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Tiny Animals Made To Do Unnatural Things

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TINY ANIMALS MADE TO DO UNNATURAL THINGS

by

Ashley Siebels

Bachelor of Science in Visualization
The Minneapolis College of Art and Design
2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English
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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Ashley Siebels

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May 2012

Abstract

TINY ANIMALS MADE TO DO UNNATURAL THINGS

by

Ashley Siebels

Dr. Maile Chapman, Examination Committee Chair
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The stories in this collection revolve around a central theme which is expressed by my title *Tiny Animals Made To Do Unnatural Things*. All my characters feel guilt about decisions and experiences that haunt their past. In the present, they have come to a crossroads and are trying to decipher between what they were made to do as in vocation and evolution and what they are being made to do by the authorial pressures that loom over them (e.g. bosses, parents, loan officers, prison guards.)

In this way, my thesis pivots on the word *made*. *Made (or to make)* has many definitions: to bring into being, acquire earn, execute force. In this collection, I'm considering all of them in many contexts, but mainly in the context of female sexuality and child rearing.

All of my stories are intended to be dark comedies. I'm the girl at the grocery store buying 99% cocoa. In my opinion, the darker the better. The following stories have been influenced by writers who dabble in this same creative space: George Saunders, Gary Shteyngart, Amy Hempel, Karen Russell, Denis Johnson, Amy Gerstler, David Sedaris, Jeffrey Eugenides, among many others.

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JEFFY AND GEORGIE: EX UNUS PLURES

In the summer of 1922, Jeffy and I crisscrossed Alberta in a covered wagon still rolling on its original wheels. Our father, Henry, a priest and wannabe Ringling brother, had a red coat and a mission: sell the fantastic to anyone with a nickel. The name of the show was painted on the side of our wagon: Jeffy and Georgie: Ex Unus Plures.

Most of the towns we visited already had a stage. Small structures built and abandoned by a traveling salesman or an ambitious vaudeville act. If there were no stage, Henry built one out of found planks and wood scraps that my sister, Jeffy, and I scavenged for after the audience was asleep—burnt-out buildings and abandoned homesteads were gold mines. The only time we were allowed out was the night. Henry thought he'd be ruined if too many would-be customers got a peek at us for free.

We were fifteen then, and Jeffy was still afraid of the dark. Whenever I suggested we go see our constellation, Gemini, she made an excuse about being tired. Too many nights, with my constellation book under my arm, I drug her far from the wagon, across dirt roads and into open fields. It was impossible for her to run as fast as me because her leg was smaller than my leg. She gasped and coughed, but I pushed her to go faster. I was afraid that if I didn't make her stronger, she'd hold me back forever. In the wagon there was no radio to make us laugh or give us hope. At my insistence, we found green pastures and watched those immortal Twins move through the sky, together for eternity.

Henry sat up front with his feet on the jockey box. The sun beat down on him. We had driven all night and were exhausted. Jeffy and I hung our feet out the back of the

wagon. I spotted a real Canadian cowboy on the horizon and gave a whistle. Jeffie gave me a look as if I'd taken my top off. We watched him and his horse get bigger and bigger. I straightened the large skirt we wore and told Jeffy to pretend to be asleep on my shoulder. I reached my arm around her and squeezed her real tight, hoping he'd think we were two regular sisters out on the prairie. When he got close, he called out to me. But I didn't say anything. He tipped his hat and road alongside the wagon. I just batted my eyelashes and enjoyed him being so close. Henry turned his head back to tell Jeffy and me we needed to duck down because the next town was on the horizon. He caught a glimpse of the man following us and pulled the horses to the side of the road. The man kept his mouth shut while Henry yelled. If he wanted to see the whole show it was going to cost him three quarters. The cowboy looked at me. Then he kicked his horse and galloped away. It never lasted long...but it was always fun while it lasted.

