip into the woods. She had to get back on time so she could convince her father to go to the museum and get the dress.*

*It took her a minute to realize that Daniel Boone had switched from tracking an imaginary animal to tracking Tom Sawyer. Tom Sawyer was pacing up and down the edge of the ravine. From where she sat she could just barely see that what she thought was an ordinary ravine was a ravine of rocks on either side. How peculiar, she thought to herself, aware of her use of the word, “peculiar,” proud of herself for it.*

*The older boy looked to have his gun pointed straight for the younger boy. She panicked. “No, don’t shoot!” she shouted, “Stop!” getting up from her hiding spot.*

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Ahead of him, Tommy plays at the top of the felsenmeer. His uncle had told them glaciers formed it, but that was the kind of thing Tommy listened to and Richard grew bored of hearing.

With the muzzle braced against a log, Richard traced his brother’s movements in his sights. Like every night of the trip, last night Richard had taken out all the ammunition, disassembled and cleaned the gun. Nevertheless, Richard felt a rush of power as he tracked his brother. This was the action he’d been denied all week.

His finger was poised on the trigger. Tommy stopped moving at the top of the felsenmeer. It was easy. Just pull the trigger. First it would Bap! out of the muzzle, then it would Crack! into the woods, then it would Fump! into Tommy’s head, then he would lose his footing.

Bap! Richard thought. And in that instant, from someplace behind him, he heard the plea, “Don’t shoot!” And just like that, Tommy was falling.

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*In that instant Tom Sawyer looked up from his reverie right at her and lost his footing. It looked like he was shot, the way he fell in an instant, tumbling down the rocks. Daniel Boone had turned to look at her, pointing the muzzle of the gun to the sky as he did.*

*“Oh God!” she said.*

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“Shit!” he said as he dropped his rifle and ran for the top of the ravine. His mind raced. He hadn’t felt his finger squeeze. He hadn’t squeezed. He hadn’t squeezed the trigger at all. The rifle hadn’t kicked, hadn’t given him that snap in the left shoulder the way that it did during target practice. He hadn’t moved an inch. The chamber was clear, they removed the bullets every night. How could this happen?

“Tommy!” he cried, “Tommy!”

It took forever to get to the bottom of the felsenmeer where Tommy lay. All the way down, hustling his heavy, awkward body, Richard thought of how fat and slow and weak he was. He was always being a Turd Bird.

The rocks were impossible to balance on, even at the bottom of the ravine. It was all loose, large hunks of rock, and Richard kept thinking of what his uncle would say. “Turd Bird, pick that kid up! Hurry up, Turd Bird. We don’t have much time! Can’t wait all day for you, can we?”

But I didn’t shoot, he kept thinking.

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*In all her favorite books, and indeed, in all her daydreams about herself, she had imagined that in such a situation, which she knew to be called a “scrape” because she had read Little Women and Anne of Green Gables, the heroine, which would be her, would normally rush into the “fracas” and use her quick thinking and keen skills to help the person in danger.*

*Daniel Boone, she now saw, wasn't Daniel Boone at all: he was fat. His face was red as he rushed to Tom's aid, and his clothes too tight. She could hear the fabric of his pants as it rubbed together with each step he took, swishing all the way. She ran after him. He threw the Daniel Boone hat to the ground, and as she nearly stepped on it she saw it was a polyester fake. She looked up to see his matted hair, a greasy dark brown, pressed against his head. From up close she could see his ill-fitting clothes were cheap and modern. He wasn't a ghost; she could smell his body odor. She was stunned. She stopped in her tracks.*

*"Tommy," he yelled. There was no reply. She could see from where she stopped Tom Sawyer at the bottom of the rock ravine. There was blood on his face. His pants were ripped and blood was on his leg, and a dark spot was growing on the pant leg.*

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"Help me!" he called to the girl who stood above them, staring down. "We have to get him out of here!" The girl didn't move. "Come down here," he said.

Then, quietly, to himself, he said, "I need some help here." He looked Tommy up and down, heart in his throat, searching for the place where the bullet entered. But he couldn't find it. Could Tommy, sure-footed Tommy, have lost his balance? Did he fall, nothing more? Richard concluded, to his own shock, that for once his brother was more of a klutz than even him. He immediately felt bad for the satisfaction he took in this.

In sixth grade Richard learned CPR and basic first aid. All he could recall about it now was the terrible smell of rubbing alcohol on the dummy's lips, the cold slick feel of the doll against his skin, the snickers and muffled laughter behind him as he pumped her



chest and breathed into her gaping mouth. He had a vague memory from that class that there were times you weren't supposed to move someone who was hurt. Like, if they'd broken their neck or something.

Richard couldn't tell what kind of hurt Tommy was. Parts of him looked broken, but Richard set his ear to Tommy's mouth and felt the warm mist of breath coming through. He could see blood on his head and the darkening spot on Tommy's pants. He didn't want to lift the pants to see what was underneath. He had to pick him up and get him out of here.

Richard struggled to get a grip on Tommy. The rocks beneath his feet wobbled. His boots were too large, was the problem, and to fix the problem, he had began to wear two pair of socks instead of one. Now as he heaved Tommy with all his might, he saw again how one problem always lead to another. He finally got his arms under Tommy's chest and pulled him up.

