

Abstract

Title of Thesis: Ghost Arm

Allison Wyss, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

Thesis directed by: Professor Maud Casey
Department of English

Ghost Arm is the beginning of a novel-in-progress about a woman who has lost her left arm. She has a phantom limb, but the phantom is an actual ghost who acts on his own and gets into trouble.

Ghost Arm

by

Allison Wyss

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Maud Casey, Chair
Professor Howard Norman
Professor Emily Mitchell

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Prologue

I duck out of Curly's just before last call, just before the regulars get gloomy. They'll bewail time's passing, moan for buddies gone, love lost, and death and bad weather.

But this weather isn't bad! The cold air feels fresh and crisp and the snowflakes are tiny crystals that keep their shapes on my sleeves. Walking is like skating, smooth over the slick sidewalk ice. Gliding through the frozen air is like slicing a wave, like swimming. Deep breaths are clean, even in this tumble-down part of town. Another breath and I'm almost not drunk anymore.

And life isn't passing—not too quickly! It's too slow. And yet it's exhilarating, all that's happening. And so much to come.

I sold a dress today! But why should that excite me? I sell them all the time.

Maybe it's not the dress that has me feeling this way but the idea, a new one. A pattern unfolding in my head, of sleeves and neckline, skirt blossoming. Flying together from bright fabrics. And splitting apart, seams unraveling into distinct arms and torso and billowing skirt. The shape of the gown is emerging.

It started with a person, this time. The bartender with a sudden flash of diamond on her finger—it means she'll need a dress. Instead of Mike and Jack and Poncho, I talked to her. I hardly know her. She ignores me for the men, most nights. But not tonight, with her news and her glitter. I watched her so closely. Her body, her gestures, the pattern of her words as they strung and spun together. Did she know I was building a dress—one just for her—in my head?

It's not done yet. I have to watch her again. I have to see her in a different light, a different mood. Also, I have to convince her to buy it. Steer her clear of pre-made gowns. Even if I can't, and perhaps I can't, this design is going somewhere. This idea will be a dress.

She'll want the neckline sort of slutty, but I'll edge it with—

—I jump back. A dark shape. It jumped at me first. A cat?

Or a shadow. Thick with fur, but flicking, quick. Quick.

I pounce, too. A recoil. Just instinct. And then I catch myself, try to, but the ice won't catch. It's slick and both feet are sliding. Brown fur flashes again—the other way.

Knee-elbow-hip hits concrete. Lights flood the street with a screech that could be the cat or the car.

What car? Black tire, over on top underneath me—crush—my arm—metal flashes, grinds and is gone. Hot rubber and exhaust and sharp screaming that's not the cat or the car. Is it me? Is it my arm? And the cat is gone and it's red hot and it's so very cold and then it's dark.

I don't know that my eyes are closed until I open them and then I can feel that they've been closed for a long time. They're sticky and the room is dark, but it's also too bright. It's not my bedroom. I close my eyes, but it's weird now. There's no pretending I'm home anymore and anyway there's someone sitting beside me. Is it a stranger? I bet it's my dad and so I open my eyes again, see that it is, see that he's sleeping.

So something has happened to me. It's bad, because this is a hospital, clearly, and because my dad is here. But I don't hurt. Not much.

Where *is* it that it hurts? With my eyes closed, I focus. But it's like an ache that's not even in my body but hovering over it, then pulsing around inside it, then far away.

What happened to me? That's far away, too. At the bottom of a well and I could haul up the bucket, the memory, but it's too much work. Too much work and I'm tired. I'm tired.

My dad is sleeping, his head tweaked forward and his ponytail flipping up over his collar and his beard digging into the front of his shirt. Sleep. I can do that and it's better than remembering.

It must be long, again, since my eyes have opened. But in my sleep, or in my lying here with my eyes closed—who can tell?—I watch flashes. Bright lights in the dark. Black to bright white to color. Pulsing, zipping. Lights flood in, then ebb.

Suddenly, eyes open, it's just a room in a hospital. Clearly. And there's my dad. His eyes are open, too. He's watching me, sees I'm awake, leans forward. He's going to talk, but I can't tell if it's a dream or not or if he'll speak English when he speaks or if he's really, *really* my dad.

“Velma? Honey?” he says.

“Hmm.”

“How are you?” It must be him, the real one.

“Sleepy.” My eyes close again, but I fight them open.

“You. You were in a car accident. You were hit by a car.”

“Hmm.” That sounds right, but I don't think too hard about it.

“You—Velma, how are you? How do you feel?”

“Okay. Sleepy.”

“Does it hurt?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, Velma, there’s something.” He looks above my head, then at my face. His voice is soft. “I have to tell you something.”

It feels like I should sit up, but my body is too heavy. And there are tubes running out of me—how could I have missed them? There are bandages down the left side of me. I prod at myself, careful not to dislodge a tube. It’s so much gauze. My cheek stings beneath my fingers, dry and scabby. On my neck, the gauze is soggy.

“Don’t.” My dad reaches for my right hand, draws it down again, gently. “Velma, I have to tell you something.” His face is twitching.

“It was pretty bad? The accident?”

“Yeah, they had to. It’s weird, because, it seems like. Well, Velma.”

“What’s wrong?”

“They had to cut off your arm. They had to amputate it.”

“Right.”

“No, your left arm, honey.” His voice is low and fluffy.

“Bllsh.” I try again, pushing at my lips. “Bull. Shit.t.t.” I must be sleeping still or on weird drugs. “Bullllll. Shshshit.”

“I’m serious, Velma. This is serious.” The serious spins out and the sss at the end won’t stop. So he’s the one slurring. I’m dreaming? Or else he’s talking gibberish. Being silly. His face is sad.

“No.” I reach toward him with both hands, both arms, to show him. I grab hold of his hand, clutch his arm.

He shivers, then stills. “Velma, it’s going to be okay. It’s going to be hard, but it’s going to be okay.”

“Mm-hm.” Of course it is. I snuggle deeper into scratchy hospital sheets. Tired again.

“How long?”

“How long until what? Until you go home?”

“Mmm.”

“A couple weeks. I’m not sure.”

“Hmm.”

“But then there’s physical therapy. Stuff like that.”

And suddenly it’s funny. “How long is my arm gone?” I’m giggling. I squint my eyes up to see if he’s smiling too.

“Um.” He pushes his glasses deeper onto his nose, fidgets. “Do you mean time? Or...?” He whispers. “Do you mean the arm?”

“Mmh. How long?” But I don’t care about the answer and it’s dark again. My eyes must be closed.

“Velma, why don’t you sleep now?” His hand is warm on my forehead, clearing the hair from my face.

Silly daddy. My arm is right here. Not gone, silly daddy. Silly doctors, too.

This room is boring, except for the way the walls drip down from the ceiling to the floor. There's nothing on TV. The air is thick and stuffy. And no one will bring me my sewing machine.

It hurts a little bit. Underneath the fog, there's a dull ache in my left arm. I can't feel it so much as I can tell that the ache is there. Silly daddy. Silly doctors.

Silly arm. It's stubborn. Won't do what I say to do. Just lies there like a log. Then shivers when it isn't even cold. And right now. Right now, I don't even want to watch TV—I want to watch the walls—but the silly arm is clicking the clicker. Changing the channels. I wish it would stop. Volume up up up. It hurts my ears. Volume back down. Stop it, silly arm. I say stop.

The doctor's voice blurs into a song or maybe a chant or a cheer. He's talking about my missing arm as if it's a fact, as if it's proven or obvious. That's the strangest part. But it must not be strange. It must be—*must be*—true.

“Uh-huh.” I nod, but don't listen.

It must be the drugs that make it so hard to believe, that make it impossible to reconcile what I see with what I feel, what they tell me with what I know. I know it's there and I feel it. But I look, and then, just a hole.

The doctor prods at the hole, pokes it with a slim silver instrument that feels cold and metallic. A twang reverberates through the cords of me that are still there and those that must not be. It's tinny, pitched like a shiver. It sends my left fingers—the “imaginary” ones—into a twitchy flutter.

A phantom limb, of course. That's the explanation. It doesn't explain anything.

The doctor, or maybe he's not a doctor but a nurse or a therapist, he writes on the clipboard, mumbles, leaves.

The covers rustle up over me and it's my left hand pulling them, the one they say is gone. My right arm is still—I can see it. My left arm is missing—I see that, too. And the edge of the sheet is twisting, twirling, bunching and then smoothing. It's my left fingers working it, nervously.

Can a phantom limb do that?

It must be the drugs. But—no—it can't be. Whatever it is, it's real.

Ghost Arm

My uniform shirt hung across the bed, dark blue, like a shadow. I rubbed a rough palm over it, cross-grain, then smoothed it. I tugged the left sleeve straight, flipped the cuff. Up and over. Forced it down. Placed with my fingers, creased with my palm. The ghost flicked it. I wrestled him off, pulled the sleeve straight again, re-flipped the cuff. No second hand to hold it flat. So steady, steady, slowly pulled it up and over. Then creased—hard and sharp—with my palm. Again. Again. No frills into this sleeve and no flowers. Just a triangle, then a flip into another, like the flap of an envelope. My fingers twisted and turned, ran like a bug flipped on its back. It was like watching a spider—half-squished and legs still squirming—how my fingers clamped together and apart, together and apart. They were squirming, squirming and it was like the scars that crackled on my shoulder—

—A deep breath at the last fold, just below the shoulder. I could let my heart race, but not for long. This was my life. I had to handle it.

But the ghost?

Calm! Another breath. I squeezed open a safety pin. Careful not to catch the bedspread. Stitched like sewing—I remembered it—like the pin was a needle. I wiggled it through the sleeve. It caught. Pulled loose. Fingers cramped, but I stretched them into a tight pain that pulled like longing.

My right arm behaved itself, did what I told it. Not the left. It poked into the folded sleeve, then it clung at my waist, until I scraped it away. It knotted at my shoulder, pinched the buckled ropes of my scars, but after a swat from the right, the fingers flapped, then drooped dully at my side.

Next, it was on with the shirt. I tossed it in the air, thrust the good arm through like a spear and wriggled it into place. My bra strap slipped, but eased back up. Spider hands again for the buttons.

Then I headed to work, to the museum, which pulled me. It was a quick walk through morning light, purple on the sidewalk. Brick-laid alleys nosed onto stark downtown streets. My coat was too warm for the air, but wind funneled up the empty sleeve, seeped through the folds. There it was, the museum, huge and square and imposing.

I began working at the Lembergher Medical Museum after my accident. It was where I belonged.

It was downtown, a whole block wide, the heart of the city. It pulsed life and death, bulged with citizens and tourists, pumped blood and money into all of us. It drew conventions from everywhere—associations of doctors, scientists, historians. Locals bought season passes, spent rainy Saturdays exploring. Sunny ones, too. They fondled the forceps, sniffed the cadavers. Poked at leathery livers, pickled kidneys, animated mechanical limbs. High schools held proms in the rotunda. Birthday parties buzzed through a giant game of “Operation,” skipped over flattened limbs long as school buses, dug out “water on the knee,” “broken heart,” and “Adam’s Apple.” The tweezers were electrified, took two arms to squeeze. Full body jolts preceded giggles. Or tantrums. And once a year, the week of Halloween, the museum held a gala—a ball, a masquerade, a festival—to raise money and to market itself.

The museum pulled me, too. I let it. And the ghost, as well. Each morning he became a taut strip of yearning, stretched toward the concrete columns.

Once inside the rotunda, underneath the high-arched cathedral ceiling, I wove between stone pillars the size of trees and then to my guard post. I was assigned a cart exhibit of syringes, which were empty or else filled with fake blood, fake medicine, fake saline. Bright needles sparked, jabbed at empty air. My job: to drag back small children, keep their gooey fingers bloodless. To hold toes behind the line, nose prints off the glass.

A middle-aged woman swelled from the crowd, leaned forward. Her toes edged the tape. A prickle of light reflected off the steel of hypodermic, then the shine of her forehead. And my invisible arm thrust out, slipped ghost thumb through belt loop and jerked. The woman lurched but didn't fall. She looked at me and I shifted my eyes away. My flesh body was calm, still. I held it so. Right hand in pocket, left sleeve swinging.

Another spectator emerged, designer glasses perched on the tip of a nose, which canted at a harsh angle. It pressed forward then held, toes on the line and hands and nose precisely above it as if a glass wall held them back. Children, three of them, clawed at the membrane that it hadn't quite punctured. Cheeks squished against the bubble I enforced around my cart. The ghost arm shimmered like a heat mirage, but felt cool like a breeze. Then there were just two faces turned to syringes, the others absorbed in the crowd. A new face broke the surface, this one with a beard, inspected points of needles and barrels of cylinders, dissolved. Beyond my syringe surface, the crowd was a river with whirls and eddies. It splashed up at the half dozen cart exhibits, cascaded past me, deeper, into the dark parts of the museum.

The ghost tugged at me, tried to pull me into the crowd. When he wanted something, it was like wading against a stream of steady water, a river current, to pull myself away. But I was working, stuck with syringes.

It wasn't the crowd I wanted, but the museum, the darker parts. I would have plunged myself into it, drowned in the specimens, washed myself in raw gore. I'd been a wimp before the accident—the museum had scared me, made me queasy. But after—the wash of juices through my belly, the shiver and the tingle, the pinprick tightening of each individuated hair—it was all that calmed me.

At lunchtime, a few guards passed me on their way to Arby's or the Dash-In—wherever they used to go. The one named Debra smiled, nodded her head, but I wasn't fooled. The ghost clenched fingers into fist. His hold on the bulge of my scars tightened, nipped into a sharp twinge. "Hi." I walked quickly, cut just close enough for the ghost to snarl fingers in the tall fluff of her teased-out hair. Then I panicked, jerked him back. She patted her head and frowned. She joined the others, let me be.

I ate my lunch in the empty museum yard. The bushes were sticks then, like the trees. Flowerbeds were dirt. The path was lined with chipped bones—human or animal or maybe even plastic. When I picked up half a femur, it felt dry and cold but real. I walked the stone rim of an empty fountain, then sat facing in, my sandwich in my lap. My feet dangled where the water was supposed to be.

The museum had four wings, named for the four humors.

There was the Black Bile Wing for technology. The latest drugs, surgical equipment. Shiny robotic limbs.

To the north was the Blood Wing, on human anatomy. Bodies blossomed, skin peeled off into curling petals. Epidermis blistered outward, revealed pulsing inner organs. They were perfect four-limbed bodies. Electrified. Illuminated. But cut open. Made of plastic.

The Yellow Bile was my dad's favorite, devoted to homeopathy. It stank of herbs and prickled with acupuncture.

The Phlegm Wing was the one I needed, the most satisfying. It was specimens, real ones—human tissue and full bodies—samples from historic collections. A college of physicians had assembled it a hundred years ago and the museum continued to acquire corpses, organs, malignant growths—pickled, mummified, turned to soap—curiosities of medicine, plucked from the sick and deformed. The chill. The recognition. I couldn't look. I couldn't stop looking.

Also, both of the Bile Wings had gift shops. The free clinic was in the Blood Wing, and Phlegm had the café. My cart of syringes was in the rotunda, not part of any wing, but where all four converged. In all my time there, I never worked deeper than the cart exhibits, never got to guard the specimens.

It was Marian that made me stay in the rotunda, my boss and my dad's old friend. He put her up to it. I suspected. My dad hated my job, thought I was giving up. He didn't know about the ghost, didn't know what kind of freak I was.

Back at my post, the needles glinted and the crowd swirled, but it was thinning as the day dragged on. Across the room, one man was still—he stared at me. His clothes were dark and his hair rested dead but uneasy on his head. Ever since I started, this man was always watching, always there. What was he looking at?

My ghost arm tingled, then waved and stretched and flailed. But the man saw only a quiet ripple in a folded sleeve, thought that air ruffled it, not a spirit. He saw a hole, an empty space. Or maybe he saw the rest of me. The un-whole part. His eyes moved up and down me, tickled the hairs that were real and the ones that were phantom.

Something surged in me and I couldn't tell if it was bile or emotion or what emotion it could be. Exhilaration? Pride? They made no sense, those feelings. Was it the ghost? He was frantic, flapping. So excited that he pawed at me, at my leg, at my side.

In that mood, he was like a thick but watery stream above my shoulder, then below. He fluttered at my waist, then scratched at my thigh. He wasn't dense as a shadow, but not thin as air. He was a haze, or a shimmer. Other people didn't see him. They felt, but couldn't name, the tickle or tweak, as they passed, at their sleeve. At their hair. At their throat.

He wasn't trying to hurt me with the flapping, the clawing, with all that energy. I didn't think so. His fingernails were overgrown and jagged, sharp as needles.

I swatted him, discreetly, put my body between the crowd and the syringes, felt the ebb and flow of the museumgoers. Was that man still watching me? Maybe the job would distract the ghost. Eventually, he calmed, wafted in and out, back and forth and swirling.

But when I looked down, blood sogged through my tights. I stretched my right hand to touch it, and my fingers came away wet, bright red. The sting lingered, hot and precious, on my thigh.

As I blotted at the scratches, pressed the bite into my skin, a little girl approached, her eyes on the marble floor. Then she looked up. "My uncle cut off two fingers and a thumb with the lawn mower!"

My fist closed on the blood to cup it, hide it. "That must have hurt."

"Yeah, and there was blood everywhere."

"I guess so." It was dripping through my fingers.

“Someone found his thumb in the--” A woman dragged the girl away, apologized.

Later, at home, there were crusted half-moons trailing down my left leg with long, whispery scratches. My tights were in tatters, so I ripped them off. Blood pulled with them and the wounds were scab-less, fresh again. I let them bleed. Pulled up old jeans, two legs at once. I paced back and forth from my living room to my bedroom, tried to calm myself. The ghost wrenched about, answered my frustration. I slowed my steps, slowed my breathing, hoped he'd calm.

The fingernail clippers sparkled from my dresser. I palmed them casually, careful not to tip him off. Then I sat on the edge of my bed and breathed, slowly and evenly. The invisible left arm wafted down to land on the living right one, which was open across my knees, as relaxed I could make it. It slithered against my palm. Then, slowly and smoothly, I closed my fingers around the invisible wrist. He bucked, jolted, squirmed. “Hey there. Settle down.” I whispered as if lulling a baby. “It’s okay.”

His fingers tapered softly, then shattered into rough edges, sharp like claws. I held the ghost hand with my real hand, wrapped around one ghost finger, with my middle, ring, and pinky. Twisted backward forward sideways to work the clippers with just index and thumb. My spider hand clamped against the ghost, which vibrated like a taut metal cord. Its shoulder end gripped my socket while the elbow flapped, buzzed like a caught fly. If he would just hold still... If I could just... I almost... almost... The clippers clattered to the floor. When I scooped them up, the hand escaped. Flew up, swatted for the ceiling, but couldn't reach, then trembled in the air at my side.

Again, I lulled him to my lap. Found the wrist, gripped tighter, used my cut-up, stinging thigh as a piece of the clamp this time. And again the clippers slipped away,

edged by a flick from the ghost. And again he thrashed from my shoulder. Wild and free and frantic.

“You have to let me do this!” It was like strangling an animal to keep my voice soft. There was fear in it, panic. It wasn’t mine, but pulsed from the ghost.

“How about a file, buddy?” I stroked the inside of his elbow. “Can we file down those claws?” The arm dragged behind me as I dug out an emery board. Snatched up again and trapped tightly, the ghost wriggled fiercely and, again, got loose.

We needed a break, so I sat, the emery board loose on my lap. My right nails were jagged, too, and I pressed a sharp point into my palm, studied the pinprick indentation. Then I ran my right hand over the file—the jeans gave it traction—ground the nails smooth to the ends of my fingers.

But what would make the ghost arm still?

While I was thinking, he was investigating. He must have been. There was a frizzle in that left thumb. The emery board hopped an inch from my lap. He’d pressed too hard, but with the next swipe, he figured it out. My right hand held the board to give him leverage and, one finger at time, the ghost filed. When he finished, he ran the nails along the soft inside of my right elbow. The edges were like silk.

I hadn’t mastered the ghost, just tricked him.

Before the accident, I’d never noticed how it took two hands to squash a spider. One to steady myself, to lean against the table, lower and lower, the other to strike. I’d never noticed that it took two hands to zip. Two hands to button. It took two hands, somehow, to put on lipstick. This ghost I had, he could help me out—if he felt like it. Or he could make it even harder.

I knew about phantom limbs, then. I knew about the clenching, the aching. Invisible muscles and physical pain that wouldn't stop. The doctors, the therapists, the pamphlets all told me. But the ghost was something else, something different. Drugs and shrinks and mirrored boxes—they couldn't cure me.

It wasn't natural, this thing that clawed into me. He should have clung to the dead arm. He should have shriveled like the muscle and bone and stringy nerves. He should have died with the snarl of raw meat that they cut from me.

If he had vanished, I could have handled it, if he had left me just the pain.

Lefty is restless at night. Nightly rightly leftly loosely. And tightly too. Velma sleeps, Lefty slinks-winks-tangles-tugs-and-snarls with her.

But he flips up, too, turns over, looses his grip, looses it loses it loses it, then t-t-t-t-tightens it. (clockwise, lockwise, lock-Lefty is sure)

He wafts upward. He remembers.

A coldness? A crunch?

Lefty hooks in when called upon, when the space, lacy-spacy, is free for him, grasps shoulder sinews and sighs. Curls-coils inward with Velma's low extended snoooooooooore. This is where he belongs, hooked in right now as Velma sleeps-sleeps-snoozes-snores, softsoftsoft. When detached-discarded, dis-attached, displaced by plastic, he coils, writhes, even flutters, flows in a circle. Holds on to whatever he can.

Lefty doesn't have thoughts—not quite, but what else to call them?—just sudden surges of emotions. Peace, then rage. Longing, then hilarity.

Lefty wants. Wants what? Wants to know what he wants, is what.

Apr. 5

Dear Ann,

Have you ever heard of Mordecai Brown? Probably not—unless I told you. But I probably didn't. He was a three-fingered pitcher around the turn of the century. I mean the beginning of the twentieth century, not this current one. He was born in Nyesville, IN. That's down South of us quite a ways. He played for the Cubs.

It was his fingers. The missing one and the hole it made between the others, that made him so great, they say. The grip. The dynamics. He took an old farm injury, and made lemonade, so to speak.

Jerry Garcia is the same way. Not with baseball, but with the guitar. You remember that? You loved Jerry with his missing finger.

Anyway, for some reason—of course you know the reason—I was lying awake and thinking about people missing body parts. You know I don't sleep. People other than pirates. People who make the loss, the mutilation, into a good thing.

I won't bother Velma with all these observations. Don't worry about that.

Love,

Max

When I woke in the morning, the ghost was already moving, poked the sheet so it floated up, batted it down madly, poked it up again. It was too early. I flipped to my side, pinned him down with my body. Fought to find sleep again, couldn't.

So I got up. I smoothed a blouse flat on the bed then folded the left sleeve into a tulip blossom. It was like origami—the creasing and flipping and turning. My right hand was a centipede, scooted along the creases. Or a spider, fingers ran along the turns, together-apart, squeezed and stretched to walk over the fabric. The left hand thought he was helping. He fluffed, twisted, warped the petals.

I was only going to the shop—my dad's dressmaker's shop—to help him keep the books. I was twenty-nine and I'd worked there, almost continuously, since high school. But I hadn't sewn since the accident, just done paperwork, part-time.