In town, Henry didn't waste a minute. He pulled the wagon up to the small stage, watered the horses, and then unfurled a large roll of purple velvet. Behind that thick curtain he erected our set. The loud bam! bam! bam! of his hammer attracted the eyes of children. Through a crack in the side of the wagon I watched them congregate at the windows in the school. Their small hands wiped dusty portholes for their heads to cram into. Their curiosity always got the best of them. When the teacher pulled the school bell, the boys and girls poured out through the wooden doors and onto the dirt road. It was always the same. They started out running. The closer they got to us and the wagon, the slower they went. Through a crack no bigger than a number two pencil, I could spot the moment their wonder turned to fear. The biggest children pushed to the front. They dared

each other to climb to the top of the stage. The pressure escalated and I listened to them push and shove closer and closer to the curtain. Even the braves ones with broad shoulder shrieked when they were forced too close. I tried to imagine what they imagined....In their separate heads they built a Frankenstein's monster of all the freaks who had come through this town: the arms of the Strong Man, the legs of the Spider Woman, the head of the Cyclops, all attached to the body of a Dwarf.

Henry didn't do anything to ease their fear. One brave boy jumped on top of the stage and grabbed the curtain. He looked back to see if he had gained his friends' approval. Henry ambushed the poor boy; he jumped out from behind the curtain wearing the big green, bug-eyed gas mask the government issued him in World War I. The children screamed. Henry pushed the boys off the stage, lifted his mask and asked, "How many of you have money for a spectacle?" A few of the girls and boys pinched a dime or a quarter between their fingers. The rest Henry sent home. He bawled, "Go get your parents! This beast costs money. No free looks."

We were only three days old when grandma Francis, a frail Catholic woman in a blue bonnet and a floral housedress, held us out the fourth story window of her Victorian mansion in Missoula, Montana. She could barely keep her arms around us. We weighed almost as much as she did. We hovered above our first audience, an angry mob of religious zealots. The doctor who had performed the delivery and rolled our mother in a sheet afterward had had loose lips. And now the men and women trampled my grandmother's daisies beneath us. They pushed closer and closer to the house until they

were pounding on the walls. The crowd wanted to count our toes. My grandmother made a scene of dousing us with holy water. The crowd below parted quickly to avoid contact with the drips that rolled off us.

Father Henry had been watching from the parlor room window. He didn't want to come out, but he thought they were going to break down the door. He went outside and spoke with a booming voice as if he were on the pulpit. He reminded the crowd of John 36:13 and asked the mob to leave, so that he and my grandmother could mourn her daughter and his disciple in peace. Men threw rocks at him. Women insisted he wasn't righteous enough to be a priest. They tried to rip his vestments off, but he held tight to his stole and pectoral cross. He refused to acknowledge any sexual deviance on his part.

The crowd pulled him into the middle of the yard and blocked the entrance of the house. He fought his way to the child's tree swing in the front lawn. Standing on top of the seat, swaying gently, he proclaimed that our mother was a sweet girl who in a moment of weakness had dabbled in mathematics. He pointed to us, dangling in the sky, when he declared that everything that had transpired in this house was a direct result of our mother losing faith in God. The crowd overcame him. They pulled him to the ground and stripped him naked. The women and men took turns beating him until he no longer responded to their punches. Then they marched to the cemetery, where they held a vigil for our mother. They petitioned the Bishop to come down from Billings to officially disavow Henry and pay to have the locks changed on the parish door.

Our mother, Leda, had looked at an equation while she was pregnant. Father Henry told us the thought of it was so overwhelming for such a young girl that she'd

fainted. Unfortunately for us, this happened just as the warm embryonic wax in her belly was about to part at our necks. Jeffy and I knew it was true. We had two heads, but one body.

At night Jeffy and I would sneak into her empty room and teach ourselves to read. She kept dozens of books that smelled of sawdust between her mattresses. In the margins, we read her conversations with her lover Yale. *Oh Yale! I want you so bad right now. Love Leda. Oh Yale! Why do you dismiss me so? Love Leda.* Years later, we would come clean to grandma. Crying as we opened the scientific magazine to the page that said $E=MC^2$. “This is what made us a monster,” we sobbed.

Grandma Francis only laughed at our superstition. “Georgie, monsters show the wrath of God. Marvels on the other hand, show the *power* of God. I don’t know anything, but why don’t you girls say a prayer for the babies who are born without *enough* heads.” Jeffy and I dropped to our knees instantly. We said Hail Marys until our voices went hoarse for the babies wandering dark streets without a single head to guide them.