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*Daniel Boone turned to her, "Help me," he said, "We have to get him out of here."*

*She heard a voice saying, "No." She felt her feet moving under her, turning from Daniel Boone. She didn't know why.*

*"Tommy, I'm coming for you," said Daniel Boone. But his voice was far away now, as though she heard it through the other end of a cup-and-string telephone. Was there a river she hadn't noticed before? Because all she could hear was a roaring in her ears, loud like a river at flood.*

*From far away she could hear “Get us help!” but she wasn’t sure that cry was meant for her. Her feet carried her slowly at first, walking back to her log. She had the feeling that she needed to eat something sweet right away, she felt bloodless somehow. She finds a butterscotch disc in her satchel and puts it in her mouth.*

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When he began walking up he called to her again. He looked all around but she was gone.

They had to hurry. The extra pair of socks was overheating his sweaty feet. Need to get boots, he thought. His mind was like that, always ticking ahead, like his teacher said. Stop shaking your leg! She’d say. And he could stop, but only for a few minutes while he thought really hard about it.

“Gotta hustle Turd Bird,” he mumbled to himself. The gym teacher, Coach Herman, was always telling him to hustle. He was perpetually last for things, and worst of all last to be picked. He always thought if he ever got to be picker he’d take the other kids that were usually last first. But no one wanted his team to lose. “Hustle Turd Bird, got to hustle,” he said again.

Hurrying made him disorganized, like leaving the house on a weekday morning with mom. Mornings were filled with his mother firing commands at him: Get your lunch! Help your brother! Tie your shoes! Eat your breakfast! Now the cacophony of commands came from everyone: His uncle said, “Turd Bird, don’t fuck this up. Get him outta here.” His mother said, “Save your brother, be my man of the house.” Tommy said, “You gotta help me, please.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, “okay.”

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*After that, her feet were so light, lighter than she'd ever known them to be, and quick. She didn't even have to look where she ran, she just ran. With the butterscotch tucked into her right cheek, she flew through the woods, her satchel beating against her butt as she went, her ankles staying strong. She was usually the first girl, sometimes even the first in her class, to finish a distance run during gym. It had always embarrassed her, having such long legs and being so quick because it set her apart from the other kids. Now, she was thrilled to have this speed.*

*Maybe she was running for help, she thought. She could see it now, returning to the boys with a pail of water and a wool blanket. In Little House on the Prairie the characters were always carrying simple commodities like that to help someone who was hurt.*

*But when she got to the road, where her father and brother waited, she climbed into the car without a word.*

*“Where were you?” her father asks.*

*“I had to powder my nose,” she says, breathless.*

*“She had to take a piss,” her brother says. For once she doesn't argue with him for being so crass. “You running or something?” he asks, casting a long glance at her.*

*“No,” she says, catching her breath at last.*

*“Well, I hope you're happy,” her brother says with mock gloom in his voice, “we're going to your stupid farm museum now.”*

*The farm museum is a twenty-minute ride. Her father turns up the radio, tuning into The Beatles on a classic rock station. They ignore her in the back, and it is like normal.*

*At the farm museum store she looks at the rack for the dress, but it is gone. For months it has hung on the rack, waiting for her. She looks over the other dresses, but there are none her size.*

*Her father calls to her, "Let's go," he says, "Time for lunch." He is holding a bag from the shop.*

*In the car he passes the bag to her, saying, "Your mother wanted me to get this for you. She says you're only young once, you should have it."*

*She holds the dress in her hands, flushed with excitement.*

*But when she puts it on she can see through the rumpled blush pink linen to herself. She is not a heroine from one of her stories in this dress. She will not go to the dance with Weston in this dress.*

*In the night she cannot sleep. She will wear the dress and think only of them, of how unbrave she was, of how unlike any of her heroines she had behaved in their moment of need. The only comfort she can find is imagining them as ghosts.*

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Some things could not be put back. The squirrel, like, could not be. After the bullet hit the flesh and tore its way through, that was all for the squirrel. No more acorns, no more twitchy tail, no more back and forth between the trees.

But some things can be put back. Tommy. Right here, he could be put back.

Better than killing a deer, better than being a hunter, was being a hero. And today of all days was Richard's. He thought, light-headed, thirsty, panting, that he was finally somebody better than he thought he could be, than any of the kids at school would think he could be. How would they recount this story? He saved his brother's life.

"I've got you Tommy," he kept saying, and he did have the boy. Tommy's breath came quietly but evenly, and though Tommy's pant leg was wet with blood it didn't scare Richard anymore. Now that Tommy was in his arms and Richard could feel for the first time his own tremendous greatness, he could think clearly.

In the overwhelming emptiness of the forest a funny feeling arose in the pit of Richard's belly when he looked to the light between the trees and knew that he would deliver Tommy safely to their uncle's cabin. And with each step and each jiggle of his roll of fat, Richard was intoxicated with his own wondrous capacity to carry this boy. Tommy's breath was constant; Richard's was loud as a chant. He was sore-footed, but powerful, so powerful.

What came to him was the dangerous thought that he might be able to do anything now. He would walk across the threshold of his uncle's cabin, and in crossing it become something different than he had ever been, better than he could have imagined. He was a hero.

Like a wild bird, inside Richard grew the hope that this was the beginning of a whole new life. He grunted as he walked, leaning back to keep Tommy's head steady, then keening forward when he felt strain in his back. He was not a pretty sight, but he

was only a hundred yards from the cabin. Smoke rose from the chimney and Richard's breath quickened. "Almost there," he said to Tommy. "Almost there."

In his mud-caked boots, Richard was a little guilty for his pride. But Tommy was home, still breathing. That was something. His uncle would figure out the rest, and as he took one last glance around at the dusky sky and the gray woods from which they had emerged, he knew he was not Turd Bird or Doughnut.

He was giddy.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Mary Martha Aubry recently received her MFA in Fiction Writing from George Mason University. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Sarah Lawrence College in 2002. She lives in Leesburg, Virginia, with her husband and son.