The chimes on the door rattled as I swung through it. A push of wind held it open behind me. The fabric, stacked near the walls, on the tables, swathed around bolts, unraveling from the shelves—it blew to life as the wind rushed in. Each scrap wanted to be a dress or as skirt. That blue, it was popping into a blouse, trying to, with long ruffly sleeves. And the paisley tarlatan—what strange stuff. A skirt was almost rolling out of it, tensing to roll, stiffening to tighten at the hips, to flare just below slim thighs. Each color fought to burst into a dress, a gown, maybe just a tasseled scarf. The colors wrapped me, the silks, the cottons snuggled me, strangled me.

But it couldn't be. They couldn't wake beneath my fingers. I wilted into my chair, behind the desk, with all the paperwork. My left arm jingled and fizzed. Ghost-fingers thumped into a pretend thimble, rolled over an imaginary needle, still prickly, sharp. I couldn't press them through the humming machine, inject life with sparking needle. The

clothes were stuck within the bolts. Only the wind to dance them. The last gust of it whistled through the shop, died, as the door clasped, finally, shut.

My dad hunched in the front room. He didn't see the dance, his sewing machine angled to face the door. "Pretty sleeve." He meant my folded one, but could he even see it? "I mean strange."

"Some would prefer an arm." The ghost toyed with the desk drawer, opened it just a touch, then closed it again. Maybe he'd smash himself.

"That's not what I meant," my dad said.

"I know."

He wanted plastic fingers sticking out of my sleeve. An ugly molded spear. I couldn't wear a real prosthesis—he knew it. In the hospital, he'd seen me try. Not shiny and robotic or anything I could manipulate. They spasmed grotesquely, jerked loose, hurt. Not sharp and sleek and strangely stylish. My amputation line was too high, the nerve damage too severe. The ghost too fretful. So I bought cheap plastic arms from a costume store, disposable. I never wore them. He knew how gross they were. How ugly. How hot and itchy.

"I like the folds," I said.

"It's fine."

It wasn't how my dad used to be—caring what I looked like, impressing other people. When I was a kid, he'd send me to school in whatever I came up with—swimming flippers, superman cape, a client's abandoned ball gown, belted up but trailing, ribboning to tatters.

There was a squeak and crank, a snick as my dad sliced a thread and pulled it free. He guided an awful dress—beige muslin, A-line, empire waist, with odd bias-cut sleeves—from the machine and unfurled it, tugged at the neck hole. Against his hands, the opening was tiny.

“How will they get their head through there?” I snorted.

He held the neck open. “You think? Poor design, I guess.”

“Or really flat hair.” I forced a giggle. “I used to snap the heads off my Barbies.”

“To get their dresses on? I know. Or else you made me do it for you.”

“You called it mutilation.”

“It was mutilation.”

“Like my tattoo?”

“That tattoo...”

My dad put his head down. The ball of his foot held steady on the pedal. His arms pulled smoothly, quickly, at the ruffled dress, whipped it through the flashing needle.

He was an old hippie. He used to show up in tie-dye, when I got in trouble, raved about self-expression and creativity and how I could dress however I wanted, be whoever I wanted. But he was conservative, too. Like about the tattoo. And the stupid plastic arms.

He still lived in the house I grew up in. Where my mom had grown up, before me. It was an old farmhouse, twenty miles outside of town, only slightly updated. But subdivisions had crept up, so from the front porch, there were back patios and swing sets across the street. Behind the house were open fields, but my dad didn't own them. My mother inherited just the house and then it went to him. Her brother got the rest of the

land, which he rented to some farmer, but thought of selling to developers. My dad wanted me to move back, after the accident. I wouldn't.

He didn't need me to do his accounting, but he needed me to stay involved. For four generations the dress shop, Abigail Engler's, had been in our family. And it was the only thing we did together. Two women could have gone shopping, gotten pedicures, chatted. We couldn't. There, with the colored dresses that hung through the room like curtains, winding bolts of fabric, soft wooden floors and the hum of the needle, we could just be silent. If one of us said a thing, it could sit a while unanswered.

"Really, Velma." There was a snick again as he sliced thread, a heavy head shake.

I didn't know if he was talking about my sleeve or my tattoo or ripping heads off my Barbies. We had a strange relationship then, like I was still a child or a teenager. It seemed easier to revert, to rebel foolishly, to avoid anything real.

I finished up, walked out over rain-splashed sidewalks.

Lefty remembers not knowing, not thinking. Not putting idea after idea. Memory after memory. Threads connect to thread. Lead on forever.

Except.

....

No.

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...

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Lefty remembers before.

...

...

...

Nothing.

...

...

...

Lefty is afraid to remember it. Can't help it.

Apr. 8

Dear Ann,

I hired a PI. I wasn't getting anywhere on my own. And the police have given up. At least as far as I can tell, they have.

I remember talking to Officer Krouse at the hospital and to Margaret's son Tony. He's a police officer now, too—he's the one who told me about the accident, who drove me to the hospital that horrible night. They said they'd get him. But they didn't.

And then, Ann, did I tell you how I went down there myself? Velma was still in the hospital. She wouldn't wake up after the surgery and the doctors said it was normal, but I couldn't take anymore. I should have stayed, Ann, but I couldn't. Instead, I walked back and forth along South Clinton, where it happened. I didn't know the exact spot where she was, just which block, from the police report.

There was this mark on the road, a dark shape as long as my arm. It was round at one end, but trailing off at the other like a smear or a streak. I stopped when I saw it. I thought, Oh God, that's where it was. That's Velma's blood. I made myself go right up to it, knelt down to touch the dark stain on the concrete. After all, I wanted clues. But when I got close, it disappeared. It must have been a shadow, or maybe my eyes were playing tricks. Of course, it was days after the accident already. It had frozen and melted and snowed again since the night. And probably city workers would hose down the sidewalks right away. Right?

I looked at the ground for tire marks, tracks of any kind. Some strong ones swerved away to the north. I took pictures with my phone. There was trash in the gutter, right near the missing shadow-stain. A tattered receipt from Starvin Marvin's and a cigarette butt. I took them.

Then I drove the block to Starvin Marvin's. Maybe the driver got gas there, or a drink. Maybe the attendant heard him squeal away and jotted down a license plate number.

There was a teenage girl at the counter. "Are you open all night?" I asked her.

"Uh-huh," she answered, alert and cheerful.

"Oh, but you probably don't work here overnight."

"I can't. I'm only sixteen." Her smile was fading. "Did you want to pre-pay for gas?"

"No." I looked behind her at the walls, stacked with cigarettes, then all the corners of the room. "Are there cameras here?"

“Um,” the girl’s eyebrows furrowed and she took a step back, but then her voice got more assertive. “Yeah, there are cameras.”

Ann, I just thought maybe if they caught something on tape, well, maybe there was something. But maybe she thought I was going to rob her or proposition her or something. There was panic in her eyes. Anyway, the police must have thought of that. Must have checked for security tapes.

I didn’t mean to scare the girl, so I apologized to her and left. Walked the streets some more, trying to find a witness, but nobody was there. Nobody saw anything.

Since then, I’ve depended on the police and focused on Velma, on taking care of her. Watching that she’s okay. But it should be both of us, Ann! If you were here, you would take care of her, and I could find the damn bastard who did this!

That’s not fair, Ann, and I’m sorry. But it’s not fair to me either.

I got the name of the PI through Curt Womack. Curt hired an investigator to find his brother back when he went off. Remember? You were already gone, but I told you about it. And this is the guy he used: I.G. Carmichael. Except I.G.’s not a guy. Blew me away when I met her. I guess you’re right that I’m more sexist than I know.

Her hair is fiery red with silver sparks zig-zagging through short curls. I thought it would be a detriment to her profession, hair like that. Hard to slink around, stay incognito. But, “Actually”—she said this—“there’s not much slinking involved.” Yes, Ann, I asked about it. Well, Ann, you know me.

Maybe I wanted more show. Someone dark and gloomy with slouchy shoulders and old-time wisecracks. If I could only put a Dick Tracy hat on her, and maybe a trench coat...

But I don't mean she's not professional—she is. And licensed, too. She's got an office on Berry St. and lots of references. I hired her.

But, Ann, she won't make any promises. We shouldn't get our hopes too high, she says. As if any of this is about hope.

Velma's still at that museum job. Talk about hopeless. I could have asked Marian not to hire her. I thought about it and maybe I should have. I guess I thought Velma would quit on her own. That place is so morbid. But it's better than those first weeks when she moped around her apartment all day, or else sat at the shop and watched me sew.

She still won't sew, still says she'll never do it again. But we'll see. I keep her involved. She does the accounting for me, and that's something.

I miss you, Ann.

Love,

Max

Spears of light pierced the entrance of the museum. They stabbed at me, between filmy stretched-out shadows, striped the marble floors. It was late. I should have already clocked out and left like all the other guards. But no one saw me standing there, low behind my syringes. The Phlegm wing sucked me toward it.

I walked by a wall lined with skulls, then a shelf full of leather, tanned from human skin and sewn into wallets, belts. Embroidered, beaded. Human skin. One held the shape of a body. Arms and legs, shriveled, hung like tassels.

The lights got lower as I walked deeper, though the rooms weren't empty. The cleaning staff worked. Vacuums roared, feather dusters flitted over the specimens.

There was a dried, standing body, as tall as me, though withered. The skin was brown and greasy, like oiled leather. It took a moment to understand the crotch, where three sticks fanned outward like thick, twisted pencils. One a penis, the others testicles, they matched in terms of length and width and bread crust color. Someone groaned at the door and I jumped. I was *not* inspecting the desiccated genitals. It was a janitor behind a floor waxer. I edged around him, coiled deeper into the museum.

In the next room, wax models of faces depicted skin disease. Melted, swollen, distorted. Gangrene snaked black tunnels through buttery skin. Tuberculosis bulged like bubbly fungus. The ghost arm wanted to touch it—it wasn't allowed—I dragged him deeper.

Narrow steps led downward, where it was dark, quiet. Low fluorescents seeped a weak glow from backlit display cases.

It was darker yet in the shadow of a distended lower intestine. On the other side, the light was red and fiery. The arm pulsed with it, throbbed or shuddered. A jar full of toenails, then a canister of skin pickings. They were curled like sawdust, like fluffy bits of snow or ashes. Or mildewed mashed potato flakes.

In another room were half-inch cross-sections of brain. Human brain, the scalp and the skull, cut front to back. Then another sequence of brain, squiggly and spongy, split the other way. One man's head, sliced ear to ear. The final segment, the face, was flattened like bologna. Teeth—real or plastic?—flapped out of squished lips. The nose

was a smear, but the mouth—somehow it smirked. Cold and compressed. It was lunch meat with hair.

It wrenched my stomach and I turned. I wanted to stay, but couldn't let myself puke there. The ghost perked up, jerked me forward through hallways like tunnels. I floated, drifted with the current that was him. My legs tangled like seaweed beneath me. I tunneled my vision, focused on a point of light ahead, a whisper of the cleaning crew. Then I surfaced in the rotunda, gasped better air, pushed through the employee exit. Gulped outside air, real air, again. Puked sandwich, then stomach bile, into the bushes.

When I stood up, spit, the light was sharp and surprising, even as the sun sank. The ghost was like the wind twisting the wrong way, against itself. He was an eddy. A funnel in the air. But suctioned to shoulder, tightly. The triangle end of my sleeve flapped, couldn't hold him.

I needed to walk, so I headed toward the dress shop, but didn't think I'd go in. I'd just wander the neighborhood. Next to my dad's was a hardware store, then a jeweler, then an ice cream parlor. It was safe and tedious and comfortable. The storefronts matched. Wide windows under the tall peaks of old-fashioned roofs.

My great-grandmother opened "Abigail Engler's"—she *was* Abigail Engler. She founded our place, our home. She knew the magic in sewing, taught my grandma, then my dad, and my grandma they taught me. The thrill in punching smooth lines with sharp needle—the seams that combined the parts, brought the perfect, pre-planned form together. How scissors slashed. Shapes emerged. Sharp. Precise. The cuts that made a whole.

Clean sidewalks turned to bricks then to cobbles. Dark, crooked lines between them. The rounded stones blistered under my feet.

Growing up, there were always dresses. I grew up at the dress shop, or else if I was at home, the dresses were there too. Like shadows or ghosts, draped over the chairs in the dining room. Like swooning ladies, in all color and manner of disarray. Plaids and paisleys spread across the dark wood of the table. Pincushions on the hutch, thread winding in and out of my grandma's china. Spools hiding in soup bowls and teacups.

I'd do my homework at the same table. Social Studies book open on top of half-basted skirts and slips and pinned up trousers. Midway through a lesson, I'd stop to pull pins and needles out of the thick skin of my elbow, which had butted against them, absorbing their stickers.

I had two arms then, two elbows.

Cobbles faded into dirt, then sharpened again into concrete.

There was a hum, constant. My dad's at-home sewing machine was always humming beside me as we both worked and that was fine, as long as I wasn't trying to do math without a calculator, which required complete silence—in my room with the door closed and a blanket wedged against the bottom crack.

Some days my dad would sing as he sewed. And sometimes he'd talk out loud to himself. Or pretend to talk to my mom, who died when I was two. Sometimes, it seemed like I remember her, but it was only that I remembered my dad talking about her. When I was young, I'd giggle or maybe roll my eyes. Sometimes I sang along.

In the sharp streets, the glare softened, maybe, as the sun sank lower. It was getting cold. It was the beginning of April, but smelled like snow.

As soon as I could stitch, I did stitch. As soon as my feet caught the pedals of the machine, as soon as my arms stretched to wrap behind it. I became the hum. I lived it, forced it out the machine. It was my breath, my heartbeat. I zipped it into sharp seams and billowing ruffles. By high school, I made all my clothes. I had a corner of the shop to myself, in the sunshine, where everyone could see me. My dad and my grandma approved—I advertised well for them.

The sidewalk chilled upward through my shoes. Shop windows flashed cold light into my eyes. The arm liked the walk, swung wildly, made waves in the wind.

He had the whole shop and the generations behind him. My dad did. But he didn't even design. Nothing new. He just altered and repaired. Fixed imperfect clothes, made them right again, for whole bodies.

I turned east, passed the old cinema and the art museum, until the historic neighborhood brightened into new restaurants. I walked toward the downtown office buildings. Mini-skyscrapers. Deserted streets.

I was bringing it back to designing. Before. I had ideas. Back when I had two arms.

I was walking, at night, when it happened. Not far from there.

The colors called to me, the shapes, the lines. A flat surface, a soft, square-cut sheet—it wanted to turn, wanted to follow the contours of your shape, my shape. No, not my shape. Not that shape. What shape was it?

It was right there, that block, where the sidewalks were suddenly sharp and white.

Streetlights too new. The ghost seized. Jolted. Then swung again, but stiff, mechanical. A convention center was going up and so it was construction and cranes and insulation piled on pallets.

I never saw the man who ran me over—it was right there, right there.

I'd always liked to walk at night. I could still walk just fine. Through the rough parts of town. Anywhere.

Sometimes I dreamed a shape, a shiny globe of a head, but I couldn't see a face. Just a dark smear of windshield. Flattened in the glare.

The office buildings faded into rundown shops, as I moved from pool to pool of streetlight. After the shops, housing projects.

Ahead, there was a shadow. It loomed, then evaporated into a bus shelter.

I wasn't afraid. I had a ghost.

Along the railroad tracks, through the city at a slant, past downtown again and toward my neighborhood.

A hooded man passed close—close enough for ghost to graze him, to grace him, to melt right through. And when he shivered, it was a cringe—away from me.

I missed the blossom of two pieces of fabric, when I turned them right side, after running a sharp seam down the back. Stitch after stitch, and the whirl of the sewing machine, needle up and down so fast I couldn't see it. Lines lulled me into trances. The only way I could think. And smooth pencil lines, in my sketchbook. Cutting and stitching the pictures into three dimensions.

Off the railroad tracks, I scooted down an embankment, hurried under the overpass, stepped around a pile of dirty, flannel blankets. The blankets shifted. They

might have covered a woman, sleeping. Or maybe it was the wind that whipped through the tunnel. I stayed tight to the concrete wall, because cars drove fast through there.

In my mind were only wispy, shadow memories of the accident. I didn't know if they were real, but they consisted mostly of a quick flash of heat and then a long flush of ice coldness, as the red heat drained from me. I didn't remember, but knew I was run over by a car.

I cut through the alley by the lumberyard, jagged with splintered wood, then toward my neighborhood, which was old but not historic. Rundown but not dangerous.

Wearing the dresses. Or draping them, enticingly, in the front window of the shop. Sleeves pinned up like streamers, or running like water, cascading toward the floor. Brought to life and shape by the beautiful old dressmaker's dummy—my great-grandmother's—brought to her life and her shape.

They also found a cat, flattened, thought I was saving it. But I wouldn't have risked my life for a cat. Or to cross the street.

In my neighborhood, the streets were softer. The sidewalks were old and the curbs were shallow. Monday nights were quiet.

And the arm, the ghost of an arm. It gripped like death! It didn't do what I said. I could feel what it felt, suggest what it should do, but it wasn't me, not quite me, that yanked the muscles and tendons and rough, unraveling strings.

That dream of designing, it had felt good. But what was original about a dressmaker's shop? An old family one? In some washed-up Indiana city. So I sold a few designs? Just to prom queens and bridesmaids. What was so special about any of it?

I walked past Curly's, the dive, and then Henry's, a little bit nicer, and then there was Mary Ann's, which smelled like piss and was only busy during the day. I'd stumbled home from each of those places, or from one to the other. But not since the accident.

Clothes were just clothes until they became part of you, until they revealed something you were dying to say. The sheer fabric that exposed what it covered. The clean lines that slashed like your arms and legs yearned to. The colors that you felt on the inside, reflected outward through scraps of fabric, stitched and draped just right.

I walked home. My apartment, there, in the city. It was cut from an old house, too, but not that old. From the street, it was dark and lonely. Three stories, but cut into five units. The top one was mine.

And a body! What was a body but more of the same. A missing limb. A tangle of scars that I couldn't look at and yet I had to. It was wrong, a mis-match. It wasn't me and I couldn't fix it. Unless I did match. Unless something in me was that way, that tangled mess of missing.

Upstairs, I grabbed a hollow arm from the case in the closet, sniffed the chemicals of plastic and dye. I traced my finger from the half-shoulder to the permanently bent elbow, over the flaky seam that ran along the underside, all the way to pre-painted fingernails. The ghost shuddered, shook me.

The ghost was evil, unnatural. Or else he was me, reflected back. When they cut the arm, when they sliced it off, it was rough and raw. Not ready to go. I lost more than arm, more than body. The ghost proved that, wouldn't let me forget. A part of me, the real me, had splintered off. Then returned, stayed to mock me.

I couldn't look at who I was. Then where to look? Was I still me?

I fed the plastic arm, orange fingernails first, into the blender. The ghost played with the buttons, alternated between mix, chop, puree. I added water, churned until I had a flesh-colored paste. Then I drank a glass of water, tried to sleep.

Lefty has a feeling like the wind, through a damp, dusky city. Lefty has a fluidity since the accident, a wriggly wiggly water weight. His bones are soft, or not soft, exactly, but willowing about, flexible. Stuck to Velma of course, but only when there's room, his Velma-Lefty's-Velma.

Velma sits and stares, sits and stares. Alone at night in the wafty-drafty apartment. She thinks, Lefty supposes so. Velma thinks thoughts. Explains and broods and sentimentaliz-ize-ize-ize-izes.

There's a hum, a buzz, a whirl. The pulse of her, the breath, the swish of blood through her art-veineries. The zip-zap of electrons through strings, webs of nerves.

It's what Lefty knows. It's that peculiar pitch, that noise.

Strings him to her.

Maybe it's her brain firing zip, zap, lightning into the air.

Apr. 12

Dear Ann,

Do you remember the fit Velma had about that splinter she got at the lake? She was eight. She slipped off the end of the pier, caught her hand at the edge, then pulled off

a piece of the board with her, into the water? That rickety old pier. I wrote you about it. You must remember.

You weren't looking when it happened, you didn't stop it. But I saw it. She could swim fine, but it scared her. I pulled her out of the water. She was wailing, screeching like a cat.

And then that nasty little splinter. She was kicking and screaming. Flopping and wriggling. I had to hold her.

If you were there you would have held her. In your lap, wrapped up in your arms, her hand flat open on the table, and both of your hands flanking it.

One arm to hold her, one to dig it out? She was thrashing like a snake or a fish.

I used a needle. Like threading one in reverse, through the screams. God, you have to be heartless sometimes. I dug that bastard out of her.

She banged up her shin, too, and scraped her arm, but that didn't bother her. Just the splinter.

It makes me think of her tattoo. I told you about it. You'd have hated it so much—or maybe loved it. It was huge on the upper part of her arm. And it's gone now, of course. The tattoo. The needle. Did she hold down her own arm?

I don't know what made me think of that. Just not being able to sleep, of course, and thinking about all sorts of things.

Velma's doing okay. Kind of lonely, I think. But she wants to be lonely—or thinks she does. And I wish she'd wear her prosthetic arm. It's crazy that she walks around all the time with just an empty sleeve. It alienates her. Makes people stare.

But it's none of my business.

Ann, there's one more thing. I wanted to tell you, wanted your advice about an idea I have. I've been thinking of getting a spinning wheel and loom for the shop.

You think it's ridiculous, but maybe not. Just hear me out.

You know how the shop is in the historic district of the city? You know how the neighborhood is right next to the original settlement and how none of the buildings are the original log cabins, but they're at least very old? We've been talking about it at meetings—the Historical Preservation Society, I mean. We're trying to get some appreciation going for the area. Well, some of them just want it to be cute. Maybe you don't remember. Brandy Klinger's the president and Chip Trevino's VP? Anyway, the spinning seems to fit. And I think it would bring in business. Give the place an old-timey feel. I would learn how to spin. And, later on, maybe how to weave.

Another reason—it's lonely without Velma. Some days the work is enough to keep me okay. But when there's none, or not much, or I need a break... there's no one to talk to. Sue's no good for it, not really. She's only part-time anyway. And I can't leave because someone might come. A hobby would be good for me and an interesting one would be good for the shop.

I'm even thinking about setting it up in the front window, up on that ledge where we used to put Velma's designs, where Grandma's dummy used to sit, or else the Christmas decorations. I'll spin during down time, but where people can see. I bet it will bring in customers. Inspire curiosity. The loom, well, maybe later, I'll move that to the window, too. I'm not sure they'll both fit.

And anyway, remember all those stories, that there's magic in it? It's linked to old witchcraft or something. You were into the pagans a long time ago. I wish I could remember more.

I don't believe in any of that, not anymore, but it adds to the interest for the customers, don't you think?

And I won't let Velma prick her finger.

What am I thinking? In this town? I better just play up the Little House on the Prairie aspect. No magic for these folks.

What I really want, I think, is to get at the origin of something. My bolts of fabric—they come from a factory. But I want to make the fabric, to spin it and weave it and then we'll belong to each other. Remember when we talked about that, before we got married? When we talked about leaving the dress shop and your college and moving to the mountains? Finding a commune? Maybe we should have done it, too.

Of course, I'll still use the factory-made fabric for my customers. But maybe I'll make a shirt for myself from absolute scratch. Or maybe something pretty for Velma.

I don't want you to think I'm silly, Ann. I don't want you to think I'm wasting my time or my money or that I'll make myself ridiculous.

But, well, I'm determined to do it, whatever you say. I've made up my mind, Ann. As dumb as you think I am, I'm going to put a spinning wheel in the front shop window and I'm going to sit in that window and learn how to spin!

A man isn't supposed to spin, but he's not supposed to sew either! He's not supposed to raise a little girl all by himself! And he's not supposed to write letters to a

wife who's been dead twenty-seven years. (Can you believe it's been so long?—Velma is twenty-nine!)

Ann, we never believed in any of those supposed-to's.

Love,

Max

A nightmare scuttles into your room on insect legs. When you sleep, it crawls into your ear, burrows into your brain. Eats all the way through you.

On my lunch break, I melted into the crowd. Skipped the sandwich to explore Black Bile. A strand of rooms, like beads, strung along a sharp thread of a hallway, and each room had robots. Silver legs, hooked to pelvis but without a torso, ran on a treadmill. A steel spine, split from the limbs, straightened then coiled. Waved like a blade of grass, except each knuckle was individuated. It had the smooth jerkiness of sci-fi. The next room was joints, pulled apart. Shiny ball bearings. The next had arms, together. And some not together. Some in pieces. Some forged and fused, but most were mobile. They reached, flexed, curled from where they were mounted next to informative plaques. Bones made of steel, or titanium, or deep black like outer space.

Were they cold? Slippery? Were the fingernails sharp? People were watching, but that didn't stop the ghost. He stretched, poked into a swiveling shoulder joint, then flashed out before he was smushed—just in time. The joint was cold and smooth. It was

polished and slick with some clear lubricant that smeared onto the ghost, filmed to the tips of his fingers.

Diagrams compared metal to bone—which were the same, which parts technology had improved. I didn't see any elastic elbows, rubber thumb bones. Just plastic. All sorts of plastic. And metal. But what was soft? Was anything alive? There were rivets, screws, pins instead of ligaments. Or were there ligaments? The ghost snapped himself at a synthetic humerus, sprang out like a wet towel. The bone didn't give with the first slap. Then harder, and it vibrated, visibly. I stepped back, peeked over my shoulder. No one watched.

Was there a pin or screw in my shoulder? He pinched something, tweaked it so tightly. What held the ghost to me? I worked my fingers over my shoulder. Maybe I could find the bolt and pry him loose.

So I let go, checked again that no one watched. Only a few kids were there, intent on a dancing wrist display. I found the tips of the ghost's fingers, traced them to palm, then elbow, then all the way to shoulder. It was sick to feel up there, to touch it, close to the wound and the scars. Even in the shower, I didn't touch there, just let the soap run over from a squeezed sponge—rivulets forked around the seams, then shattered over the bulge of stitch marks. Scalded it clean under too-hot water. Tried not to look at the pulsing web of knots and tears and incisions.

But the ghost must have a wound, too, where he disconnected, in the accident. Was there a hole? A place to press down hard? A tender bruise to prod?

My back to the room, I reached inside my shirt, underneath my armpit. Snaked my fingers beneath the oozy goo of him, squirmed between skin and ghost. He was loose

over my skin, cold and slippery, until he wasn't. The squishiness hardened until the ghost was firm above a knot in my scars, some tissue that had hardened like rocks beneath my skin. There were bumps and bulges. Was it bone? Was that my skin? A slimy patch, then a scaly one. A twisted rope, a warped and bristling braid. I inched my fingers further, found another snarl of scar tissue where he was firm again. I couldn't touch the skin there because the ghost fought so hard for his grip. I tugged him, fought him, but my own skin pulled, too. With my fingernails, I pried up a spaghetti thin strand of him, but another slapped down in its place. It would take an extra hand or two, at least, to get him loose.

I was out of breath and suddenly there were more people in the room. Some adults, though none looked at me. I went back to my post, still holding the ghost's slinky forearm. I squished it in my hand like a water balloon, like a tube of toothpaste. He smeared out of my grasp, but not completely. And hard as I pulled, he only stretched, he only smeared. When I pulled, he squeezed tighter, pinched sharp into the snarls of me. He wouldn't let go.

Lefty likes, struggles, tries, fails to: p-p-p-p-p-p-ponder. Refffffffffflect. Ru-u-u-u-uminate. It wasn't until the accident that Lefty felt any thoughts at all. It wasn't until the accident the incident the stealing of himself—thief-thief-give-it-back-give-me-back! that he knew the separation. That he thought at all. And still, it's hard. Hard to piece together happenings, make them into round-soft-holdable memories.

Lefty loves to snuggle in and remember and forget.

But.

Oh.

Apr. 16

Dear Ann,

I met with the PI again today. She was so professional, so calm. She asked me in again to go over the facts once more. She stressed, rather forcefully, that she just wanted the facts of the case.

So I told her about the ice and the snow of that night, of how Velma looked in the hospital with her face like mush. I showed her the Starvin Marvin receipt and the cigarette butt. I told her about telling Velma that her arm was gone, how she didn't believe me. I told her how we worked in the shop together and how she had such plans, such ideas for it all. I told her about the medical museum where Velma works now and how she says she'll never sew again.

About halfway through I knew I wasn't telling her what she needed, that none of these were facts or relevant to finding the guy, but she was so calm and right in front of me and listening. Ann, she was listening. And afterward, so tactful, after I knew I'd got it all wrong, she asked me again for a few facts, specific facts like dates and times and locations. She had a hold of the police report and she wanted me to verify a few things. I was embarrassed, but also it was such a relief. Ann, you're all I need. But talking to a physical person—that's good, too.

And, of course I kept our secrets. I didn't tell her about you or us or about these letters.

There's another confession I didn't make. But I'm ready, at least, to tell you. You already know it, though I haven't mentioned it for years. I hate the shop. I hate it. You remember how I tried to get out? When I took a class in library science? Then when I did the pottery in my spare time and even sold a few pieces? Do you remember the Christmas season when I worked that bead cart at the mall? That wasn't so bad either. But then do you remember, each time, how my mother talked me into staying, for just a few more years. And then, by the time those few more years were up, it was just too late.

I was getting ready to retire, Ann. I was ready to give the whole place to Velma. Maybe help her out part-time, but not too much. She was ready to run it. I was ready to quit.

But the accident. I couldn't shut it down completely. She says she'll never sew again, but I don't believe her. I think she needs more time and then she'll want this place. I have to keep it going for her, so it's here when she wants it.

I never wanted to trap her in this sweat shop. It was her grandmother that spun it into her head.

Except, I think Velma really wanted it. Eventually. She misses it now.

Except, who am I kidding? I love the shop, too. I could never leave it. Even retired, I'd be there everyday. Losing it would be like, I don't know, cutting off my arm.

Too soon for that joke?

Love,

Max

I was alone in the shop because I arrived first, made coffee, and planned to work on the bills. Before the accident, I'd spent a lot of time alone there, in the early morning or at night, obsessed with a project—either drawing or sewing or both. There were friendly streetlamps, then, familiar shadows. Afterward, the early light was different and felt strange. But without anyone watching, I could poke around a bit.

In the front room, there were four pictures on the wall—one of each generation to work in the dress shop. On the left were my great grandparents. It was their wedding photo, stiff and yellowed, but charming—the groom looked so much like my dad. Both of them had light hair and eyes and wide-open foreheads. My grandma was next, alone at the sewing machine when she was about 50. Younger than I'd known her, head thrown back in a laugh that I could almost hear. My dad was a child in his photo—maybe five—pretending to work the big black Singer, but his foot didn't reach the pedal. And then there was me, like my grandma, alone behind the machine. The picture was three years old. My hair was straight and dark but shiny and caught the light in a sharp angle hanging down. Two hands gripped the edge of the table as the top part of me swung out from behind the machine to smile, head sideways. It even showed my sketchbook on the table, pencil across it diagonally.

My fingers, in the picture. They rested, like piano player fingers, on the table's edge. They gave me leverage to pull myself to that position, slanted to the right. The machine blocked my left arm, so that my left hand was isolated on the opposite side. My nails weren't painted, but they didn't look awful, just practical. Three fingers pushed down, but one flipped up. My thumb wasn't visible, gripped the underside of the table.

I had a ribbon tied to my left wrist—who knew why? So I wouldn't lose it? To remind me of something? My grandma taught me to write everything down.

Our joint order book, with notes to each other and my dad's notes in there too, was still on the shelf above the desk. My dad didn't use it anymore. It was dusty and the pages already felt delicate. The ghost stirred up more dust when I opened another cabinet to check the bottle of whisky that my grandma always kept “for emergencies.” It wasn't lower than the last time I checked, so no emergencies. The ghost fussed at the top, tried to pull it off, but couldn't grip it.

I pulled him back, flipped through the stack of invoices to be reconciled. It was an old green-screen computer, ancient but functional. The codes and colors, using the F-keys, it made the work feel like a game. And on the full-size keyboard, numbers were easy enough for me to type, unlike my laptop, which was sleek and modern and pointless, then, for me to own. All that design software. I had my right hand on the number pad, zipped in payment after payment, with a quick click to the F row between each entry. The ghost poked at the letters, but they didn't do anything in that program, so he couldn't mess it up. And pretty soon he was quiet, just resting on the desk. I felt the pins and needles of his sleep.

Later, my dad bustled through the back door with a pile of clothes slung over his arm—work he'd finished at home. His beard was freshly trimmed, but his ponytail looked smashed, as if he'd slept in it. “You made coffee!” he said, and poured some before plugging in the iron and pulling out the board.

Both of us worked, heads down, except occasionally peeking at the neighbors walking by the front window. He hoped for friends and customers, but I'd sneak out the

back if anyone came. Mostly, everybody was going to Carmelita's, the diner across the street.

"I got you something," he said. He'd moved to his sewing machine, his foot steady on the pedal. His arm pulled smoothly, quickly, at the front of a ruffled shirt, whipped it through the flashing needle.

"What?"

"It's a present." The blouse came clean at the back. He jerked it up and over, slashed the thread at the hook of the machine. He looked at me, then at the shelf above my head, lifted an eyebrow. There was a package, badly wrapped in Santa Claus foil.

"Christmas paper?"

"Only thing I could find." He pinned the next ruffle. "Open it."

I swiveled to face forward and pulled at the bow with just the live hand, the box clutched in my knees. My dad gave me things, I supposed. Pointless gadgets to improve my one-armed life. And he made me clothes sometimes. But unless it was Christmas or my birthday, he didn't wrap anything. He was impatient, head down, but his eyes peered over the glasses that had slid too far down his nose.

Inside the box was a shimmery strip of nylon, sleek and slinky. Leg warmer? Sleeve? I gripped it with the dry part of my lips and slipped my right arm in, pulled it to my elbow.

My dad called out. "No, Doofus. It's for your left arm."

With my teeth, I pulled the sleeve the rest of the way up. He was right, since there was a thumb catch on the wrong side. Some sort of etching, stitching, twisted around my elbow, straightened as I stretched the tan fabric.

Oh! It was a familiar picture, a long needle was embroidered on the sleeve, flashing, but warped and twisted on the inside, the fleshy part, of my right arm.

“Velma!” My dad left the machine to stand across the desk, rolled his eyes. He leaned over, snatched the edge of the sleeve and slid it off with a quick flick of his wrist. Tailor’s touch. Always professional. He spread the sleeve on the desk. “See? It’s for your left arm. It’s got your old tattoo.”

And there it was. The silver, three-inch needle, the spin of thread shimmering, spiraling, looping out and down from the eye. A line of smooth stitches marched in a straight line, then curled into my initials. It was a good tattoo—the original. It was across my bicep.

“But, Dad.” I touched the raised silver of the embroidered needle. “You don’t do this kind of embroidery.”

“Sue did it.”

“Oh, Sue did.” I ran a finger along the stitching. “The work is really fine.”

“I just sketched it out for her. From a picture. A photograph.” He leaned over the sleeve. “Did we get it right?”

I snaked my fingers into the nylon. “I think so. It’s hard to tell without trying it on.”

“Your arms all at home?”

I nodded. “You hated my tattoo.”

My dad touched the edge of the sleeve, turned it to see the inside stitches, which were dangling off the end of my right fingers. “Sue and me, we did a pretty good job, huh? Pull this right up over that plastic.”

“You called it mutilation.”

“I think I was joking.” He rubbed the fabric, which was fine, between his fingers.

“What do you think about the thumb catch? A full glove would have been too much, right? But you don’t want it to slide around—”

“It’s beautiful.” I’d have worn the sleeve, strange as it was, if it hadn’t required the prosthetic underneath it. Or if a needle made sense any more.

There was a shiver—it caught in my neck—when the ghost arm lifted, briefly. The tattooed nylon billowed, filled with air, bubbled to a muscling shape. Then the sleeve deflated and my left arm, invisible, ached in its socket.

At night, Lefty likes to watch the moonlight seep-and-creep. Slinky-crawly-creepy-catlike--through Velma’s bedroom. A t-shirt glows, then fades, passes glimmer to a bottle of perfume, then moon-glory over the pillow, fluff-fluff-glow.

Some nights are sound nights, loud nights, bright lights of: Laughing. Carousing. Ha-ha! What the fa-fuuuuck? Two bars close-by, no gutter edge to trip into, from Velma’s brick building.

Car growls. Blips. Bleeps. Alarms and singing sirens. Sometimes shouting, even crying.

Lefty can’t see out the window, clipped in to Velma, who is sleep-snore-snapping, (fake-fake-faking it) but when she leaves it open, the wonder-window, he can hear window-wander-wonder. In the summer, the cold air box unit hums, humms, hummms, on top of noise. Hum-Harmonizing.

Not summer now. Funny to remember hot. Lefty doesn't remember re-re-membering before. Lefty wasn't lefty then.

Music drifts in from the bar or car radio. It's slow and sad and Lefty lifts. Lefty pulls into a straight column from Velma's shoulder. She is lying flat on her bed, but not sleeping. Lefty holds tight to her but pulls straight up, waves with the melody, wavers in it like lake, like ripples-on-lake after a pebble splash. Lefty listens. Lefty feels. Lefty undulates. Then Lefty dulates right back up. Stiff-standing column. Duly dull dulate then undulate then re-dulate.

Maybe, Lefty tries to remember-member, pre-re-members, maybe Velma used to go to those bars. Maybe when Lefty was just an arm, Lefty maybe premembers. Not anymore. Velma stays home.

In this dream, you want to see him, the freak, the monster. At least, you want to see him more than you want anyone to think that you are scared. You hand over your ticket, gingerly, avoiding the hand and then the stare of the shaggy carnie.

The man lifts the flap and you enter the tent. The flap closes behind you. Your companion stalls, maybe isn't coming in after all, and you are alone in the tent, which is dark, lit only with candles.

Oh, no, you're not alone, because there it is. The freak! A skinny man—Is it a man?—but muscled. Oddly stringy, lean, only a scrap of brown fabric wrapped at his waist. Dark blue stars are inked over his body. He knows magic, they say. He wears a tall hat to advertise it.

Iron bars separate you, or maybe just shadows, but when you look up, he lunges, he reaches, he grabs. His face smashes against his cage. He garbles syllables you don't understand. An arm shoots through the bars, fingers stretch, stream toward you but stop short, their length exhausted.

He can't reach and so you smile. Edge back an inch to be safe, then lean forward. Maybe you taunt him, just a little.

You hear a rustle, look behind you and. Then. There's a thing, a creature. God, there are fingers, strong fingers. It's a hand. At your neck. Five points of pressure, popping, writhing between vein and muscle and collapsing throat.

The thing in the cage is cackling and waving a stumped arm.

And you are sinking, not even breathing, and the world is tunneling, black at the edges. The edges creep to the center and it's all blackness.

Apr. 29

Dear Ann,

I got my wheel! I drove to Auburn to look at one this morning and liked it so much I bought it on the spot. I won't bore you with all the details because I know you don't care. Just know that it's wooden and it's the kind you pump with your foot.

Also, it's for short-draw spinning and it's got a flyer and bobbin, so I won't prick myself and turn into sleeping beauty. Of course you don't know what any of that means, but after all, I couldn't stop myself from giving a few details.

Also, know that I've cleared out a spot for it in the front display window. It didn't need much clearing, what with no dresses from Velma, and also the dummies gone for all these months—you know, my grandmother's dummy and the others, the antique ones that I moved out after Velma's accident. (They're upstairs now with yours.) I also bought a little stool that matches the wheel.

I've had the wool washed and carded and ready to go for weeks. I got some nice carders, matching ones, too.

The woman who sold it to me agreed to come over next week to give me a lesson, but I might play with it tonight after the shop closes. I've read up on the technique and anyway it's calling to me. Something tells me I'll have a knack for it.

I'm excited. Makes me want to get out my crystals again. Or maybe just a little incense?

I'm not ridiculous, Ann. I'm not like a little girl. Or an old woman, like you think. I just need a hobby.

I wish you could be here. Then I wouldn't need a hobby at all.

Love,

Max

At the museum, I caught the shimmer of the clear, stacked cylinders, a gelatinous wiggle in the glare. In front of me, a stream of museumgoers flowed to the virus exhibit, bisected by a field trip headed to the archives. A swirl of preschoolers skipped, then

rolled, created eddies and whirlpools in the rotunda. It was chaotic but soothing until a voice interrupted.

“I lost these two to the stamping machine at GE.” A withered man held out his hand. Two fingers were missing.

“Oh!”

“First one didn’t teach me a lesson!” He chuckled and shook his head.

“I guess not.”

“I was showing another fellow how I done it.” The old man slowly pushed his hand forward in the air as if he was poking it with an invisible finger.

“Yes.”

“It was my first week back at the job after they stitched up the first.”

“My goodness.”

The man stood in front of me with his mouth bunched up and his eyes as wide open as anyone’s eyes ever went. “And you?”

“A car ran me over.”

The man’s mouth un-bunched, re-twisted to a smile. “That’s a good story, too.”

When he walked away, one foot dragged and the toes pointed too much inward. He vanished into the depths of the museum.

Meanwhile, the ghost was whistling around the famous syringes—the ones from *Saw* and *Kill Bill II*—he smeared himself against the glass case, where they lay next to glossy movie stills. Then he tapped at the case of needles used on celebrity patients (Courtney Love, Bob Newhart, Condeleeza Rice). Maybe he knew they weren’t authenticated. He flitted about the antique syringes, then the giant ones, the tiny ones. He

grabbed hold—I jerked him back—of the mechanized plunger that buzzed constantly, cushioned my ears.

It was all against a backdrop of the pyramid. Thousands of every-day syringes, needles still intact, still sharp. The plastic barrels were transparent so the needles seemed to levitate. I passed my hand in front of them, the right one, close but not touching. The ghost aped me, but floated closer to the needles. It looked as though a sharp breath would tumble them. People admired the balance. I let them. Really, glue held them together.

A man watched me, the one with the bad toupee, the one who was handsome despite his hair, but who didn't seem to do anything but skulk around the rotunda. He was far back, behind a pillar and there was no one close to the syringes anymore. So I watched the crowd swirl by. Let their shapes wash over me. Faces, elbows, heels—they blistered from the swirling mass, receded.

There'd been a kind of magic in drawing. I remembered it. Sparks flicked out of my pencil point. A flash, like lightning and thunder, when I drew a crisp line. Crackle-Pop! It would explode into a second line. Black. Sharp on a white page. No smudges.

Not that it always happened like that. Most of the time, they'd been wiggly, wavering lines. And then the eraser. And trying again. Meaty arms too big for a body, tiny pinheads, all out of proportion. Awkward angles. Missing ligaments. The feet stuck out sideways.

That was early. I studied. Learned how a neck sprung from shoulders, the way a knee twisted together the two parts of a leg. I used to know how a torso eased itself into a shoulder, then an arm. And the way a chiffon ball gown should float over it all.

Careful drawings had carried a quiet power. Simple, but long-lasting. I'd still done the other kind. Black lines like gashes. No hesitation. I liked both kinds of drawing.

These were just memories. I couldn't do it anymore.

After work, sharp green spears sliced up through the dirt by the sidewalk. Petals unfolded like loose origami. Spring made me think of skirts like tulips, pointed collars like the bright shoots from the soil. But my shoes were muddy. The hems of my pants sogged in the puddles. Nothing crisp was left. Nothing sharp.

I walked another few blocks to the dress shop, tipped in the door sideways and fabric whooshed with the open and close. The ghost arm batted the chimes over the door.

My dad pulled the skirt he was hemming out of the machine. He reached for some scrap fabric, torqued his left arm behind his back. "Velma, it's not even hard." He gave the fabric another jerk, then pulled it through in a crooked swipe, moved his hand behind the machine, then in front. The cloth moved slowly, slowly. "On the machine... You can guide with one hand."

"I don't even want to sew anymore."

My arm didn't spring from my shoulder. Didn't flow outward, or twist from the hinge, from the muscle. How could a chiffon ball gown float over that?

My dad grabbed a wedding gown next, spread its white gauze over his lap. His eyes smiled and the pins he held in his lips fanned out. He spit a pin at a magnet, his ponytail caught in his collar. "I almost forgot." He batted at the white, until it fluffed up like foam. Then he bunched it into the bottom armload of a snowman and stood up, waded out of the cloud. "I got you something! Are your hands clean?"

“Hand.” Well, neither one was clean. The ghost had actually *searched* for gum under the eyeball table that day. He’d found it. But I took the snow mountain and hugged it to my chest.

My dad pulled a couple sticks from the back room. He set them upright in a triangle, an A, then balanced a sketchpad against the frame.

“An easel?”

“So you can draw again!” He held an arm behind his back, flourished against the paper with an empty right hand. “It holds the paper still for you.”

“I know what an easel does.” I let a wave of white fall, clutched the remaining ball tighter. “And it won’t help. I’m done with drawing.”

“It won’t hurt to try.” He folded the legs together, then laid the frame on top of the desk, next to the sketchpad. He took the ball of bridal gown back—the ghost fought to keep it, lost—and melted it over his lap. “Anyway, I saw it when I got my wheel.”

“Your what?”

He was suddenly shy, avoided my eyes. He slowed down to study a seam that should’ve been easy. “You’ll see.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Um.” He was acting weird. “I haven’t set it up yet.”

“Whatever.”

My dad’s glasses slipped down his nose, and he did sew one-handed, momentarily, as he pushed them back up. I was slinging the easel over my good shoulder to lug it home, when he looked up from the seam. “Just try it.”

I knew I could learn to sew one-handed. And draw. But why should I?

Apr. 30

Dear Ann,

I hate that spinning wheel. I set it up tonight, after work. Couldn't bear to look at it all day, or to try and possibly fail with people watching.

I started with a cloud of white carded fluff, and ended with a wad of lumpy, sticky... I can't even call it yarn. Just matted fuzz that almost formed strings, but not really. Mutilated strings, is what they look like. I would start, it would seem okay, it wouldn't catch, but I'd keep up, find a rhythm with my foot. Feed it in feed it in, hold my breath. God damn nothing. What a waste. The money, too. And not just the wheel, but the other little stuff. The stool, the carders, the wool. What am I going to do with all that damn wool?

Ann, I'm a damn fool. At least I tried at night, without anybody watching me. I'll see if I can send the wheel back tomorrow.

Love,

Max

Here's a guess about what happened that night, a story that I put together.

I was walking, at night, out for some air. I was thinking about a dress. A new design. Cuts and lines ran behind my eyes. The feel of the fabric, the twist of the seams. Texture and balance. Colors flashed while I was strolling over shiny streets.

It was January. The ground was hard and slick. But the sting of snow in the air felt refreshing. I wandered aimlessly until I saw the cat and then I started following it. Maybe it was the same cat I fed sometimes. It was the same color. I didn't care about the cat or where it went, but following it gave me a direction to walk as I thought about the dress, as I saw the shapes and the lines and the swirl of the fabrics.

I wasn't trying to save the cat when the car hit me. I was distracted by the cat, not paying attention. I was following it across the road. The car hit us both, which made no sense. The cat should have jumped out of the way, but instead it was flattened. I saw the cat flatten, froze, then felt the car against me, twisting my left arm around and under the back tire.

It must have hurt. I tried to find the pain in my memory, followed the thread backward from the ache, the twinge, the torture—from my ghost. I couldn't find it.

Later, it was hard to remember anything about the accident except the coldness as my shoulder opened up a wide hole to the snow. When images came to me later, in dreams, it was hard to keep the cat separate from the arm. Feelings didn't line up with body parts—the visual and the tactile just wouldn't connect.

That was how I thought about my accident, but it was made up. Only the coldness and the confusion were real.

Fluffy nothing. Lefty emerges as a thin strap of feeling.

Lefty pieces. Lefty pulls happenings.

It was just them, her and him, Velma and Lefty, the-still-unnamed, un-souled, still-stuck-to-Velma left arm that would become Lefty. Limbed. Lified. Lifted.

Night of the becoming—it was chilling dampness and darkness and hurry. Lefty didn't have his own thoughts then, just Velma's feelings—harder to know, to piece it together. But Lefty thinks night. Thinks hurry—she was, they were, late for something? Slippery streets? How could Lefty, lifing-levitating-or-NO!-still-linked-to-Velma, know the slime of the street? Must be false, made up, an insertion. Lefty shouldn't lie.

Drizzly rain or snow, Lefty can know that, Lefty can feel cold tickles in his palm when she turns him skywards. He can feel it in the frizzy when she runs him through her hair.

Then a flash, a screech, pulling a whole self away against the tilt the fall for balance, can't muscle it back, lurching forward and twisting. Aah!

And then. Then with what Lefty knows, what he's piece-puzzled together, it must have hurt. Burning hurt sharp horrible hurt. But Lefty doesn't remember that. (And Lefty loathes to lie.) Can't-remember-the-only-thing-left—It's Lefty! Doesn't think it was there. It is here.

It was just iciness, coldness, a whooooooosh of heat draining, and then a new feeling fluffy-firm-filthy-feeling that Lefty didn't know, couldn't name, not name right away out-RIGHT. Lefty wriggled on screamly sidewalk. His bone and muscle was real and soft and solid. Flat and juicy, smeared across concrete. Lefty likened to a hamburger.

Velma lying tangled, torn. Who is that? Not Lefty? And lots of blood. Splash-wet, splash-red. He felt funny, cold and hurt and twisted.

He was still meat and bones, still attached to Velma, but twisted. Lefty all a tear, shreds stringing, gushing, bones not working, bending at bad places.

Screeching noises. Car swimming away. Then nothing. Black silence. Then sirens. Then a stretcher, stretched out with Velma, wrapped. Stretched and wrapped.

In the hospital, it was warmer and hurt less. Something woozy in the blood. Lots and lots of gauze gauze gauze. Velma puffy and asleep, put-out. (pout-pout.) Then Lefty slip-sleeping too. Nighty night, he couldn't fight-bright-fright-fight it.

And then, Lefty was born. New Lefty. Memories are sharper, more his, no Velma thoughts muddying it up. Still some, yes—swat at them—but less. Separate. Oh Velma.

Lefty still wasn't thinking—only remembered afterwards, in tangled shreds of bloody memories.

Lefty pulled from his body. Tangle of tendons, angle of endings. The powder, ponder it, of crunched bones.

A jerk-jerk and he (he? he? he!) snapped free.

Stretched straight again.

Popped the crick from jammed knuckles. Locked-bone-less-ness.

Dropped, tumbled off a steel tray, to the girl, his girl, his Velma. Touched the hole, pouring red.

Oh no this isn't good!

Lefty felt so heavy then so heavy. Strange and bodiless and heavy. Lefty curled against her, wrapped fingers around her other arm (his friend!) intact so lucky, and coiled against her chest. Chest torn into, shreds unraveling up her chest. Lefty tore and clung, clings to shreds. Then masked men flashing men scooping men stitch-stitch-stitching, they scooped off the dead part that had been Lefty and closed the hole where Lefty fit. The Lefty tangle of bone and muscle and skin gone gone gone. Nowhere to live but to

hang off Velma, clear-bloody finger-shoulder-tangles tear-grip-tear into dangling shreds.
And then masked-men closed the shreds, smoothed her over.

But not too smooth. Not too much.

Twisting ropes of scars still give him handles—Grip them!—but it's tenuous now.
Only takes a spear of plastic, a strap, a buckle, to dislodge him, set him puddling,
pooling, helpless.

It wasn't until the accident that Lefty felt these thoughts at all. It wasn't until the
accident the incident the stealing of himself—thief-thief-give-it-back-give-me-back! that
he knew the separation. That he thought at all.

Tonight, Lefty flutters, flows, flies. Almost almost levitates, but still clings. One
hangnail shred tattered tendon tangles into Velma. Sleeping sleeping sleeping.

Lefty loves to snuggle in and remember and forget.

In the middle of the night, I got up, shook off bad dreams, or maybe bad thoughts.
I couldn't tell if I was sleeping.

The ghost snagged on blankets, scraped them across the bed, then hung like a
heavy sack over my shoulder.

In the kitchen, a low film of light seeped through the window. Streetlight, but it
was soft like moonlight. My carving knife gleamed, suspended from a magnet on the
wall. I couldn't use it anymore, one handed. My dad had given me a smaller knife, one
that rocked like a cradle. I never used it. I didn't cook anymore. The big knife should
have been stuck, rusted to the wall. It had been so long. But the magnet released it
smoothly.

It was in my hand, sharp steel curving upward, and the top of my pajamas was unbuttoned and falling away from my half-shoulder, with the oozy ghost that was thick and hard over the knotty snarls of my scars. The ghost was asleep, or else just sleepy, hanging dull and heavy. I drew the tip of the knife, glinting, near the base of him, near those knots. I touched the spider on my left shoulder where the scars bunched and tangled.

The metal tip was cold and the ghost came alive. He tensed—jerked—woke up. A jolt of panic, a splash of red on the knife tip, bright on the floor, and I was afraid.

Afraid of what?

Afraid of what happened if I cut him off.

I couldn't tell if the fear was his or mine, but it was overwhelming. How much would it hurt? Could I live without him? Was he me? After all, was he me?

I threw down the knife, then moved to the living room and sat in the dark. I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped one arm, no two, around them, tightly. Slowly, the fear faded. Into the hole, there ran something else and it was just sadness, like my feelings had been hurt, but they weren't my feelings, they were his. And then guilt flooded me, from the other direction. The feelings were separate but swirling, like tears running down opposite sides of a face.

Lefty shudders-flutters-mutters. Oh-the-cutters. Velma love him Velma hate him. Lefty shudders. Gutter. Shutters. Stutter. Cut cut cut and Lefty dies.

Dies? Or flies?

For certain-sure-true, Lefty cries. Lefty doesn't know. Life-Loose-Lefty doesn't want it. Wants to stay with lovely, love-fly Velma. Wants to live-love-live-life as fully meatly arm. Wants to stay-pay-play. And tangle into shredding scars!

A want? (A fear.)

Fears to lose. The cut the cut, the knife the knife. Would it work? Wriggle-wrest him off?

Could she shave-pave-crave him away like a head of foam like the top of a cut-carrot or silly-ssssssssss-celery?

Lefty tries-flies so hard. What has Lefty done wrong?

Ah! Hah! Harumph. Umph. *There's* a thing that he wants, he sobs. A thing a thing. Lefty wants to be Velma's arm.

I discovered a woman at the Medical Museum, a guard. She was lovely. Pretty. She was graceful and reckless, pointing her eyes high at the domed ceiling. She wasn't pretty like the girl next door, but pretty like the woman who would cross the street in front of your car.

She was missing an arm--that would've been important to some people. But not to me. After all, I was missing some parts. Most of my hair was gone.

My wife didn't understand, of course not. Couldn't see what I saw, even waking, even watching, after that dream. I couldn't explain. Could the tulip be for her?

It was such luck to find this lovely lady. I'd been looking for her. Looking for someone like her, for so long. Lovely and graceful and surely not minding my hair. I sort

of had my eye on her, her type, for a while. She reminded me of someone. Maybe someone from a dream.

I saw her from across the rotunda, guarding syringes. I crept closer. Stopped. Moved in again. Till her face lost its fuzziness, shimmered out between the tourists. Her empty sleeve floated back and forth with the breathing of the crowd.

Dreaming. If she could see me, what would it mean?

I don't know why she drew me to her. Why I had to keep returning. I don't know why she never looked at me, never wondered why I watched. After all, I wondered.

What kind of man would pick a tulip, a fiery one, tall and slim, petals so alive they hurt to look at? What kind of man would pluck it, admire it as he walked, and then, fastidiously, pull off the petals, roll them in his fingers, scatter them on the concrete? Grind them into a greasy smear?

**

May. 1

Dear Ann,

I did it. I got up at four this morning, I was hardly sleeping anyway, got dressed and headed to the shop before the sun could even come out. I was thinking about that spinning wheel.

I was in that halfway state between sleeping and awake, I think. I played around with the tension for a bit and then, well, the thread was lumpy for the first hour or so, but steadily it got smoother and then even smoother. The sun started to rise, the street outside

turned pink, and the thread got smoother. And then about the time it was light, I understood. Something snapped or clicked or shifted and I could spin.

Let me tell you, at first, when I was getting the lumpy stuff, it was like I was doing it, I was forcing it, and then I was fixing it, but not really. That was the first couple of hours.

And then, I looked up and I wasn't doing anything at all, it was doing itself and I was just there to guide it. Like the most important part of my spinning was my picturing the smooth thread I wanted the fluff to become and then, with the picture in my head, my hands just guided it there.

Throwing a baseball is like that, you know. You don't aim so much as picture it.

I'm definitely going to dig out my crystals—just for at night, when nobody's watching. And some incense, too.

Love,

Max

P.S. I met with the PI again today. Nothing yet, but we're optimistic.

I dressed in the dark, folded my sleeve from memory, pinned it, one-handed, one spider claw, careful not to poke through the blanket beneath the shirt.

It was early, but I was anxious. And maybe a little bit lonely. And maybe a little bit hungry. I didn't understand what I'd almost done the night before. The ghost was tense, taut, fluttery.

So I walked to Tom's Donuts, as the sun lifted over the city. Then, with the half dozen swinging, squishing in the bag, I walked to Body of Art tattoo parlor, peeked inside. Poncho was in the shop, backlit from the table lights, wearing just an undershirt and the bright swirls of his tattoo sleeves. He was painting, his back to me, sharp swaths of green and dark brown. I put my fist close to the glass, but then his back tensed, and I stepped away, quickly. The ghost reached forward, so quick, thumped at the glass, and I ran. Didn't look back to see.

My dad's dress shop would be safer. I could get there before it opened, surprise him. A truck backed up, beeping, from Curly's. Then over the railroad tracks and under the overpass, over the pile of blankets that breathed and into the historic district, where the streets were bricks, or sometimes pretend cobbles.

Meanwhile, the sugar was working on the ghost, who couldn't stay out of the donuts. Phantom fingers brought a taste to my mouth, wiped glaze over my cheek, then on my pants. Maybe he forgave me.

My dad sat in the display window, behind a tiny wooden spinning wheel, the wheel a blur. His foot clicked up and down, his hands hovered in front of him, while a small woman with old lady hair leaned over his shoulder. His "wheel." What a weirdo.

Fabrics floated up as I opened the door. Inside, the shop whirred and hummed.

"Why, it's just amazing!" The woman brought one hand to her mouth and stood up straight. "I've never seen anything like it!" She turned. "Oh my!" And jumped when she saw me, just inside the front door. "Goodness." The hand was at her chest then. "You startled me."

“Excuse me.” The spinning wheel was whizzing. It pulled the breath from my lungs, sharply. Hypnotically. The ghost stretched straight in front of me, pulled harder, and I jerked. Snapped back to hold him out of reach.

My dad chuckled, then outright laughed. He broke the spell of the wheel, but didn’t stop. His hands were in front of him. His foot moved up and down and up and down.

He didn’t look at us, but said, “Mrs. Halcow, this is my daughter, Velma. Velma, Mrs. Halcow is teaching me how to spin.”

“I haven’t taught him a thing. He’s either a liar with years of experience or the best natural spinner I’ve ever seen.” Her eyes ran over my missing arm with only a small hitch. Then she was back to watching my dad. “And a man at that!”

“Well, what do you know, Dad! You’ve got a talent.” I patted him on the back, but it was too hard. His hands spasmed, the yarn yanked, and the wheel faltered.

“I was stopping anyway.” My dad stood up, bumped the stool off balance, then set it right. “Donuts! Mrs. Halcow, would you like a donut?”

“I’m sure your father has lots of talents.” She addressed me, but looked at him. Underneath Mrs. Halcow’s hair, her face wasn’t very old, after all. To my dad, she said, “Why, yes, I’ll have a donut.”

“Please.” My dad touched her elbow as he led her to the donuts. I’d already dug out a cinnamon twist. My dad offered the bag to Mrs. Halcow, picked one for himself.

“So, Velma, what do you think of my toy?”

I licked a finger. “It’s for you, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s cute.”

Mrs. Halcow, with her short tight curls, nibbled a bear claw. Strange, how she watched him, when I was the one missing an arm.

“It looks nice in the window,” I said. There was something cheerful about it sitting there. The wood gleamed and it was smaller than you’d expect, toy-like. But its light felt strange and source-less.

“How about from the outside?” My dad went through the front door to look from the sidewalk. The display window ran floor to ceiling, converted from an alcove that once had a normal window.

When he returned, Mrs. Halcow jumped up. “Now if you have any problems, you call me.”

“Certainly, Mrs. Halcow.”

“Oh, please, it’s Janice.”

“Certainly, Janice.” My dad shook her hand with two of his and smiled.

Once she was gone, I gave him some eyebrows.

“Don’t make fun of her,” he said.

“You mean Janice?”

My dad took a deep breath.

“Will you be giving Janice a call?”

“I don’t think so.” I believed him even though he pursed his lips to hold back a smile.

May. 9

Dear Ann,

Velma was over again today. She's here all the time and it's great. Except sometimes she's a chatterbox, but even then, you know I don't mind.

But I'm worried. I don't know if she has any other friends. I haven't seen any of the old ones. Sara? Nick? Billy? I guess those guys were from high school... But there were some people before the accident. A woman named Kristin, that she knew from the gym, I think. And the man who owns that tattoo parlor—I don't know if they were dating or just friends, but he used to come by here and they'd get lunch together. He's still in that shop, 4 blocks over, but I never see him here or with her. Wait, she was dating someone before the accident. I know it. Martin? Mark? Maybe they were never serious. She wouldn't let me meet him. It's not like she ever told me anything, but maybe she would have told you. Does she have friends at work? Does she eat lunch with the other guards? Get drinks with them in the evenings?

Maybe I'm wrong.

I met the PI for a drink this evening, after Velma left. Her fiery hair is like this beacon of hope for me. She'll find the guy. I know she will.

The spinning is going well, better than I'd hoped. Customers are interested and so, of course, I'm playing up the ancestral bit. I don't know if there's ever been a man or woman in my family who spun, but surely there were plenty of them. And it doesn't matter. No one will question it.

I don't talk about the magic—but trust me it feels like magic, when the string grows out of my fingers.

And it calms me. I'm even sleeping better.

I still miss you.

Love,

Max

There was a spider web in the pyramid. It glimmered between three of the plastic cylinders. I wanted to poke it out, sweep it away. Too many people.

I pulsed at the ghost, swept him tantalizingly close. Sometimes it worked, I swore it did, but not that time. He was busy. Playing an invisible piano? He was running fingers, making me tired. Twisting my wrist. Jiggling my elbow. Or his wrist. His elbow.

But the web was torment. Seeing it there. Leaving it there. I had to wait until no one watched.

A gray-haired woman stepped briskly to the exhibit. Her pants were too short but her sleeves were too long, just barely. It made her look tough. She stood at a respectful distance, her eyes followed the pyramid methodically, then she read the plaques next to the syringes. The ghost waved in front of her. She squinted, removed her glasses, put them back on. She gave me a sharp look, since I blocked her view of the next plaque, which was next to the spider web.

I stepped sideways to give her access and, as I did, the ghost reached. Finally. Finger and thumb swooped in, poked it up and rolled a sticky wad of spider web between his fingers.

The woman vanished into a fieldtrip. Children flowed around me like a river over stones and I was distracted.

Later, I noticed the spider gunk was gone from my fingers. All of them. It wasn't in my pocket or on the floor. Had he stuck it, like gum, under the table?

There was only that one funny-haired guy watching—always there, he hardly counted—so I dropped to my knees, was feeling the underside of the display case, when another man, stiff-legged, young and handsome, if a bit too clean-cut, surprised me. I stood. He smiled, then eyed the sleeve, which swung fiercely with the ghost. “Iraq?”

“Car accident.”

“Ah.” He limped away, then melted into the Black Bile Wing. The arm reached after him, sucked me toward the hallway, but I held my ground. Another patron disappeared behind him into the dark space, then a mother leading a toddler on a leash. A pack of children. A string of teenagers. I snapped my eyes to syringes, but nobody else was looking at them.

Later yet, I found the spider web stuck in my hair. Gooey between the strands.

After work, the front window of the shop was lit, as I approached it, and my dad was spinning, hunched at his wheel. His beard almost blended into the fluff he held in his hands, which clouded over his lap, then bumped into a tight twist. It felt like he was doing something private and it embarrassed me.

When I leaned into the door, curled into the shop, the clack-clack was louder than the chimes, but he must have seen or felt me, because he looked up and slowed, then stopped the wheel. His hands rested on his knees.

I thought of the lady with the tight gray curls. “So is this spinning supposed to be hard, or was that Janice woman just flirting?”

“Honestly? I don’t know.”

“But you did pick it up quickly.”

“Yeah, there’s something, I just sort of felt my way into it. It’s kind of a spiritual thing.”

“Don’t start on *that*.” There were crystals on the windowsill, too, shooting glints of colored light. I rolled my eyes.

“Well.” He gathered his fluff and the beard indented with his frown. “Okay.”

I started the accounting and my dad returned to his spinning. I pounded numbers into a spreadsheet from a stack of jagged invoices, inventory lists, canceled checks.

My dad was CLAP-clap, whirrrrrrrr, clap-CLAP-CLAP-CLAP, whirrrrr, clap-CLAP-clap. He hunched. The string he twisted was clumpy and the rhythm was gone. I couldn’t concentrate. It grated.

“Aah!” My dad stopped the wheel suddenly, grabbed it with two hands and let the yarn and the wool fall over his knees to the floor. “I lost it.”

Then he settled himself into the chair by his sewing machine. How did he find time to spin, anyway? It was prom season.

I got back to my numbers and they were annoying, but at least I could concentrate. They put the ghost to sleep, and the shop was quiet except for the hum of the sewing machine. Nothing was awkward unless I made it that way.

“So, this is weird,” I said.

“What is?”

“What I’m about to say.”

“You haven’t said anything.”

“Give me a chance!”

“Spit it out.” My dad’s head bobbed with his words, and his needle stalled.

“It probably bothers you that I’m not married by now. No kids.”

“You’re young.”

"Twenty-nine."

"That's young." He pulled the dress from the machine, snicked the thread, then threaded a loose needle to stitch by hand.

“Yeah, but now it’s going to be harder. If I’d just found somebody before.”

“Can’t go back.”

“I know.”

“Who would you have married?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Billy?”

“Huh! Poor old Billy.” My dad almost looked up, but only because he was pulling a long thread through in a slow pull. The needle sparked light at its tip. “Don’t marry Billy on my account.”

“You don’t want grandkids?”

“I don’t want you to get married just for me.”

“Yeah, but grandkids?”

My dad kept his head down, but rolled his eyes up to look at me. I knew I should drop it, but I was feeling perverse. Like I was irritated enough to push through a bad conversation. I smacked the desk in front of me with a flat open palm because I was mad he wouldn’t look up. Of course it was childish. It woke the ghost. “So you’re telling me you don’t want grandkids?”

“Either way.”

Then he went back to his stitching and I stared at my spreadsheet. The numbers swirled like that wheel had, except they wouldn’t line up, wouldn’t funnel into thread. The ghost was flapping at the desk, smacking it harder, harder, and he wouldn’t stop. He was starting to bruise and the noise was loud. My dad was still being stubborn, wouldn’t look up. I should have been grateful. But at that moment I wanted him to look. Wanted him to see the freak that I was. The thumping ghost flung invoices off the desk, the whole stack. Screw them anyway. My dad’s eyes lifted, finally, when they hit the floor. But his face was only puzzled, maybe pained.

I dragged the arm from the desk. He grabbed the edge, clutched desperately, then snapped, stung me like a rubber band as I wrenched him free. I gathered the scattered papers, tossed them on the desk and left.

May 17

Dear Ann,

I'm writing this letter in the shop instead of our old house, your old house. Instead of from the desk in our bedroom, by the light of your Aunt Mabel's lamp. Do you know it still works? The lovely old thing. Usually I write by the light of it and so never mention it because it is so obviously there.

Now I'm in the rooms above the shop. I'm writing with a pencil, almost in the dark, but the streetlamps shine in from the street. I'm in the "abandoned dress room," which is just as messy as it ever was, but the mothball smell is not so bad with the window open. Either that or else I'm used to it. The streetlamp is a new one, a new retro streetlamp. The neighborhood is getting quainter. The one on the corner is an original, re-installed. The one in front of Abigail Engler's is new, but made to match the original one on the corner.

Today, Velma was talking to me about getting married. Not that she's planning on it! Just asking if I want her to, or if I want her to have kids. I wonder where she gets her ideas. Do you think she's lonely? Yes, she must be. I don't know, really, how much she dates. And I don't blame her for keeping that to herself. But it's not just her keeping things to herself. It's keeping herself to herself. She's pushed away all of her old friends.

She brought up my dating the other day, but I think it was just teasing, asking if I was going to call the woman who sold me the spinning wheel. Just teasing, or else maybe she was building up a way to talk about herself.

It's all I could think about as I was spinning today, how I wish I could find Velma a nice boyfriend.

Of course I'm the last person who can help her...

Ha! A dad setting up his daughter? That's like a return to the dark ages. Don't worry, honey, I won't try anything like that.

I still miss you, Ann. I wish you'd come back.

Love,

Max

The man who brushed me off came back. The handsome man with the limp who asked if I lost my arm in Iraq.

He circled my pyramid of syringes, which seemed to quiver like jello in the pink neon lights that sprayed from the virus exhibit.

He stopped and faced me. "Hey." He stood at attention. "I was kind of rude the other day. I don't know if you remember."

"You." I lifted my head a notch. "I remember."

He lowered his head a notch. "I'm sorry."

"It's ok."

He lowered his voice. "I'm glad I found you again. To apologize."

I leaned toward him until our faces were very close. The ghost flicked, lightly, at his hair, but he didn't even notice. I whispered loudly. "I'm easy to find. I work here."

He tilted back and smiled. Took a breath. "Can I call you sometime?"

Even though he looked too young for me and too military, we traded numbers, Brent and I. When Brent walked away, I stepped back to my exhibit and stiffened into guard posture. I scanned the rotunda and another face pushed through the crowd, that

man with the bad toupee, closer to the syringes than he usually ever came. His face was mysterious, kind of intriguing. Just as quickly, he was gone.

The room is dark, lit only by weak overhead light, which comes down in vapping beams, but you cannot see the source. A man is lying on a table, unconscious. On his face is a gentle smile. He seems peaceful, until you step closer and see that his hands and feet are bound. That there is a purple bruise on his jaw and his lip is cut open and swollen.

You look at the ropes binding his arms. Can they be cut? You pull your Swiss army knife from your pocket, but in your haste, it clatters to the floor and the clack is LOUD.

There's a stir behind you. Instead of fumbling for the pocketknife, you leap behind a cage in the corner. Conceal yourself in a tiny ball. Adjust the shadows to peer out between the bars.

Footsteps. A door opens, closes. You see nothing, yet the footsteps thud closer. They seem to stop at the table. You recognize it as an operating table, now, though you didn't before.

There's a whistling.

What tune is it?

Light. Catchy. Familiar, but you can't place it.

There's no one in the room, but you and the man on the table and this whistling. It comes from a spot in the center. Five or six feet above the footsteps.

A glint of light catches in your eye. A long, shining instrument lifts from the table. It plays over the body on the table, twirls gracefully in the air. Spelling words in

cursive letters? Stitching curses into the air? Then another instrument lifts. This one is like scissors that open and close. The two metal instruments hover, then lower over the man's chest. Down down down.

The sleeping man wakes. His eyes open. His chest heaves. And he screams.

May 24

Dear Ann,

Talk about magic! Mechanical magic, Ann. What turns the up and down clunking—so stiff, so start-and-stop, so awkward—of my foot on the pedal into the spinning, smooth and eternal, of the big wheel? I know it's simple mechanics. But what's so simple about that? Where is the moment, the place, when the up and down becomes a circle? I've been watching as I thump and I can't find it. Maybe I don't want to.

And what wraps the big spin into the little spin? What is the spindle for and who does it hail, reaching up like that?

What pulls thread out of cloud? A cloud that has no thread—have you ever looked at the fluff? I was looking at some today, digging through with thick fingers, trying to sort out a line, a string in the jumble. But it's little bits, not even little bits. It's almost solid. The string—where does it come from? The cloud is not even a tangle—that would require threads—it's just a lump.

Magic, Ann. It must be magic.

Love,

Max

On Saturday morning, I was back at my dad’s dress shop, refusing the present wrapped in a green bow that he pulled from behind a large spool of velvet ribbon. “Dad, no more presents.” He held the box flat on his palm as if it were a tray. It was small, must have been lightweight.

“Why not?” He set the box on the desk. “Just open it.”

“I’m done with them.” I let my posture slip to its sideways adjustment. The asymmetry set off the crushed hydrangea that was folded into the purple sleeve. “There’s no going back.”

Instead of sitting behind the desk, I pulled a chair into the hole where one of the dressmaker’s dummies used to be. In that front room, there wasn’t much area to move furniture around—every bit of space held a rack of dresses or a box of buttons or a towering stack of spools of colored thread. There was an empty space for customers to stand while my dad fit them, but the space was so thoroughly designated for fittings, that it didn’t seem empty. It was not a place to put a chair.

I’d brought a plastic arm from the case at home, clasped it between my knees so the hand pointed at my face. I stabbed the pinky with a threaded needle, then the ring finger, strung a web all the way to the thumb.

“Fine.” My dad winced when the needle punctured the prosthetic thumb. I only stitched the fingers to bother him. It was so hard to get a rise, out of anybody, anymore. “Maybe Sue would like it.” He sat down, slid backward into his chair. Then he revved the

sewing machine, pulled a bright scrap of muslin through a test-run. “I hear you’ve got a date tonight.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I know everything.” He put a pair of men’s suit pants in the machine next, clamped them under the metal foot. “And, Velma, don’t take this the wrong way, but I think you should wear your arm. Not that one.” He curled a lip. “A new one.”

“Because it’s so beautiful?” I waved the webbed hand up and over, played it in front of my face like a fan, peered through punctured plastic and the film of snarled thread.

“A new one. And maybe with that tattoo sleeve over it. The one I made you.”

“Maybe.” There was no way I was going to wear the plastic that night.

“You don’t like the sleeve.”

“Don’t be dumb.” He was really frustrating me. “It’s the *arm* that I don’t like.”

As soon as I got home, I laid three shirts on the bed, all long-sleeve v-necks, cut deep enough to be sexy, but still cover the scars. Maybe it was useless to cover them. I always felt them spark through fabric. They trapped eyes, entangled them.

I folded one sleeve like a crane, one like a dahlia and one like a pair of scissors. I pulled on each shirt, threw it off. I twisted the green dahlia into an airplane, smoothed the black crane into a soft loop, crunched the scissors to make a pineapple. The ghost arm fluffed and frilled with me, creased ahead of what I planned, knew what I wanted him to do. But it wasn’t any good. A pineapple? I left the shirts, took a shower, extra hot to steam out the weird nerves. Looked right and shivered when the water hit the half shoulder and flowed, distorted, through the ghost.

Then, the ghost helped me to pull on my best jeans, strap into sexy shoes, even straighten my hair. We turned to the shirts, shook out the silly folds and smoothed all three, flat on the bed. The mauve was crinkled beyond wear, so I turned to the black while the ghost fussed at the green. So it was spider fingers, together and apart. I creased with thumb, twisted with pinkie, needled safety pin tip in careful-careful, until I had something smooth and soft like long blades of grass. The green shirt beside it had a puckered blob, pointed at one end like a heart. Stupid ghost. I pulled on the black shirt, slung my purse over my shoulder, tried not to blink too hard in the wind as I walked, across town, to the restaurant.

Lefty like-loves-lucks dates when he gets to go, which is more often than you'd think and much more than certain of Velma's witchy watchy web-spinning friends would like. That old-woman spinning man, her dad dad dad. Been getting on Lefty's nerves lately, been pulling at the twitching strings that flap out the top part of his frazzled end, those nerves, those raw-exposed-extra-sensitive-sensory-sensitive string-nerves.

But Velma loves Lefty. Velma takes him shakes him at the date. Velma values Lefty's opinions. No more knife. In fact, knotty-knife lives-dies in drawer now, not wall.

Ahem!

Ha-ha!

A-hem.

Now out with crew cut fellow Lefty look/lick/likes, at least a little bit, he likes the hello-fellow. Nice. Nice looking. Maybe not too smart. Lefty can identify with not too smart.

Also to remember, at least to try to: With these pants and underwear Lefty is on wedgie patrol tonight. He knows his job: Butt!

—But. Well. It’s easy to forget. Easy to get distracted. Nice fellow-hello-fellow.

Brent sat across from me at Firenze’s. He was older than he seemed in the museum, my age after all. He dressed well, too. His shirt fit him elegantly. But the military posture was real.

“So you were in Iraq?”

“Yeah, but we don’t have to talk about that.”

“Okay. What do you want to talk about?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Okay.” I didn’t try very hard to make conversation, read the menu instead. Pasta was hard one-handed, worried me.

“Hey. Um. Again. I’m sorry I was so weird when I first met you.”

“We hadn’t met yet.”

“I know. I was just nervous about talking to you. I thought I had an opening, and all. And then it wasn’t going to work, and I was an asshole.”

“Does that line usually work?”

“About Iraq? Maybe for military women.”

“Do you only date military women?”

“Not always.” He smiled and it was kind of lopsided.

The ghost was flapping. I pulled my chair an inch to the right, didn’t want him to reach anyone walking by. Brent’s smile died and I realized my scoot looked bad, that it

was a move away from him. So I wrestled the chair to the left, closer than before, but just barely. Brent's smile came back, but he was studying the menu. I dropped my right arm to my side, forced it to hang calmly. I sent smooth, soothing waves to my left arm. Please settle down. Ooh, that's it, settle down. No, that's a ripple. Please settle down. My heart pounded and my pulses weren't calm, they were frantic. I couldn't blame him for the flailing—I felt like flailing, too. I shifted, leaned my right side into the table, cut the ghost off behind me.

“Have you been here before?” Brent asked.

“Only for drinks.”

“Should we split the calamari? Or maybe bruschetta?”

“Let's do both.”

The ghost was jerking violently toward the table. He grabbed hold of the tablecloth and was about to yank, but I pulled it back with my real arm, bumped the table hard. Plates clattered and water lapped over the edge of both glasses. “Excuse me.” I stood. “I'll be right back.”

I found the restroom, rinsed my face in the sink. The ghost splashed in the water, but didn't help. Please please please, behave. I took a deep breath and fixed my makeup, because it often calmed him. He liked to hold steady on my cheek while I drew on eyeliner. He liked to press against my chin or my neck while I brushed mascara, swept the lipstick.

He didn't help, but seemed to quiet. And I was calming down, too. I re-tucked my shirt, inspected the folds in my sleeve. It was more like an amaryllis than grass. It was still crisp and clean, somehow, with sweeping lines.

No need to be nervous. I might not even like this guy. I told that to the arm, felt it to him.

At the table, my prosecco had arrived. I gulped, hoped it would calm the arm. He pinched my scars, shivered down my side.

And, somehow, the dinner went well. Brent picked a good bottle of wine. We talked about the museum and local politics, the scandal with the mayor's wife and the clinic. We talked only a little bit about his deployment and I learned that he was done with the army. Working for his dad's construction crew until he found something in his field, which was environmental science. He played the saxophone, but not well, he claimed, and we talked about music. We traded bites of our dinners. My tortellini stayed on my fork. We split tiramisu, then lingered with cappuccino. It was a really good date.

But the ghost thought so too. As we left the restaurant, he got touchy-feely. Fresh. Reached for Brent's waist as we walked out. I pulled away before the arm could grab Brent's butt, just barely in time, and it looked like a seizure. Brent turned, puzzled.

"Sorry. I tripped." I stepped to the left of him and took hold of his arm with my good hand. "This is better." I angled my body to block the ghost from Brent, squirmed grossly.

In the parking lot, Brent still had the funny look. "Did you walk here?"

"Yes."

"Let me drive you home."

"Um." I was worried about the ghost, but more worried Brent would think I didn't like him. "Okay."

The drive to my apartment was short, but the ghost stroked Brent's thigh the whole way. I couldn't stop it. Brent was quiet, followed my directions. He felt the hand, but didn't say anything. Maybe he was scared of me. Maybe he thought he was crazy.

When we got to my street, I sat in the car, wondered if I should invite him up. Two-armed, it wouldn't have mattered. But one-armed? Was it stupid or my only chance? "Um."

"Oh." Brent hopped out and so I waited, awkwardly, for him to open my door.

"Um." I was out of the car and standing next to him. He leaned toward me. The ghost arm reached, touched, stroked his face. I was pissed, but, looking back, it was just right. It was just what I wanted to do.

Brent started. "Hnnn." He took a step back.

I stepped back too and swatted, discretely, I hoped, with my right arm at my left.

Brent had his hand on his face. "I'm really sorry." He rubbed his cheek, then his chin. "It's just my leg is acting up. The one I told you about? The bad one?"

Brent leaned back in to give me a tiny peck kiss, very quickly, a hand on my good shoulder and the other hovering above my mangled one. His arms were practically straight. Then he drove away.

Lefty wants what Velma wants. Right? Lefty thinks so, so he thinks. Lefty reaches, Lefty urges, ooh-ooh.

Lefty feels slinky-sexy.

Touch that touch that touch that. Hhhhhhn.

Snap back. Slap slap, Lefty feels slapped back.

Velma!

Stings red stings red, like blood in bloodless-cheekless cheeks.

Hmm... Humiliation?

May 29

Dear Ann,

You always had something to prove—at first I loved it. But then to my mother. You had to work and that was fine. You had to travel. How did our dreams turn into this? Anti-establishment, anti-war, anti-capitalist—to power hungry? I got it then, I thought. I wasn't threatened. Didn't mind the income either.

But you were gone. I pulled, but couldn't pull you back. And even now.

But now I wonder. How did it fit with who you were? And what we wanted? Flower child in a power suit. Or were the flowers just a phase I caught you in, but couldn't keep you in?

Love,

Max

I tipped into the shop and it was chimes and a clack-clack clack-clack and whiiiiirrrrrrr from the spinning wheel. Green and blue fabrics unraveled from their bolts on the shelf, swept down like long, full skirts. Burst into gowns, almost. They filled like

sails when I opened the door, didn't stop dancing when it closed. It must have been the radiator blowing them.

"Dad?" He was seated. Yarn grew between fat fingers, oozed from a cloud of wool. His back bowed and he wore a fringed leather vest that I didn't know he still had. His head was down and he didn't look at me or anywhere but at that twisting string that ran between finger and thumb and finger and thumb.

My dad was getting stranger and stranger with the spinning. He hummed as he did it. Not a song, just a low continuous drone.

"Dad!"

Still nothing and I stepped closer. "Dad." I put a hand on his shoulder.

A sharp, but quiet intake of breath, I barely felt it.

"Velma! For Christ's sake, I hear you." His shoulders moved up then back down, so subtly. "Can I finish this please?"

"Fine." I sat in my chair, swiveled. "Can you talk while you spin?"

A long pause. "Not really." Another long pause. Clack-clack clack-clack clack-clack. "Not good enough yet. Can it wait?"

"I guess." I sat behind the computer at the desk. Nothing important to say anyway. Just, hello. Just, has the invoice for the new steamer come yet? Just I need someone who'll talk to me, maybe, about nothing in particular. I flipped through the mail.

The ghost was playful that day, flipped the stack of envelopes around like a deck of cards, tried to lure in my right hand. But I was mad at him. Didn't he know? I snatched my right hand away from the cajoling fingers, then away again, and squeezed it in my lap. My dad's spinning pulled my attention to it. That whir. What did it sound like?

While I thought about the whirl, my two hands drifted to the desk again. I didn't mean to let them. They made a bridge, shuffled, repeated. The little fucker tricked me. I slapped the envelopes down and my dad stopped his spinning. With a loud clack, he stood up.

“Velma!”

“What.” I forced my real elbow over the mail, fought the ghost hand away.

“I really hate how you never wear your prosthetic.”

“What?”

“It's bugging me. I keep thinking about it.”

“Why do you even care?”

“I don't know. It just seems wrong to go around flaunting the injury like you do.”

“Flaunting it?”

“Maybe that's not the right word.”

“I don't flaunt it.”

“Why won't you wear the plastic?”

“I don't see how it affects you.” Both arms were stiff, then trembling.

“It's just something I've been thinking about.”

“Whatever.” My keys were on the desk. I scooped them into my purse, slung the purse over the good shoulder and walked to the door. “It's not your business.” I crashed the chimes.

On my way home, Brent called and I let it go to voice mail. “I had a really good time on Saturday. Are you free this weekend? Call me back.” I deleted the message. To keep from calling him, I kept walking. Through my neighborhood, past my house and on

into the dark part of the city. It was wet that night, not raining, but misty. It was cool and stinging on my cheeks.

Brent must have rationalized the ghost arm. Chalked it up to booze or the wind or a muscle spasm. I didn't know. But it wouldn't work twice. Nobody would ever understand about my ghost. I knew that they wouldn't.

Jun. 1

Dear Ann,

You had the strangest toes—so wonderful. They gripped my calves like tentacles, like suction cups on a squid. Found holds in the backs of my knees, my ankles, my thighs, elbows. Chin. Big toes like thumbs. Your feet smelled like grass and dirt and sweat and sometimes leather from your sandals. Tasted like salty dust, or pennies. Shiny pennies. You sat in the grass by a campfire, knees pulled into your chest and rocking. We all sang. You rocked and hummed, peeling your toenails absentmindedly. As if no one could see. Flicking soft, unpainted crescents toward the flame.

I loved your feet. Brown, freckled. Tough and dirty on the bottom. Thick and rough. But between your jointed toes was white and fresh and soft like ripe peach flesh. A miracle. Sweet like ripe peach, too.

It's not a fetish. I loved other parts of you, too. The freckles on your throat. The swell of your hair in humidity. You pretended not to be self-conscious when you danced, but you were. The corners of your mouth twitched—dimples and puckers!—I want to kiss you, thinking of that, those dimples and puckers.

And that's where the fantasy ends. In my head, I can see you! I can hear you if I concentrate—the low hum when you couldn't remember the words. I can even find, follow, force the smells and tastes that are you. But the memory of touch—it's gone, if I ever had it. I can't imagine feeling you. Can't call the memory to sense. Ann, I miss you so much.

Love,

Max

One day, I ran a test. I had to know, could I control him? The ghost liked the buttons on my blender, so I got it out. It was ancient, inherited from my grandma, that muted orange of the seventies, four chunky buttons across the front. I pressed the lid on tightly, even though it was empty. Then I scooted it to the center of the counter, plugged it in, turned it on. I flipped to puree then to chop. As one button clicked down, another popped up, and at the noise, the ghost stirred. He poked at the base, jabbed a button, then another. The kitchen filled with the click of the buttons and the whirl of the machine, which shifted from pitch to pitch as it alternated between chop, puree, mix.

Okay, he liked the blender. But could I tear him away?

I took a step back and his fingers slipped from the buttons. He was long as my living arm, but had more stretch, like elastic, more snap. At four feet back, he couldn't reach. He stretched, pulled. It felt like a strong current in a river or an ocean. Then the pinch in my shoulder sharpened, like a screw twisted into the scars. There was a tightening, a drawing forward of the low ache that was constant. If the floor were slippery

or I lost my balance, he could overcome me. But not easily. He had no outside hold, no leverage.

Next, I tried to distract him, to divert his attention. I faced the refrigerator, which he liked to open. He gave the handle a faint tug, but, really, he wanted the blender. The blades were still spinning, whining. Maybe if he couldn't hear it.

I moved, again, to the blender, close enough to turn it off, but before I could step away, the ghost flipped it back on. What the hell?

Then I realized. I didn't want to distract him like a baby or a dog, or to pull him away with my body. I had to control him, had to will him to stop.

So I stood very still. The blender was just within his reach. My right arm was tense and frozen at my side and I focused my whole body on pulling my left arm back to me. He was busy with the buttons. Chop, chop, mix, puree—bzzzzzzz.

It was like listening for one instrument in an orchestra, one lone horn, pulling it to my mind. It was like flexing a single muscle, uncoiling it from the tangle of strings, without any other part of me moving. It was like hanging from a ledge, upside down, gripping with the sticky tips of my bloody, shredding toes.

He halted, fluttered in the air, above the buttons. He dropped an inch toward me, and I pulled, I pulled. My whole body tensed, tightened, held that note so high, so high. But I couldn't hold it. I released. Exhausted. Sore. And he zipped back to the buttons.

Except that when I released, he sprung, bounced forward against the glass pitcher of the blender and the vibration zinged through both of us. He forgot about the buttons, held his entire palm and all five fingers against the blender. I could feel it in my nose. I wiggled it, jerked him back with a twist at my waist. But he was back against it and

before I could stop him, he flipped the lid off the top of the blender. I jerked, but he had ahold of the top glass edge of it, his fingers wrapped over the lip and stretched down. The blades were sharp and spinning and I didn't know, then, if he could cut himself, or even if he bled, but I didn't want to find out that way, didn't want to feel him sliced to pieces. I pulled him slowly, but the whole blender slid with him across the counter. I stopped and it sat right at the edge, so I clutched the ghost with my right hand. But he really wanted it, that blender, wouldn't release his grip. His fingers couldn't reach the blades as long as he had ahold of the top, but I didn't trust him not to snake down. I couldn't turn the blender off without releasing him. And if I jerked away, the blender would come too, would crash off the ledge. So I used my right hand to pry at his gooey fingers. Like rubbing up gum or tar with the sharp points of my fingernails. I thought I could jump back as soon as he came loose. He came loose! But he was quick, diving in, and I jerked away, desperate, got caught in my own feet. He smacked at the glass again as we both fell to the floor and the blender tipped over the edge. Sparks blasted from the outlet as the weight pulled the plug from the wall. The heavy base hit my leg, but not the blades, thank god. The glass pitcher smacked the floor hard, cracked into pieces that skidded across the linoleum.

Fuck! My leg throbbed—a knot bulged on my shin already—and I grabbed the arm, the little the fucker. I squeezed him tight and shook him. There was a black scorch mark on the wall and my grandma's blender was wrecked. I got hold of his wrist, tight in my hand and I slapped him, hard, against the floor. The blow pinged up through my shoulder, too, but it was worth it. He shivered, trembled. He was meek for a second, but then I felt him stiffen. He lifted up, pulled back and before I could dodge, he smacked me hard across the face.

I startled, but it didn't hurt. It felt more like he'd splashed me with cold water. The really strange thing, the almost overwhelming thing, was this incredible urge I had to feel the inside of the blender. There was a piece of it right in front of me. The inside was shiny and smooth and it wanted so much to be rubbed. I reached for it, stroked its curved surface. Then I held it close to my face, inspected the sparkle, touched it all the way up to my nose. I was careful about the sharp edges, but the ghost, who was also stroking it, was not. I felt a quick, sharp prick before the arm pulled away.

Suddenly the blender was less interesting. I swept away the pieces.

Jun. 6

Dear Ann,

The PI is off the case. She's found nothing, recommends, like an honest sort of person, that I stop paying her and move on. She's been telling me so for months, but now she's finally put her foot down. The trail is cold. There's no hope. Damn honest woman. I wish she'd strung me on. Paying her wasn't getting me anywhere, but at least... well, it felt like something.

So, Ann, I did what you'd have done. I mean not in those last years before you died, when you got so serious, so professional, but before, when we were first together, and so happy.

I went to a psychic.

She was young, so young. That surprised me. Oddly enough, it was Curt Womack again, who recommended her. I went to her house and the place smelled just right—like

you think a psychic's house should smell, but she looked so normal. I wore my old vest, it just felt right, but not the robe. That seemed too much. She had on jeans and sandals and a tight black t-shirt.

She studied my hand. She did some tarot. She couldn't find him. I started to think that maybe she was a fake, after all. But, no, I didn't really think so. There was something about her that just felt trustworthy. And Curt knows her, like I said.

The only advice she could give me was to worry about Velma instead of the driver—as if I'm not worried about Velma! Only, I guess she didn't say “worry.” She said to “focus my energy” that way. I'm not sure. Well, maybe I know what she means.

Ann, if there were two of us... If you were here... One to take care of her and one to avenge. That's the way it should be. Maybe I can't do both.

And, Ann, one more thing, about the PI. Well, her name was Isabella—Izzie—and we were sort of dating. But I think that's over now, too.

Love,

Max

Sometimes-glumtimes, Lefty longs for Righty, his complement, his soul mate. (Sole mate? Uh-uh, there's Velmy, too.) Righty. Complement complete-a-ment. But that other arm, Velma's right arm--there's nothing there, no thoughts no feelings, no rage! It's just a hunk of meat and bone, hard and muscled with lots of leverage. Lefty wishes he could be meat again. Wishes he could swat away all these pesky thoughts and feelings. Lefty longs for leverage, too.

Lefty lunges. Loops himself around. Twists, twirls, tries to take over. Poor Righty, all meat no feeling. Must be nice. Poor Lefty!

In the morning, I folded a triangle into my uniform sleeve. Instead of holding with one hand and doing with the other, I held with the heel of my hand and did with my fingers. Or held with my pinky, did with my thumb. There was a wrongness—a perversity—in the spider movements. In using the same hand for both. And when the ghost helped—that was wrong too. The triangle was neat and professional. A tangle of index and pinky and thumb clumped together, pinned it steady.

Then I picked up another safety pin, squeezed it open and held it calmly. The ghost was sick and wrong. The arm floated down, slowly, like a feather, batted at the uniform shirt still spread in front of us. I tossed the shirt away, in case there was blood, then timed a careful jab for the ghost's forearm. Fuck, it hurt! It felt good. I couldn't tell how deep I had him, but I held the pin there, while he writhed. There was no flash of blood, just the almost shimmer, like a shadow, in the air. The prick zinged up to my shoulder, or maybe it was the ghost's panic, more than pain. I savored it. I pulled the needle out. He convulsed.

He smacked against the side of me, as I carried the pin into the kitchen where there was more light. The pin looked normal—no traces of blood or whatever thing he was made of, nothing visible. The point was still sharp. It didn't seem warmer or colder than before. I closed the pin, put it in my mouth, but I only tasted metal.

After dressing, I pulled a plastic arm from the case, wrapped it in a garbage bag and carried it to work, along with the sleeve my dad made and a sleeveless blouse. The

day was cold for June, so I brought a hoody, too. After work, I'd strap on the arm. Then wear the tattoo sleeve to the dress shop for my dad to see. Later, the sleeve could live in my underwear drawer. I wouldn't throw it out. Or wear it ever again.

At work, my exhibit was slow because they had a special demonstration at the clinic, which was public, separated from the museum by a thin wall of one-way glass. The mayor was getting a colonoscopy. It lured them from the rotunda, smeared their noses against the clinic window.

The ghost wanted to go there, but I snapped him back by twitching my shoulder in a hard, sharp jerk that almost threw me off balance. Then I snapped him back again, when he stretched toward the Blood Wing, then the Phlegm. I wanted to go, too, but wouldn't let him boss me. He stretched again and, finally, I grabbed him with my left arm, rubbed down the length of him. It worked but it was awkward.

But it was good that it was slow, because then the ghost wouldn't stop tormenting the real arm. He tried to hold hands, tried to wring the two of them together. I circled my syringes. No one was watching, no one saw me grab the air.

Then there *was* a woman near my exhibit. Just one. She walked all the way around it, then stopped, looked at me. "I had a miscarriage last summer." She held a bag of leftovers from the café and she passed it from hand to hand. It swung like a pendulum and the smell of Caesar salad wafted upward. "They all say try again, but..." her voice drifted away. "I bet they tell you the same things." She wandered off and the rotunda was desolate again.

The ghost stretched to the pyramid, pulled so I thought he'd rip from my shoulder, but he didn't. He never did. His reach, though, was longer than I'd allowed for, and he

jabbed a needle, just the tip of his finger to its sharp point, so quick I only felt it later. There wasn't blood, just a high-pitched stinging, like a too-bright flash of light that crackled in mid-air.

In the locker room, Lefty wafts with Velma and the garbage bag. What's inside? Oh no.

Lefty clings-clings-clings. Claws in. That arm stupid plastic stupid stupid stupid. Shoe-horns him, wrenches him off, he flings, he flies, he drops, reaches stretches as he wafts back down, catches the tail of Velma's pony tail, grips, slides, climbs up with spider fingers, grasps tighter at the base. And sobs.

Lefty sobs. Breathes in heavily, out blubbery.

Hates it hates it. Wants to be her arm, not cut off, not hanging from her stupid pony tail.

Ah! Hah! Harumph. Umph. *There's* that thing that he wants, he sobs, he sobs. That thing. Lefty wants to be Velma's arm. Is *that* it? Is that *all*?

Walking to my dad's shop after work, the plastic arm was creaky and gross. The ghost was being weird, too. He pulled at my right bra strap. Then he pinched into my wrist, twisted a sharp purple bruise, and clung there. A little bit later, he snagged in my hair. I stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, stood very still. I focused all of my attention on my left shoulder, couldn't feel him there. He was just a tug in my hair, then a tickle down my neck. I poked, carefully at the plastic shoulder, but I only felt plastic. What was he doing?

The back door didn't have chimes, so I walked into the shop that way, to surprise my dad with the sleeve stretched over the vulgar plastic arm. But there was only Sue, the woman who'd been working there since my accident.

"Is my dad here?"

"He ran out for a sandwich."

"Oh. Well, I wanted to see you anyway. Thanks for the sleeve."

"You're welcome." Her eyes stayed down, followed a seam. "Did it come out accurately?"

"Yeah, it did." The design was perfect over the plastic arm. Only it didn't move. Didn't ripple or stretch or show life. "At least as far as I can remember." I chuckled. "It's been a while, you know." The plastic arm wouldn't twist. To display the art for Sue, I had to turn my whole body, reach across myself to jerk the limb forward with my right hand.

Sue didn't look up anyway. "Your dad was crazy about getting it just right."

"Was he?"

"He had some pictures—photographs, you know, but then also some really bad drawings. Said the other pictures didn't capture the *spirit* of the design."

"Oh, god, did he go all hippy on you? All new-agey?"

"That's exactly what he did."

"He hardly ever does that anymore."

"I'm pretty sure he called me 'Baby.'"

"Oh god."

"I may have misheard." She looked ahead of her for a second, her face cloudy.

"He was definitely hippy. Trance-y. I thought maybe he was stoned."

“Maybe—“ My ponytail wouldn’t sit right. I tugged at it, pulled the rubber band loose and my fingers tangled in the ghost. What was he doing up there?

“—I mean, probably not. Of course not!”

I shook out my hair. Fed my good fingers into the ponytail holder, flipped it onto my good wrist by rolling my hand against my thigh. Another set of fingers snapped it—ouch! So the ghost was there. Then both hands were in the curls—one tangled, one pulled apart the knotted strands.

Sue was staring. “I didn’t mean to say—“

“—I know.” I said it so Sue wouldn’t think she’d offended me, even though it was annoying when adults acted like kids about drugs. “It’s just the way he used to act, a long time ago. Always talking about the spirit of things, being true to the spirit. But he doesn’t do it much anymore.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Sue pressed her lips together, pointed her face back down.

Sue was strange, but better than Margaret, who sewed for us when I was away at college. Margaret tried to act motherly, which was creepy. And she desperately wanted to set me up with her son.

There may have been. Well, it’s hard to know, but I thought that there was something with Margaret and my dad. Something her husband wouldn’t like. It might have been the reason she wouldn’t come back.

Sue never jabbed her eyes at my missing part or the plastic that mocked it. Maybe I wanted her to. Maybe not. I was running green-screen computer numbers, the ghost deleting half of what I pecked in. Sue was at the sewing machine, turned sideways to study a tatter of something. A slip?

“So what do you think about this spinning wheel business?” I asked her. Business seemed normal in the books, but, next to Sue, the pickup rack was nearly empty.

“Oh, you know,” she finally answered.

“Kind of weird, huh?”

“It’s not my business.” The mint green of her dress matched fabric scraps on the table. The lines were clean, suited her perfectly.

I twisted in my chair, and the plastic scraped the top of the desk, flipped up papers that the ghost swam in. They crinkled under the plastic, danced into the air. The ghost rapped the table, dared Sue to look up at his show, but I pulled him away. Then I lost my grip as I pressed the papers down.

“Yeah, but what do you *think*?” I asked her. “Has the old man gone nuts?”

“You probably think so.” She decided what to do with the slip, began to change the thread on the machine.

“I don’t know.”

“He told me not to touch it.” When she wound the bobbin, I leaned in, and the ghost did too, wafted toward it, but held tight to the end of my hair, not shoulder. The ghost and the hair stretched toward the sound of it. Sue still didn’t look. I’d always loved the sound of a winding bobbin.

“That was rude,” I said when the bobbin stopped. I smoothed my flying hair, caught ghost in my fingers, pulled him down.

“As if I would.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t move, but the plastic arm dropped off the desk, wacked me in the side.

“I told him I wasn’t dressing Little House on the Prairie style.”

I gasped, gripped a plastic elbow, found shoulder shreds throttling it. “Did he ask you to?”

“No, but it felt like things were trending that way.” She pulled thread through its obstacle course of levers and holes and hooks. “You know he wears--”

“—that hat. That horrible hat.”

Sue looked up, finally. The papers were finally still. “And this robe?”

“Oh no!” The robe was truly terrible.

“He takes it off before we open.”

“Thank god,” I said. “What about the vest?”

“I haven’t seen a vest.”

“Good. Is it helping business? I mean, not the weird clothes, but the spinning.”

“People stop to watch.”

“But not to buy?”

“It’s early. Honestly, the spinning is weird. But it wouldn’t surprise me if it did bring in business. The way this neighborhood is going.”

“Good. But if *he* gets weird?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you let me know?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I can’t ask you, exactly, to spy for me...”

“No.”

“Please.”

“That’s not my job.” Sue whipped the scrap of a slip up and over the desk, scattered my crinkled, fallen papers. She walked it into the back room, didn’t come out.

I left the shop, walked carefully, tilted at the waist so plastic fingers wouldn’t brush my thigh. Instead of home, I went to Poncho’s tattoo place. He’d called me a couple times.

“Hey.” Poncho had his sketchpad out, doodling. No, when I looked closer, he was drawing a client design. It was a mermaid, sexy but sad.

“Velma!” He tossed the sketchbook away. “Don’t look at that one,” he said, when I started to pick it up.

I dropped it. “How’s it going?”

“No origami sleeve today?”

“I want to show you something.” The ghost flipped through the sketches. Pages blurred like a flipbook. Mermaid morphed to dragon to butterfly to barbed wire.

Poncho set a pencil on the book as if it was wind that rustled the pages. “A plastic arm? Why don’t you get a good one? Shiny metal, maybe a hook or a magnet or something useful.”

“They don’t work.”

“Bullshit.”

We kept our faces serious but we were playing, teasing each other.

“Do you want to see or not?”

“See what?”

I pulled off my jacket, revealed the sleeve. The embroidered needle stretched as the sleeve snagged, then snapped back to its right shape. Poncho’s jaw dropped and then

he was close to me, breathing on my shoulder. He touched the sleeve, traced the thread that spun from the needle. His eyes were so close to it. He chuckled.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Fucking awesome.”

Behind him, the pencil rolled off the book, pinged to the floor. The ghost flipped, then stopped at a page covered in elaborate, lacy web. A spider lurked at the edge.

“My dad gave it to me,” I said.

“But kind of stupid.” He pinched the fabric, pulled away and let go so it snapped. “Why not just draw on the plastic?” He tugged my plastic arm up, close to his eyes, and rubbed both his hands over the fingers. Poncho and I had dated for a while, after my tattoo, on and off for a few years. It was sexy the way he was prowling over my arm, but it didn’t mean anything. “I could paint the needle and thread right on the arm.” Then he pulled one hand away to dig in the desk behind him. He drew out a sharpie. I couldn’t tell if he was serious.

“Poncho!” I jerked the arm away, couldn’t let him get marker on the sleeve. “He worked hard on this.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” The marker was capped again and he was next to me, nose inches from the embroidery. “It’s his medium.” He tossed the marker on the desk. “And mine is skin.” He sighed. “I’d be no good on the plastic.” The tattoo book was still. Ghost fingers were whispering through Poncho’s hair.

“Yeah.” I said.

“So Jay is playing at the 412 later on. Wanna go?” The ghost was raging in the hair, yanking at it, making patterns with the soft, dark shapes of it. Poncho brought his hands to his head, smoothed it back again.

“I don’t know.” I stepped back to pull the ghost from Poncho’s hair, but it felt wrong. There was no tension from my shoulder. No tweak or twist or pinch. Or from my ponytail, where he’d been earlier. No stream of water, strangling, that I had to wade through.

“Oh, come on, Velma,” Poncho said. His hair still whirled! “It’ll be fun.”

I was six feet away—longer than the arm!—but it was dancing. The hair was dancing! Strands formed spikes, then waterfalls. A long, dark piece was twisting, by itself, in the air.

I pounced forward, grabbed desperately over Poncho’s head. I got it! Squeezed it in my fist. While the ghost flopped from my fingers, I tousled Poncho’s hair, tried to make it playful, but of course it was rough and awkward. The frayed ends of the ghost’s upper arm smeared across Poncho’s forehead. I faked a chuckle.

“Um.” Poncho’s hands were in his hair again. Both of them rubbed it, then one ran over his face. The hair was still.

“There was a bug.” I said it low, without confidence, looked down for a moment. “Thanks for the offer, but... I’m really tired, actually.”

On the walk home, the ghost was oozy and floppy in my hand, then it was grasping me again, fingers looped through my bra strap and he bounced up and around from there. I let go and he drifted with me. Then I reached for him again, pulled him down and away, and I could feel him slithering, stretched from bra strap to my

outstretched fingers, down the whole length of my right arm. I let go, reached again, and grabbed closer to his grasp. I seemed to have his wrist, as his fingers clutched the strap. It felt like squeezing jello. I tightened my grip, gave a strong jerk and he was loose in my hand, both ends trailing and flailing. I'd tried this before. I'd tried this so many times, to tear him from my shoulder and I never could.

What was different? Was it the plastic? Oh god, was I free?

I flicked him, shook him, but he clung to me—not with claws or teeth or straggled tendons squeezing scars—but like a static-y sock or a chewed piece of gum or a fuzzy slip of cellophane. I shook again, flick flick, stepped away. Wiped him off and hopped away. Stepped again quickly quickly. I was running down the sidewalk and he was gone. He was gone.

I stopped. I stood completely still and felt for any tickle of him, any pinch or scrape or long, low ache. Reached for him, leaned into the air, muscles tensed. There was no tickle, no rustle, no whisper. No teeth in the ropes on my shoulder.

A car passed, swept lights over me, and saw only me. Only, from that quick angle, the shape of a woman. My steps became light. The prosthetic was itchy—so it wasn't just the ghost that made me think so. It was ugly. It was horrible. But without the ghost, maybe I could be a regular amputee. I was almost skipping.

What would the ghost do? Get flattened by a car? No, he'd survived that once, and anyway, he'd stay on the sidewalk. He knew enough for that. Surely. He'd roll around there, until some nice person or cat or dog, came around, I suppose. Unless he could fly... or float... No, he probably couldn't fly.

But what would he do? Without me watching him, what would he get into? He wasn't malicious—I hoped. Just annoying. He poked at things. He pricked himself on needles to spite me. But he wasn't murderous. Not violent. Surely not.

When I turned the corner, the lights spread apart, with wide expanses between their yellow pools. It was chilly and there was no one else. No cars, no faces in the shop windows.

Was I sure? Was I sure that he was safe? For others? For himself?

Where had I dropped him? Shit, where had I dropped him?

I ran back, around the corner, down the street to the spot where I'd flung him, a half-block from Poncho's. On my knees, I swept over the sidewalk. One-armed, I could hardly crawl, but I crept slowly forward, slowly back. Then I was sitting. Then I was on my belly on the ground, reaching as far as I could, then rolling, stretching as far as I could another way. But I couldn't find the ghost.

Maybe it was closer to Poncho's. I walked low, crouched like an ape, swung my good arm (the plastic swung too) along the ground, eyed the door to the tattoo parlor, in case Poncho was still there. I turned, swept the stretch of sidewalk again. Then again.

The plastic arm grinded into my scars and sweat ran down it, soaked into the sleeve my dad made me. I flung off my jacket, then pulled off the sleeve, shoved it in my purse. I swept down the sidewalk. Again. My fingers scraped the ground, knuckles grazed the concrete. They grew skinned and bloody. And again. At least a dozen more times. I couldn't find my arm.

After one more, futile, sweep of the street, I picked myself up, kissed my raw knuckles, walked home. I couldn't find him. It was done. I was free.

The plastic arm chafed my half shoulder, loose from the rolling and crawling. Before going up to my apartment, I slinked to the alley. I couldn't stand it another second. I stood alone in the dark. Then I loosened the shoulder straps. All by myself, I ripped it off.

But there was a whoosh as I did it. A swoosh. A sudden rush of wind that wasn't really wind, but ghost. It was the ghost arm, returning to me. What the hell? I was relieved and I was glad and I was so disappointed. What the hell did it mean?

Together, the ghost and I heaved the plastic arm into the dumpster. He clung so tight.

Ah-ha! Ah Hah! Harumph. Humpa! There's the thing, the thing that he wants. Lefty lifts, links-in, lives. Not slithering. A thing a thing. Lefty wants to be Velma's arm. Is this it? Is this all?

Jun. 23

Dear Ann,

You know how I never let Velma win at checkers? Or monopoly? Or tennis? It's like that now, too. It's kind of the same feeling about her arm. I better not go easy on her, or help her do things, because she's got to learn. And I better not avoid the subject either. Do you think that's the right way to be? I think you'd have been more tactful, not have made all the mutilation jokes. But I don't think that's best for the long term. She has to learn.

What else? There must be more to tell you, to ask you about. I've been so busy with the wheel and I haven't told you about anything else...

Have I told you about Sue? She's the woman I've hired to help me out at the shop. You know that, of course, but you don't know about her. She's working out really well. Her mother owned a tailor's in San Francisco. I'm not sure how she made it all the way to Indiana, but she's really good with her needle. She's in her mid-forties, I'd guess, and very efficient and professional and friendly enough with the customers. She looks Asian, but was born in California I think, because she doesn't have an accent. She hasn't asked me any personal questions, and she shuts me down pretty quick when I try to ask any of her. Think of that—she shuts me down!

Velma seems to like her, too. Velma never took to Margaret and I was never sure why.

Until tomorrow,

Max

All day, my ghost was with me. He was achy at my shoulder, whispery at his finger ends, which stroked my face, flipped my hair, swept outwards into the crowd. He poked and tickled museumgoers, pulled ponytails of little girls. Yet, the shoulder parts of him, the ribboning ends that clung there—they were tight. Firmer than he'd ever felt, screwed-in, secure. Compared to the night before, when he'd been gone, so briefly.

When I reached the dress shop, after, work, my dad wasn't spinning, but fussing with his wheel. He lined string into its groove, caressed the polished wood of it.

“Hey, what happened to your arm?” he said, without looking up.

“Um, there was this car and it hit me--”

“--The plastic arm! You wore it yesterday... With the sleeve... I thought it looked nice.”

"Did Sue tell you?"

"I was across the street having dinner."

"And you didn't come over?" I unfastened the top button of my uniform shirt, unraveled the triangle folded into my uniform.

"You left quickly."

"I did not."

"The arm?"

I lifted a shoulder. “The trash.”

“Again?”

“They’re disposable.”

“To you.”

“I buy them from a costume shop!”

“But if you’d get something nicer--”

“Dad.” I wasn’t in the mood for the shop after all. I left quickly.

At home, I undressed. I pulled a fresh plastic arm from the case, laid it on the bed. Then I grabbed hold of my ghost, who was solid but slippery. I pulled him outward, away from the bruises he pinched into me. Stretched him out like taffy, strained until the skin pulled like raw dough over the blistery knots of the spider-web scars. It thinned, became translucent in streaks. I pulled harder until it seemed my skin would tear, bubble out,

bleed. But he wouldn't let go of the shoulder holds. Then I ran my fingers, as much as I could, between him and the knots on my half-shoulder. His grip was strong and sharp, like fishing line, knotted tightly, pinching into the rough stitch marks.

I released him, strapped on the plastic, slowly, gradually. I paid attention this time. And as the plastic arm pulled tight, grated into the bruised place, there it was—the ghost just fell away. He melted off like the wax from a burning candle. Slid down to my waist, to my ankle. With my right hand, I scooped him up, wiped him onto the bed and stepped back. Tightened my straps, watched the bed from across the room. The blankets swirled in the air, ruffled like waves, like a storm, like a tornado on top of the ocean. I couldn't see him, just the tantrum he threw in the sheets. The room was quiet or maybe not. There was this fine thread of anger, just barely there, if I concentrated. Except for his whirlwind, the air was still. But that wasn't right either. Coldness emanated from the maelstrom in the center of the room. The chill ran from the sheets through the air and down my neck. Watching him dance was so eerie.

I crept away slowly, until my back was against my bedroom wall, ten feet from the crashing bedspread. Then I tugged at the straps to the plastic arm, let it fall. At the same moment the blankets dropped, stilled, and I felt a suction. Swoosh-plop! The ghost was back. He clawed my shoulder, tickled my waist. Hugged me, rubbed me. Normal again and real, throbbing.

It was better, yes it must be better, to keep him close, to keep him threaded into me, my shoulder. It had to be safer that way.

It used to be. If Velma wish-wanted a segment of orange, Lefty was the one that reached to grab-grapple it, helped to peel it, brought it to her lips. The stickiness ran over him as she sucked out the sweetness. Then she ran her tongue into his fine webbing, between the fingers of him.

But Lefty didn't know it. Back then. Velma and Lefty. Separate. Wasn't a thing—just was. Then, after, Lefty was. Alone, detached, floating. But not thinking.

Lately, though... What is a thought? There are things. Things that did happen and things that do. They spin together, pull tighter tighter, faster! Clack-clack-WHIRRRRR. Feelings smooth memories into thoughts. Clack-whir, it's in feeling, a thread from tip to tip, mangled shoulder to jagged fingernail. Pulls pulls. And so. He's learning to pull things together with feelings—just one feeling following another. Learning, in his separation, now suddenly, to find words for the feelings, extrapolate thoughts. Then theories and events, even sequences of event-after-event-after-event.

Now it's her right hand that grabs the orange. Peels it in twisting, stretching, twitchy contortions.

Now Lefty knows that line, (remembers? imagines? knows?) the one between her and him—it's rough. Shredded tendons dragging out and behind. It's just above the shoulder, reaching into the chest, stretching toward neck, with a little bit of the left breast, now useless and flopping. Ends at first juicy with blood, now shriveled and dry.

Now airy like breath. Shimmery like mist.

Doctors rounded off Velma's edge. Stretched skin, stitched it, needle in needle out. She's a tangle of scars, but drawn together in a smooth line. Nobody, of course, bothered to smooth Lefty's ends together. It's fine, good that way, really. Lefty has

fingers on both ends now, can suck those tendons like tentacles onto Velma's scars and snuggle right back into her. Lefty doesn't have physicality anymore, but on most days, he still has Velma.

Unless.

It only takes that plastic imposter of an arm. She straps the thing on and Lefty loses grip on the scars, shoved-shoe-horned out of the way. Why why why?

But usually.

Clipped-gripped into her like usual, can still feel commands. (Lefty doesn't necessarily—heneedstoifhefeelslikeit!—obey them.) Can still feel yearnings and longings, and anger anger anger pulsing through her. Most days Lefty is an extended fist, swinging swinging flailing. Other times, Lefty is sad, a sail without wind, hanging hanging, finger tips brushing her thigh or hanging slack or wrapped in around her waist. Wasted. It's both of their feelings then, full-body, both of them together and the same. Like before like before when Lefty was really himself.

Hmmm.

Lefty needs something else, something better, less sadder, to think about, Lefty thinks. If after all, now that he's started thinking, he can't stop, can't stop, can't stop.

Spin thin from fluffy nothing.

Jun. 26

Dear Ann,

Sometimes I know you read these letters. I can feel you eyeing them right over my shoulder sometimes, sucking the ink out of my pen to flow my love for you onto the paper.

Tonight is not one of those nights. Tonight, I know that you are just dead and that means you are nowhere and you will never read my letters and I will never hear or feel you again.

With love,

Max

P.S. I thought about Velma's prosthetic today as I spun. I think she should wear it more often. I think it would help her to wear it more often.

Max

P.P.S. There! Do you see how crazy I am now without you!

Max

The mist turned into rain. It had to be the worst June ever. My chin gripped the handle of an umbrella, spider fingers pushed out, clicked the catch over, spread the bow of it. Up up. Except it was pointed down like a boat.

What was the point? I was already wet.

The streets were pretty, at least, when the water slicked on top of the oil on top of the black top. Shiny and sleek. I cut through town the quick way to work. No bricks, no cobbles.

The rain made the museum slow all day, until school let out and there were a handful of children with parents or babysitters.

A man stepped from his group of kids, walked toward me, across the rotunda. Pleated khakis, polo shirt. He stopped ten feet away and said, too loudly. “You can’t tell, but there’s no foot in that shoe.” He pointed down at his feet, cheap loafers.

“You’re right. I’d have no idea if you hadn’t told me.”

“I dropped a chainsaw.”

“Ouch.”

“You got that right.” He turned, followed his group towards Yellow Bile, but there was no limp or hitch. No sign.

It wasn’t quite time to go when a new guard relieved me.

“You’re early,” I said.

“You’re wanted in the back office. Right now.”

I clunked across the rotunda, through wide, cream colored hallways, then twisted deeper into the interior of the museum, behind the staff-only plaques, between roped off extra-exhibit material, to Marian’s office.

Marian was head of museum security and also my dad’s friend from way back. She sat at her desk, scowled. I stood in front of her, too straight because she annoyed me, but tilted slightly at the waist so my empty sleeve could swing freely. It was the ghost’s idea. He slapped back and forth in the sleeve.

Marian lifted a pamphlet from her desk, thumbed it like a flipbook. Then she slapped it down in front of me. “Page 57,” she said.

I opened the book against my chest and found 57, the dress code section. “Am I out of uniform?” I asked without reading. The museum had stupid guard uniforms—the shirts were fine, just dark blue button-down, with a logo. But the bottom part—*either* skirt with pumps, or long pants with boots.

“The fifth bullet point,” Marian said. “Read the fifth bullet point.”

“Sleeves will be worn to the wrist. (No rolling.) Cuffs will remain buttoned at all times.”

Marian dangled her finger toward my left sleeve, which was neatly pinned, but flapped, softly, with the ghost’s gyrations.

“It’s not rolled,” I said.

“It’s not ‘to the wrist.’”

“I don’t have a left wrist.”

“And I am just as sympathetic as the next guy. Really. But rules are rules, Velma. I know your dad taught you that.”

She had no idea what my dad taught me. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’ll notice the handbook does not specify that the wrist cannot be synthetic.”

Or a ghost, I thought. “A prosthetic arm.”

“Exactly. Remember, Velma, appearance is important here at the Lemburgher.”

She was quoting the handbook and I followed along with my eyes. “Guards are the first item of display at the museum!”

“You’re *really* going to make me wear it?” I’ll quit, I thought. Why had this come up? It must’ve been be my dad. Or something worse. Maybe the arm wanted free.

Chills ran through me. My whole body, including the ghost, shook violently, but Marian didn't notice.

“Unless you want special treatment...” she wasn't even looking at me.

“Okay.” I didn't want special treatment, had made a stink about it when I first applied. I wouldn't really quit. I wouldn't sacrifice another job to the arm and, anyway, I liked it there. It was perverse and morbid, suited me fine. “Starting Monday?”

Marian slumped her shoulders, exaggerated a sigh. “Monday will be fine.”

“Hey, my dad... He didn't?” He must have asked for this. It was him, surely. And not, somehow, the arm.

“What?” Marian's lip curled like a potato chip, all the way to her nose.

“Never mind.”

I *had* worn the prosthetic before. In those first weeks after the hospital, when I'd tried, so hard, to be normal. The ghost didn't get into trouble then. I didn't think. I didn't even notice if he left. But back then, I ignored him, pretended he was drug-induced, or imaginary. Or a regular, tensed up and physically painful—clinical!—phantom limb.

The plastic spear. Hot and uncomfortable. It threw me off balance.

And the ghost... Would it be whole days without him? Or would he cling to me?

Already in the basement, I cut through the lower level of the Phlegm Wing, deeper than I could get to on lunch breaks. I hadn't been through that part in a while, didn't know what was there. The ghost was excited. I wasn't doing it for him.

I charged through an open passage with wax models, facial distortions. Skin eaten away and discolored by gangrene. Oozing, twisting sores. No big deal.

Another turn and it was jar after jar of warped and floating human specimens.

Three teenagers oohed over a fetus in a jar. It was bunched like a fist, about the size of one. The limbs were too tangled to count. “Look at this little guy.”

“Yuck.”

“It’s cute.”

“It’s creepy.”

They weren’t arranged by size, but by deformity. At least I thought so. I slowed my steps, didn’t stop. One head and four arms, four legs. My right arm, with its real muscles, tensed with the rest of my body, but the ghost flopped, convulsed, fluttered.

Another room and another. But still clear cylinders, or glass that was wavy with age. Was I going in circles? Lost? Suspended bodies, the color of vanilla pudding. Slimy open eyes, or closed. Mouths in tight smiles, or gaping. One had a brain outside its head. Another had just one eye, centered above its nose. The smallest specimen was like a wad of phlegm that floated in a swimming pool.

Dried people in the next room. So I *was* moving through them. Human bodies. Brown and glossy like greasy leather. Stringy like beef jerky. Tumors bulged from legs, foreheads. Bones stabbed through in bursts of dull ivory. How could I get out of there? Curled like animals, or stretched to stand like little men.

“Excuse me.” One of the teenagers spoke. Were they following me? “Could you take our picture?”

“You can’t take pictures in here.”

She pushed her mouth into a pout. I rushed past—was this the way?—and caught a flash behind me. Assholes. Not my problem.

Turned the corner and it was tiny human skeletons. Femurs like toothpicks. Ribs were like the bones you pick out of your fish. Propped up like the toys in the gift shop.

I'd forgotten about rooms like these. And all of it was real.

Finally, marble steps ahead, curling in a wide spiral, to the employee exit. I clocked out, marked the last half hour as "no disturbances."

My phone had a message from my dad, so, after work, I walked to his shop. Sharp angles of sunlight scraped at the images of floating monsters. They sliced between tall buildings and onto the sidewalks, into my own slimy eyeballs, then into my brain.

Then my ghost arm clattered too long in the chimes, and I was safe, finally, in my dad's shop. The light in that room was soft and warm. Potential dresses were soft, quiet, still in their fabric bolts. On the table, a swath of old-fashioned calico was draped across a pillow of bleached wool, wrapped in string.

My dad was waiting for me. He held up something black but covered in silver sparkles. "What do you think of this?"

"Wow." It was wild, bright like lightning.

"Leftover fabric. I got bored, so I started a dress for you." This wasn't another gift, just something we'd done all my life—made silly clothes for each other from scraps. But with the spinning and the work and the meddling in my life—how did he find time? I scooped the dress from his hand, turned into the dressing room.

"Pretty close fit." Back in the main room, I tugged down at the bodice.

My dad pulled at my right shoulder, then my left, the half-shoulder. "Is it too wide?" He tugged the hanging left sleeve.

"I don't think so."

He tugged again. To the right and then to the left. “I think it’s too wide.”

“Why even bother with that sleeve?” I asked him.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m just going to pin it up.”

He was folding and pinning along the neck now. “How’s that? Too tight?”

“You could sew the hole straight shut.”

“Hold still.”

“You just pricked me on purpose.”

“I did not.” He was circling and poking, mouth pursed full of pins and speaking out of the corner. “Really, hold still.”

When he finished with the pins, he whipped it through the machine, finished it while I waited. I scooped up the dress and took off without trying it on. “Thanks, Dad.”

There was still some light outside, but it was tinted, and tilted in from a different angle. The deformed babies were back, floating like egg drop soup behind my eyes.

For a long time, I hadn’t thought about the doctors cutting off my arm. I had this picture of it wriggling on the sidewalk, already severed, when they scooped me up in the ambulance. Really, they scooped the arm with me. It was tangled, but still clinging.

At home, I pulled a prosthetic from the case and stuffed it into the sleeve of a fresh uniform shirt. The thumb snagged on the cuff, but I fought it through, until the orange fingernails popped out, the knuckles, the wrist. Then I shook the arm out of the shirt, walked it into the kitchen and fed it slowly down the garbage disposal. The drain choked when I reach the elbow. I pulled the arm back, flipped the disposal switch up and down, then pushed it in further, harder this time. The ghost arm was pushing too. Was it

two people sharing a head or one person with extra arms and legs? The noise of the garbage disposal felt good. I thought about feeding in the new dress from my dad, to watch the sparkles chop up like fireworks. The dress was pretty, in a strange way, but more for an old lady schoolteacher ball than for anything I'd do. But I kept it. It might work as a costume some day.

I was nervous about my ghost arm. I didn't know what he could do on his own, what trouble he'd get into.

June. 29

Dear Ann,

I wish I could explain the spinning to you. There is no one else who would understand. Not Velma. Certainly not Sue. It's not like any of my bowling buddies could understand such a thing, or the folks in the historical pres. society. But if you were here, I couldn't tell you either. I wouldn't have the words, not to say them out loud.

It's a hum that moves through my whole body. And my concentration. At first I could think of nothing but the thread. It was watching my own fingers. I know them so well now. How well do most people know their own fingers? That expression—the back of your hand—well, it's bullshit. Have they ever studied their hand or their fingers? Ever watched them for hours? I know mine. Watching them. Guiding them with my eyes. The string springing, growing from them.

Then, later, just a few weeks ago, a separate—what do I call it?—a separate channel opened up in my head. And I was still watching my fingers, but also thinking one

other thought—exactly one thought—spun out, extended, for the length of my spin, the length of my yarn. And there’s something. There’s something else about that thought.

Well, anyway. It’s bowling night. I’ll come home stinking of beer and bad cigars but you won’t be around to care.

Love,

Max

When Lefty wakes-awakens-up-up in the morning, it is just after Velma wakes, just after she rubs the pins and needles from the air—sharp prickles knives and needles—that used to be his body. He stre-e-e-e-e-etches, he does his not-quite version of a yawn, and shrugs himself ready for the day.

But then the old plastic enemy comes out. She smacks it against her shoulder, straps it tighter tighter smooshing into her, and shoves Lefty off, she—shit!—she shoehorns the plastic wedge between them. He clings cli-i-i-ng-s-s-s-s. Then, scraped off, he loses-looses-loses his grip, tendons tug tug no use. Lefty is scraped the fuck off pissed the fuck off. What the hell! Lefty swings himself against the spear, head-butts the grips at the shoulders, throws a heck-heck-heckle-heck of a tantrum. He wraps around Velma’s neck, pulse-sob-hyper-huh!-vent-i-la-ting. Dripping-drooling down her back. Suck-huh!

Useless.

Lefty pissed-off-spiteful-wants-to slink off her body, drip-drooping-dropping to a puddle.

But! He won't learn nothing if he stays home, here. Could play on the computer, he supposes. But better to investigate. Velma-vela-vema-love-velma, why do you hate Life-Lefty?

And after all, stranded is no fun, not for today. He better see. Lefty loops Velma's right elbow, and drags with Velma, over the sidewalks. Floating on the wrong-right side. Lefty hates it.

The plastic arm creaked on my way to work. The straps were too loose maybe, but tighter and it was hard to breathe. They chafed at my skin, crisscrossed like sandals straps. I'd build calluses on my back and chest, like on my feet. God, it was gross. And there was this slimy spot in there, where the plastic touched my skin and the sweat slicked it. And who would see me with that hideous thing? Mondays were slow, at least.

The ghost was with me. He snapped at my straps, tried to find a way back in.

The plastic arm whacked the frame of the employee entrance. It caught, tweaked itself into a wrong position, which tugged at the straps, pulled them crooked so the top one cut into my neck. I ducked into the locker room. Three guards chatted outside of it, but nobody was inside because it was disgusting. Cruddy, smelled like feet. In the spotted mirror, I was a mess. The arm had twisted so the thumb pointed outward and the palm faced forward. The point of the elbow jabbed out behind me.

I unbuttoned my shirt, but left it tucked in and hanging from my waist, while I fixed the straps. One was tangled with my bra so the bra had to come off, too. Spider hand at the clasp. Then a big knot of elastic and nylon and silk. The plastic hand stayed in its sleeve, but I scraped it toward my chin, clenched it there, to work the tangle with my

right hand. It was loose and straps were falling then yanking up over a shoulder and a half. Fought to pull the fuckers tight. It was hard to keep my torso straight as I pulled, but if I bent, the adjustment wouldn't be right. The ghost was there, but didn't help, just clawed at my neck and fussed around in my collar, which was open behind. Pulled tighter, the soggy part of the strap wrapped around the front of me. I tucked it all in, smooth as possible. Pulled up the shirt, spider-handed the buttons.

Time for work. But a shadow loomed in the doorway to the locker room. I jumped. The shadow stepped forward and it was Debra, another guard, not looming, but walking into the room. "Oh, Velma, sorry about that," she breathed. "I was just coming in to check—Is everything all right?"

I put up my hands in a shrug except it was just one of them that lifted, palm up. "Mmm," I said, nodded, then passed her to get through the doorway. The other two guards, Nadine and LaShonda, were quiet outside the door. The ghost arm flapped at them, as I weaved sideways to drag him out of reach.

At the syringes, there were more eyes on me than usual, reflecting off shiny cylinders. Of course there were.

There were regulars, but I didn't talk to them. Elderly folks who got senior discounts on their season passes. They tottered through, or stepped briskly for the exercise. Some read and re-read the placards. Some sat on benches in the rotunda, flipped through books, stared into space.

And there was that man—he was my age—who came every day. He stood in the corner of the rotunda, in a tiny alcove behind the fern. Dark and serious, with glasses. I

imagined that his eyes were piercing. He was handsome despite the bad toupee that slid around on his head.

The children who came during the week were too young to notice my plastic left hand. Maybe. Or else, like their mothers, too polite to look.

There was a teenager, staring at the syringes or at the haze that floated in front of them, but her gaze wasn't fixed on either. When I walked around the pyramid, got a better look, her eyes were wet. "My boyfriend left." Her voice was low and she might've been talking to herself. But then she turned to me, looked at my plastic arm and then my face. "He went to college and he says we'll stay together, but I don't think so."

I couldn't ignore her so I shrugged. But the plastic hitched up oddly when I did it, the hand twisted at her and she flinched. She mumbled, "Sorry," walked away.

By mid-morning, the ghost had wrenched the plastic sideways. He'd yanked my ponytail loose too and so it was back to the locker room, after some eyebrows to the stethoscope guard. He'd watch my station, briefly.

On my way back to my post, I watched for rustling in the fern, but the toupee man was gone. There was a different man standing too close to my syringes. I cleared my throat. He stepped back with the slightest, familiar hitch. Brent. The syringe pyramid shielded me, sort of, but I couldn't hide. I circled the pyramid to meet him.

"Velma," he said.

"Hi Brent."

"You never called me back."

"Well."

"No, I get it. I was just here and I thought I'd say hi."

“Really?”

“Sort of. I was.” He sucked hard on the inside of his cheek. “It seemed like you were having a good time.”

“Well.” I tried to look over his shoulder but my eyes sucked back to his face. I stepped away so the ghost couldn’t reach him, so Brent wouldn’t smell the sweat that gummed in the straps of my prosthetic.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He held his bottom lip in his teeth, thoughtful. He was cute, really cute. “I just thought...”

I took a breath.

“I mean...” he said. “I thought...”

He was all puppy dog eyes. It was time to be cruel. “That I’m too pathetic to blow you off?”

“No,” Brent said.

“That’s what you thought.”

“No!” Brent’s mouth hung open and he was less cute. He just looked pitiful.

I twisted so the plastic arm swung outward. I made sure he couldn’t miss it and I tensed for the prick of his eyes on it.

He turned around, took a step away from me, then turned back again and walked in my direction, but past me and away.

Jun. 31

Dear Ann,

I went to the museum this afternoon to spy on Velma. You think I'm an old fool and should stay out of her life, but, well, I don't know. I guess I don't have anything better to do.

No, that's not it. It's the spinning—it drew me there. Or maybe I was the one doing the drawing—I can't explain it. Anyway, I just did it. Okay? I don't think she saw me. I sort of slunk around the edges of the big rotunda to get behind Velma's post. Nearly knocked over this other fellow, who was slinking just like me. Good place to slink, I guess, the museum.

Anyway, she's guarding a pyramid of syringes. How pathetic. I wonder why she doesn't try to move up. She's lost her ambition, I think. Or maybe that's not the way it works there. Maybe syringes are prestigious. Or maybe they all rotate.

Anyway, once I was in and had made sure she was wearing her arm like she'd said, like Marian said she'd make sure, and like the yarn told me—like it made me feel would happen—I went ahead and looked around. I paid my admission, after all.

There's this special exhibit now on regional medicine and its history. I'd been meaning to take a look, because you know I love that stuff—local history and lore. A couple of my pals in the HP Society contributed it to the exhibit.

It's about homegrown remedies mostly. All the stuff they did in the days of the log cabins. And where the folks got the ideas for their kooky "cures." Also, next to each treatment, they include a scientific breakdown of what the cures really did to you. A few of them got it right. But most would kill you faster than whatever snake bit you.

Whether or not they worked... At first it was interesting, but after a while, it sort of seemed cruel. It was like these scientists were destroying whatever faint magic the

settlers had found. They were stuck in the woods after all. The swamps. The Great Black Swamp and the Limberlost—before everything was drained for farmland. Who could blame them for trying this stuff?

I remember my grandmother—not Engler, I mean Grandma Freygang—talking about... She had some cures. And some spells and some special prayers. Maybe they didn't work, but I don't think they ever hurt any one.

They also had some stuff about the Indians who lived here and how they treated different sicknesses, before the settlers ever came.

Then I went to the old homeopathic wing, just to spite those letter-to-the-editor writers. Have I told you about that controversy? Certain people put up a huge fight for the special exhibit to be across the rotunda from the homeopathic medicine. They didn't want it to seem linked.

I loved it. They had people like pincushions in one room. It looked like our house sometimes, made me smile. I've been stuck enough times that I'm not scared of that acupuncture, like some of the museumgoers seemed to be. Ladies squealing and shrieking out loud. Maybe that's how Velma and I kept so healthy all those years. (You were dead, remember?)

Anyway, I guess Velma is okay at her new job. But I don't see how she could be anything better than okay there. It's interesting, but so cold and so creepy.

Yours,

Max

After strapping on my arm, fighting off the ghost, I found the tattoo sleeve my dad gave me, pulled it up the plastic. There was time to hit the shop before work, and I meant to try, once more, to show my dad the sleeve.

He was clack-whir-clack at the wheel when I rattled in, but he looked up right away and smiled. How was he keeping up with the real work? I turned to show him the sleeve. The tattoo glimmered. It clung to just the right spot.

My dad nodded at me, but didn't stop spinning. "My idea turned out well, I see."

"It really did."

"Took you long enough to wear it."

"Dad."

"I'm glad you like it."

Once he was re-absorbed in his spinning, I took the sleeve off, rolled it up and tucked it into my purse. The straps of my arm needed adjusting and it was another fight with the ghost, before I could get my uniform shirt over the t-shirt and the straps. The ghost finally dropped and I wrestled everything into place.

Lefty wants-to-stay, fights-to-stay with Velma, but then. Then. A shiver. A sliver? A skiver. Some feeling shines through tip to tentacle. Strings out of wooden wheel. Maybe this is why. This is why? Lefty drops to be a sulking soaking-no-just-sulking puddle on the dress shop floor. Middle of the floor, muddle-of-the-floor, where Velma dropped him, mopped him, stopped him. Lefty let go, he knows, because he has to know. Has to know. Something funny-fishy-squishy about the dad-fellow. Maybe he's the reason. The reason Lefty is left.

But still it sucks. Lefty droops and drips, drops and droops.

No cling-to person (Ah Velma! But another also works.) means no leverage, no motion-loco, locomotion. On his own, Lefty can't walk, can't trail, can't float, can't fly. No balance and no bones. Can only wriggle like a worm. Squiggle-wiggle-wriggle. Inch a tiny inch but slow and hard and sucks. No spider hand, won't balance, too much dead weight to drag behind.

Spinner-spider-witch-dad is in the shop, but Lefty is afraid. Won't screech won't reach, scared. Doesn't crave that lift that animation. Not from spinner-spider-witch-dad.

When he steps, Lefty cringes, quakes, sets his puddle a-rip-rippling.

A woman tinkles the chimes and steps through the door. "Hi Max."

"Melinda Sorg." He smiles and stands up. "Sue just finished your dress last night."

"Is it ready? I know I'm early, but I was in the neighborhood..."

"Lucky for you. Let me grab it."

Spin-spid-dad walks out. Lefty lifts then lalts to miss his feets step-step-steppings.

The woman clicks high heels across the floor. Shiny patent leather heels. Clicky-clickily. Lefty likes. Lefty shakes a centimeter centi-centi-centipede style. Stretches, reaches, aah. Hmph. Can't reach. And Lefty is left. Wriggle-wiggle-wriggling in frustration. Oh well.

The dad-doctor-wizard is out again pushing swinging door. "Yep. It's ready. So here's how we fixed the tear." Both heads lean over purple scrunch of fabric. Lefty catches the color can't see the cut or cure.

Clicky click clickety. Patent leather high heels pass and exit with their sparks of flashy.

Lefty loops and latches to himself, shoulder shreds to shredded fingernails. He's a coil, a ring, a river. Looping puddle, waiting waiting waiting.

Meddler-pedaller-spinner man crosses the room and sits at his stool. Sits at stool and clack clacks at pedal , rattle rattle at wheel. Whoosh whoosh air blows and then whir-whir-whir.

Despite lull-less-ness, Lefty is lulled.

Whir-whir-whir-whir--and then a vocal, one note hum. Hmmmmmmmm....

Lefty undulates, softly, gently. He feels the whir and the hum. They sing to him, vibrate through him hmmmmmmmmmmmm.

It's comfort, high-pitched, raspy comfort. The noise is soft and fluffy. Lefty lifts. Lefty lifts. Lefty is not touching hardwood any longer. Elevates. Lefty. Levitates. Hovers as the hum holds him. Higher. Holds him.

Rocks him cradles him. Air is soft and fluffy.

Whir-whir-whir. The hum stops and lefty settles, still calm to the floor. He's still in his loop. lulled. The puddle is peaceful. Lefty relaxes, coiled in the middle of the dress shop floor.

Vaguely away, in the shadow-distance of the display windy-window box. Just an arm's reach really. Spider-dad-spinner slows the wheel, trickles out the clap-clap pedal, finally stands.

Steps—SPLASH!

OUCH. Arggh! —right into the Lefty loop puddle.

And the Lefty-loop is aquiver. Atremble. Aquake-quake-quaking again.

That spider dad man is up to no good no good no good.

It was quiet at the museum, and somehow the plastic arm stayed put. I had a t-shirt between my skin and the straps. It helped with the chafing.

But the ghost was gone. He'd been with me in the morning, hadn't he? On the walk? I thought so, couldn't remember. Where was he? Well, fuck him.

There wasn't any reason to go to my dad's shop again in the afternoon, but I felt like it. The plastic was gross and hot, but I left it on, let the sweat roll over it. I wasn't about to call back the ghost. Like I said, fuck him.

But inside the shop, there was the ghost. He oozed, oddly chilly, around my ankle. Had he been there all day? I looked for signs—Of what? Damage? Ghostly misbehavior? The place looked normal. Cheerful and messy. My dad was quiet in the corner, not raving about invisible arms.

I stepped behind the changing curtain, then stripped to my t-shirt, poked at the buckles that held the arm secure. The ghost inched up my leg. It tickled. I swatted him. He climbed. I swatted again. I jerked my arm the rest of the way loose and the ghost glooped himself into his usual place at my shoulder, pinched and tugged the snarl of scars.

“Hey, Dad!” He didn't look up. “Dad!” So focused. “Hello?” He finally started, jumped a little, looked up at me, then was sheepish.

“How was your day?”

“Hmm?” He was doing something with his wool, not at his sewing machine, and so I slid the hollow fingers of my prosthetic underneath the needle and pretended to sew the fingers.

“Velma, don’t!” That got his attention. “You’ll ruin the needle.”

“Geeze, just kidding.”

And slap! I was knocked off balance when the ghost arm hit me. It was like a spring recoil. Open ghost palm. Like a cold splash of water in the face and a sharp sting. One in the face!—and I knew what he knew: My dad was acting weird. He just spun and spun all day.

But he wasn’t spinning in that moment. He was sitting on his short stool and carding wool—was that what you called it? He had two paddles and his elbows shot out to the sides as if he was exercising.

I pulled the plastic arm from the sewing machine. Instead of sewing it, I stepped on it. Then stomped on it with both feet.

“So it’s that bad?” he asked. “Wearing the arm to work?”

The question was normal, I supposed. “Yeah, it’s pretty bad.”

“What’s the big deal? I don’t get it.”

“It’s not. Well.”

My dad pulled his elbows wide and squinted at me.

Maybe I could talk to him. He was weird, too, after all. “It’s just that it’s not quite gone. My real arm. I mean, you can’t see it, but—“

“—A phantom limb?” Back at his carding, he knocked an elbow on a shelf, scooted his stool sideways to avoid it.

“No. I mean. I feel it.”

“Phantom limbs—they’re supposed to help with prostheses. I read it.”

“It’s not a phantom limb!”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. Yes! But that’s not what I mean. I mean, I feel it.”

“I don’t know what that has to do with—why it stops you from wearing the arm.”

“Well, the real arm—“

“—Your right arm.” He plucked a ball of fuzz from the carder, added it to a pile on the floor and pulled another wad of fluff from a sack.

“No, my left arm.”

“The phantom limb.”

“No. I mean, I feel it. I really feel it.”

“That’s what a phantom limb is.” The paddles had spiky metal teeth. He was careful when he patted the material over them.

“It does stuff.” Right then it was drifting out toward my dad, curious about the paddles, the clouds that piled at his feet.

“What stuff?”

“It’s different.”

“Like it hurts? Or itches? Velma, I’ve read about it.”

“But it moves.”

“Actually, there are some interesting treatments.” Both of his elbows worked in and out. In and out.

“Not for this.”

His arms moved like he was playing an accordion, brushing over the fuzz, making it smooth and soft. “Like these mirrors they use. I was reading—“

“—You’re not listening.”

“I’m sorry. Just tell me about it.” He became serious and still, paddles face up on his lap.

“It’s like.” It was like a ghost, but how would he understand that?

“Uh-huh?”

“It’s just.”

He didn't say anything, but looked at me very calmly.

I breathed out and it was long. I must have been holding it in. “I guess it’s just a phantom limb.”

His arms were immediately moving again. “So, I was reading that they have these mirrors. And the therapy, I mean, I’m no expert, but the therapy is to look in the mirrors. You should look it up yourself. I don’t know anything. I just read about it.”

“Me too.”

“Maybe a doctor could help?”

“I don’t think so.”

“A psychiatrist?”

“Oh god.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy.”

“Well, maybe I am.”

“Phantom limbs—I mean it must be strange, but it doesn’t mean you’re crazy.”

“Uh-huh.”

His elbows flew faster, like he would lift away and the ghost arm was imitating him, mocking him, so that it felt like I would fly, too.

Jul. 11

Dear Ann,

Did you ever watch Velma sew? I mean after you were dead? When she was grown up, or at least in high school? How about cut? Velma with the scissors was something else. Like lightning. Like fireworks. The slash slash slash. The sheeeeeeeaaaaaar-rip! She made it like a dance. And the flash of the blades, when she sat by the window, in the sun. I don't know how she learned to do that, unless it was from my mother, who was also pretty good with her shears.

You must remember, the look she got on her face, when she was really little, and playing with cross-stitch, the child ones, with plastic grids and blunt needles. Next to my mom. Concentrating so hard.

Maybe it's not nice to remind you of that.

I bet she would have sat next you to and played "filling out paperwork," or "writing sales pitches," if you'd been home more or if you hadn't died. She missed you. I can tell you that.

Velma was always so serious. It seemed, later, like it was sadness, like she missed you, Ann. And she did, she did. But remember? Even before, how quiet and thoughtful and just *serious* she always was? At one? At two? At twelve? What does that mean?

Anyway, it's funny, back then, I never pictured her growing up to the shop. I didn't let the four generations weigh on me then. She liked to draw so much. I thought

she'd be an artist or an architect. That's what I was thinking about as I was spinning today.

Love,

Max

Lefty wakes. Sighs. Sees plastic. Ugh ugh. Velma skipping, slipping into slip the skirt, swiping plastic arm around the room.

Lefty times his grasp, graps plastic fingers—yuck!—re-leeeeeeeeeeeas-es. Just right. Lefty splashes up against the screen. Open screen of Velma's laptop. Slides down to clickety-click-ees.

Laptop liptip. Loop for Lefty. Lefty has never tried it alone alone.

Lefty deserves a day off anyway.

Velma hustles off and Lefty has the place, the whole wide internet to Lefty's self.

Huh!

The ghost was quiet, or else not there. I swung my right arm to see if he pinched tighter. I ducked behind Curly's when I reached it, the stinky back alley, poked at my neck, my ankles, my hair. No arm. When I got to the place where the homeless woman slept, under the underpass, no cars were passing, so I checked again. My legs twitched, they searched so hard for a hint of him. There was nothing I could do, but hope he behaved himself.

At work, I settled into syringes. The gelatin-haze reflected from their curved surfaces, bounced around the room. I wiggled a bit, sliced the plastic up and down with a shoulder twitch followed by a hip lurch. Then stopped, stood straight.

A woman approached me while her children played tag between the syringes and the gauze exhibit. She stood next to me and faced her kids, then leaned in and spoke quietly. “My husband’s missing a finger.”

I watched her kids more than her, ready to scoop them up if they got too close. “Oh no. What happened?”

“I didn’t actually see it. It was before we were married.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But it’s not a big deal. Hardly noticeable really.”

“That’s good.”

“He says it was pretty common back then. The machinery they used was so dangerous. It was the, let me think, the po-wer-take-off-shaft.” She said the words slowly, as if they were memorized. “He was just a teenager.”

“That’s horrible.”

“I’m so glad I didn’t grow up on a farm! That’s all I have to say about it.”

“Yes.”

On the walk home, I almost didn’t worry about my ghost. I just fought the plastic through the sleeve, felt him return, my little ghost. He squeezed back into me, pumped a fist, then fluttered loosely. I dragged the plastic beside me on the sidewalk, ground its fingers to smooth flat stubs.

At home, my charcoals, my pencils, my paints were in a plastic bin, way in the back, on the top shelf of the closet in my bedroom. I yanked the box out over the shelf ledge, tilted it towards me until it slid. I caught it with my cheek and shoulder, carried it to the living room.

The easel wasn't easier than paper on a table, but it was white and it stared.

I was surprised that I didn't draw a dress. Instead, I drew a building. A tall one, shiny but stark. I didn't know anything about architecture.

I put the building on a street, added a garden, pushed flowers up from the dirt. But it was night, after all. I turned on the street lamps, broke just one, to play with the shadows.

I lit a window, then another. It was hard to stop. Was that a person looking out? Or just a shadow? A piece of office furniture?

I smudged as I went, but then I blended the smudges. In the shadow, it was working.

There was a pile of bricks next door. New construction? A crane. I reached the edge of my sheet, flipped it to start again. I turned the sheet smoky with my spider hand, graphite covered. It crawled beside the lines.

I used to love a clean line, but this was more real.

I drew another building, on fire, this time. Smoke was easy for me—why not go with it? Eventually I smelled the smoke I was drawing, I was that good.

The alarm went off and it was my dinner I was burning. I shut off the oven, dumped out the dinner, and fanned the smoke detector with a towel.

My fist was as black as the food, from all the smearing.

I went back to my drawing, sketched a city's worth, kept at it until the sun rose, and then I slept for just a few hours.

In the nothing of not knowing. Yanked up out of it. Bright white. Questions—
emerge! Blind him the eye with flash of bright asking.

You walk down a winding tunnel. The air is getting danker, step-by-step. You cover your nose with the front of your t-shirt, but you still smell decay.

Your flashlight makes brightness, but only in front of you. Behind you crawls—
You turn—Nothing crawls behind you.

Because the spider is in front of you now. Its legs as long as yours and its mouth like a cavern.

Your legs are stuck now. Your arms. Your head is inside its mouth. Its lips are gooey and sealing around your neck. Its teeth pierce your throat.

When I woke, it was like being hung over. No, it wasn't that bad, I was just tired. Pulling on a new prosthetic was tricky. The ghost flopped like a fish and I wrestled him away. Shoved him off, wrangled the straps around my torso, tightened them in small, gasping increments.

I flipped through the sketchbook. The drawings were ugly and childish. I scooped up the sketchbook and the easel, slung them into the dumpster behind the house.

After work, after ripping off the plastic arm and feeling the ghost cool into place, a clean sting at his pinch, I walked to Poncho's tattoo parlor, just to see if he was around.

“Velma, my girl!” Poncho had both arms on the tattoo gun, hovered over the calf of a girl lying face down on the table. He didn’t look up, but somehow knew it was me swinging through the glass door.

“I can come back.”

“No, stay.”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” mumbled the girl. Her head rested on folded arms. Blonde hair pulled forward, so the black roots showed luxuriously at the back of her head, near her neck. She looked about to fall asleep.

Poncho’s needle moved up and down too fast to follow but the lines he drew were stark, for just an eye blink, before they blurred with blood.

“What’s it going to be?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“Jeez.”

“So what’s with the arm?”

“The one that got run over?”

He was silent.

“Is that what you mean?”

“I know you’re here to talk about it.” His line took a sharp curve, but fluid. The blood swirled along the lines, pooled in the crease of her knee, dripped beneath her on the table. He blotted it. “You were wearing plastic all week—I saw you walking. And I know you hate it. But now it’s nothing. You’re worried about that.”

“Can’t I change it up?”

“Just wondering. You hate the plastic. Right?”

“It’s work. They make me wear it.”

“Quit your job.”

“I could.”

“No, you couldn’t.” Poncho looked up and considered. “Some guys could, but you couldn’t.”

“I hate the plastic.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t feel right. It’s the weight or something.”

“What about a nicer one?”

“Why should I have to wear a fake arm?”

He shrugged and it manifested in the curl of what might have been turning into a wave. Then he ran back over the hitch in the curl and made it part of the design. It fit.

“I’m Velma, by the way,” I said to the body on the table.

“Therese. Nice to meet you.” She didn’t look at me, but snuggled deeper into her forearm.

“I did her back, too.” Poncho pointed his chin to a snake that wove underneath the straps of her tank top.

“Nice.”

Poncho made an adjustment to his tool. “So you care about what people think or you don’t. You get used to the weight or you don’t. You wear it or you don’t. What’s the big deal?”

“I just hate it.”

“Why?”

“I think it’s about the balance. The symmetry.” Could I tell Poncho about the ghost?

“Like a design element?”

I didn’t think so. “No, it’s the weight. It feels wrong.” This part was true and it surprised me. I’d thought it was just the ghost.

“You could fix that. Fill it with sand or something?”

But I didn't think I could.

I discovered a woman at the Medical Museum, a guard. She was lovely. Pretty. She was graceful and reckless, pointing her eyes high, at the domed ceiling. She wasn't pretty like the girl next door, but pretty like the woman who would cross the street in front of your car.

She was missing an arm—that would've been important to some people. But not to me. After all, I was missing some parts. Most of my hair.

It was such luck to find this lovely lady. I'd been looking for her. Looking for someone like her, for so long. Lovely and graceful and surely not minding my hair. I sort of had my eye on her, her type, I mean, for a while. She reminded me of someone. Maybe someone from a dream.

If I could make her look back, it would be just a dream.

I saw her from across the museum's rotunda, guarding syringes. I crept closer. Stopped. Moved in again. Her face lost its fuzziness, shimmered out between the tourists. Her empty sleeve floated back and forth with the breathing of the crowd.

Melissa had her arms, my wife. I had her arms and then I didn't. She couldn't see what I saw, every day, that smear on concrete. I couldn't shake the dream. Couldn't blame her for shaking me.

What kind of person would pick a tulip, a fiery one, tall and slim, petals so alive they hurt to look at? What kind of man would pluck it, admire it as he walked, and then, fastidiously, pull off the petals, roll them in his fingers, scatter them on the sidewalk?

I turned for another wing of the museum. The homeopathic wing, this time. Acupuncture. It was needle after needle, sparking sharp reflections, like glitter, like a haze, like a shimmer in the air.

I knew what it was to lose something, something that was really a part of me.

My wife was a nurse, two round arms, so clean and strong. She cleaned wounds, changed bedpans, held babies on her breaks. Ran to the nursery instead of for a cigarette. Would never cross the street in front of a strange man's car.

And I knew what it was to be not sure.

My wife said she loved my baldness, hated the new toupee. She was still my wife then. Not anymore.

The woman wasn't jogging when it happened. I didn't imagine her sweaty. Not laced into running shoes, pressed into sports bra. She carried her purse, I was sure, though she must have dropped it. It must have flung out across the sidewalk, contents scattering, keys-lipstick-cellphone, not too far. The police identified her right away. They must have.

I circled back to the woman. Across the crowded rotunda. Of course, she didn't see me. Didn't recognize me watching her.

What was to recognize? What did that prove?

Her empty sleeve fluttered. Her hip pointed, then the other one. She reached in front of the display, waved back some children. The tips of her cheekbones glistened, like they reflected moonlight across a dark street at night.

No one saw me. Not at work. Not at home. No one sees me in a dream.

I didn't move close, but circled the museum instead. I walked to an anatomy exhibit. Found the women, or maybe one repeated woman, stripped further and further each time. It was my favorite exhibit in the Medical Museum.

Every day, I circled the figures, huge Barbie dolls, I figure-eight-ed between them. At one end, just bones, hardly female unless you looked closely. The next, with organs. Another, veins. Each one was life-sized, in the middle of the floor. Lit from within. And then, finally, a perfect plastic lady. A mannequin. Hair poufed out, colors painted on her lips and cheeks and eyes. Even red fingernails. She was naked, but, like a Barbie doll, her parts were rounded off for modesty.

Each day, I came at different times. My work gave me flex time, there was that. I could copyedit at night, watch Velma in the day.

But Melissa worked odd hours.

Why did I keep going?

The woman, the guard, her arm was rounded off under her uniform shirt, I imagined. For modesty. It came off horribly, I was sure. But the doctors took care of that. Made her smooth as a Barbie doll's breast.

Yes, I knew that her name was Velma.

I returned to the guard, the beautiful one-armed woman. She was standing straighter, looking alert. Some boys were approaching, rough and shoving. Velma eyed them.

She never eyed me. They didn't see me at work, but it was fine, because they didn't see when I was gone. Or did they? The police didn't see me. In my car or out, or even if they stopped me, they didn't see.

What was there to see?

I never played with Barbie dolls, just popped the heads and arms and legs off my sister's. She asked me to do it. They were easier to dress that way.

Under cover of the boys, I crept toward her. I could almost smell her. Then she pivoted. I retreated.

What did she smell like? Could I smell in dreams?

At five o'clock, I walked out the front entrance, and around the outside of the building. It only took this woman, Velma, five minutes to do whatever closing duties she had and leave through the back employee exit. The building was large, so I hurried, cut through some bushes on the lawn, leaped through a bed that used to be tulips, then ducked inside a bus shelter across the street. When she emerged, I walked with her. Side by side, with only the street between us.

I walked her to the coffee house, waited across the street as she bought a skinny macchiato. Stepped in time with her as she sipped it. She never looked about her as she walked. She always stepped so quickly, swung that arm in vicious slashes.

We walked together, almost ran, to her apartment, but when she went in, I walked past. I circled the block and returned to the museum parking lot, where I had left my car. I drove to the car wash and rumbled through the deluxe underbelly scrub.

I knew a little bit about her accident. From the papers, of course. And from what I could guess just looking at her.

I had been watching her for months.

A dark sliver wrapped my head, poked the corner of my eye. A shadow? A cat?

I used to know I wasn't crazy. I used to know I was a good man. I was even handsome. And upstanding. People used to see me. People used to date me, love me, trust me. I even had a wife.

When the head was off, the arm, she'd shimmy a sparkly dress over the smooth, rounded off body. She'd twist the head back on, the arm, ball-and-socket, plunked back in. Then she'd comb the Barbie's hair. I'd help her search for tiny shoes and purses.

I stopped off at the liquor store, then went home and worked through the evening. Sent off my proofs and fell asleep. When I woke up, I dressed for the museum. It was Velma's day off, but never mine.

My sister used to love me. My parents. My wife.

With her gone, I approached the syringes. Plastic tubes, full of something. Needles. Blood or probably fake blood bubbling through a few of them. The weekend guard paid no attention to me. I could have slipped a cool cylinder into my coat pocket.

And when the heads wouldn't go back on, when the necks got chipped and wouldn't hold them, she cried. But nobody blamed me. Nobody saw me there, I guess. They punished my sister for breaking her own toys.

The museum was strange without Velma. I didn't stay long. I walked to Velma's apartment, then to her father's shop, then drove all the way out to her father's house, but I couldn't find her.

They ran a picture in the paper. A smiling face, but shadowed, catching the light in streaks of brightness. Her head swung out from behind a sewing machine. Two hands visible, fingers gripping the table's edge. Straight hair fell at a jaunty angle, like that sleeve did later. But later her hair was curly.

Had I already seen her? In a dream?

My sister grew up to have a family. A girl to dress those Barbies, and a boy to rip their heads and arms and legs off. Of course, the kids weren't old enough for that yet, just 4 and 1. Or maybe they were, I couldn't remember.

One day, she wore a prosthetic arm, and the next and the next. Never before then. I didn't know why. No more flapping sleeve. Painted plastic fingernails. A flesh colored, fabric strap, visible when her shirt slipped sideways.

Sometimes, I followed the woman from her job to a dress shop, or from her apartment to a dress shop. She didn't seem to sew.

Or see.

What kind of man would leave his wife? Pluck his marriage like a tulip, too bright and alive to even look at? Watch another woman, a woman so pretty? What kind of woman would cross the street in front of his car?

There was an older man at the dressmaker's who looked like my Velma, her father. My Velma sat on a folding chair and talked with one arm, while the man kept his head down, and flipped colored fabric through a white sewing machine.

Or fed wool, like his beard, to a wooden wheel.

We were all made out of water, supposedly, but that's not what it looked like. Or blood either. It was like a dirty grease stain, what you saw, when you rubbed a human body against the pavement like a piece of chalk. I saw it in a dream.

She walked recklessly, when she cut through the museum. She was always late, never watching ahead. I thought about placing myself in her path, to be blown over, to be knocked down and smeared across the marble floor of the rotunda.

Nobody could stitch hair into my scalp. It wouldn't work. It wouldn't hold.

A woman was hit by a car, late at night, crossing the street. They used more words, but that's most of what the newspapers said. They named the street. It was one that I knew well. It cut through town, swiped by her house, curled out and away. Nobody had any business driving 45 on that street.

I'd already seen it.

They never found the driver, had no leads, no witnesses. The police didn't even know it was a car, except of course, they did know. They didn't know the color or the make. They didn't know the license plate number.

He must have been drunk to have been going so fast, drunk or buzzed or in a hurry. It must have been a he, must have been a man, drawn, inexplicably, to the pretty woman crossing the street.

Was his wife passed out beside him in the car?

Velma was at Parkview Hospital for sixteen days. Velma was 28 years old when the hit-and-run driver smooshed her arm from its socket, smeared the grease of her

across South Clinton Street. Left her splayed, curled, eyes closed, who knew? It wasn't something I could think about.

At the hospital, her father never left her side. So I imagined. Her father closed their family tailoring business to sit beside his one-armed, pretty daughter, as the wounds healed, the flesh sealed smooth, I hoped, like a Barbie doll's breast. The bruises around her eyes slunk slowly over her face and then away, like a shadow under the street lights on a dark night in the city. Velma flat in that bed, until she was healed.

While Velma was flat in that bed, her stitching father at her side, no stranger could talk to her. A stranger walking by, could only walk by, could only casually walk by with his head already turned. Caught only flashes of her father's needle, as it worked up and down and up and down.

No one saw the stranger.

She always walked, so when I was with her, I walked, too. I left my car in the museum parking lot, or two blocks away from her apartment building, so she never saw it. I tried to wash the car before I saw her. Often afterward, as well.

I was there to see my wife, the nurse. When she held babies in two arms, I wandered, head already turned.

Would the scars stretch and bulge? Would they be ropes twisting, snaking onto her torso? I liked to think that her arm popped like the head of a tulip. A clean, straight hole at the socket. Then a fold, a couple stitches and a smooth, forever smooth surface.

I imagined a cool cylinder in the doctor's hand, flashing needle, bubbling painkillers into her veins. One arm's worth of veins, instead of two.

The little boy and little girl, my sister's children, they knew me as Uncle Al. I was the man who threw them into the air. I was the man who brought them so much candy they got bellyaches. What a nice man to be. They saw me, knew me. Really?

It's hard to un-see, once imagined, a shredded twist of bicep meat.

Under the navy blue sleeve of the uniform, the arm didn't seem to bend. It creaked from her shoulder. The same elbow angle, always. The fingers that poked out at the cuff were stiffened to a gentle curl, tips painted.

Who was I to judge? After all, I wore a hairpiece.

My car was very clean. The underside, the guts, the coils, the gears, the tanks, rods and all the inner organs. They were clean, too. Scrubbed.

With the prosthetic, there was a hitch. A falter, a twitch in her left hip. She seemed to swing the left arm with her whole body, but only needed a few muscles, living muscles, to swing the right. From across the street I hardly noticed, just a tiny dip, in alternating strides.

I haven't always worn the hairpiece.

I thought about her sometimes, when I sat on my porch, a taste of scotch resting in my glass, on my tongue, cooling down my throat. My wife asleep or gone. That night, I imagined, she was not going anywhere special. She was running out for milk, or cigarettes. But of course not cigarettes, she never smoked. She wasn't dressed for a date or expecting to be seen. She was the pretty woman crossing the street, but wearing a stained t-shirt, I tended to think.

I cut through the tulips, what used to be tulips, leaped over them, tight to the side of the building, off the path, to beat Velma to the back door. I panted, as quietly as I

could manage, and hid within the bus shelter. I was nonchalant. I was waiting for a bus. I was watching for Velma. No one could see me.

There were no witnesses to the accident, no one to see the skin-smeared sidewalk. The wriggled snake of a useless arm, or the closed eyes under the wet strands of hair. No one saw the car peel away. No one noted its color or wrote down the license plate number.

A pale green stem in my hands. I held it and it grew slimy.

I didn't drink much anymore. Just scotch on the porch and by myself so I could watch it. Not beer at parties. Not shots or cocktails or wine.

With the plastic arm, it was almost too much. She was whole again somehow. And not, of course. Like my hair. It was gone and there at the same time. Synthetic. Plastic. Better than ever maybe.

She was someone else. Did it make her someone else?