Around that time Henry came home with a piano, a violin, and two ventriloquist dolls. Henry tried to teach us all sorts of talents. Nights when our fingers ached from the piano, he told us that he could charge more money if we knew how to do something well. Grandma and Henry disagreed on everything, but the fact that he thought show business was our ticket to fortune enraged her. Before we could walk, he charged people a dime to come into our grandmother’s house and take a peek at us.

Henry found the dresses in a box behind a bar in Goats Haunt, Montana. Jeffy and I remember the day he ran home, swung the door open, and instructed us to take our

clothes off. He spent his last dollar bill on a plastic measuring strip, a spool of thread, and a needle. He told us that he had been blessed with an idea and now everything was going to be different. He attempted to hold the three dresses in a line. One in each hand, and then one in his mouth. He talked through the dress in his teeth about the seams he was going to tear and the holes he was going to fix. It would become a dress like show girls wear. He spit the dress out and grabbed the needle. He whispered, “This is how we will escape your grandmother.”

Jeffy couldn't see what we were looking at, so I quickly said, “It's a sewing needle.”

Jeffy smiled.

We unbuttoned the large male dress shirt that we wore most days. I did the top button, Jeffy the next one, and then every other. We allowed our modest skirt to drop to the ground; I looked away rather than watch our father squirm at the sight of our uneven and disproportionate bodies. He held the numbered strip in his mouth and we nervously wondered if it would be long enough to make it all the way around our heart-shaped rib cage. Jeffy and I each lifted an arm so he could slide the cold, yellow, plastic number strip over our pale oblong chest.

That night before he had a chance to start cutting, I stole one of the dresses. If he measured twice and cut once, he would only need two. Besides, I didn't think any of those dresses should be worn by a girl like Jeffy. They were beautiful. The long strings of crystal beads sewn in concentric circles created the illusion of a patch of sparkling geometric flowers. Off the shoulder and hips fringe flourished like moist forest grass. I

knew it was a mirage of cheap glass, but I didn't care. It felt natural, as if it had grown out of the ground whole. It gave me nightmares to think of Henry cutting the wrong bead and the dress dissolving like sugar in cup of warm water. There'd be nothing left for me or Jeffy.

The next morning, he tore the blankets off our bed and demanded I give it back. I told him I wanted it as it was: a whole thing. He asked Jeffy what she thought. She bowed her head and kept silent. Without thinking, I slapped her face. I said, "Wake up! Don't you want something beautiful for keeps?"

She looked at me like a ghost had just walked across her grave. She whispered, "None of this is any use to me."

Henry lifted the dress from my small hand and said, "Well that settles it." By sundown, all three dresses were a pile of pieces on the floor.

Jeffy and I kept our eyes open late into the night, listening as he cursed the needle and slowly brought them back together. I cringed every time we heard a bead hit the floor. In the morning, we found him asleep holding safety pins in his mouth. The smell of coffee usually woke him up. He'd have a cup then stretch, mumble about how it was only going to be a few more days, and then fall back asleep for a few hours.

The day he finished it, he brought home a burlesque dancer named Betty to help us into the garment. She told us he gave her a dollar to teach us how to dance. I grabbed her hand and she lead us to the back of the house. Jeffy told me silently that she could smell alcohol on the woman's breath. I told Jeffy she should mind her own business. It took Betty five minutes to figure out what hole was for my head and what was for my

leg. Even after we'd managed to get inside of it, there were spare holes that Betty couldn't explain. She used kitchen string and clothes pins to keep us covered. She taught us to shuffle step and then paraded us before Henry. He couldn't take his eyes off his creations while we did the tap move. Afterward, he brought his arms around us and said we were the most beautiful thing on two legs. He was a priest, and we were marvels. He instructed us to thank Betty for her time and to pack our bags. We left Montana the next day.

The crowd began to swell as children trickled back to the stage with their parents. Shopkeepers, bartenders, and even the postmen closed their establishments and made their way to our rickety wagon. Women in dowdy house dresses and wide brimmed hats scoffed at Henry for disrupting their family's supper. He pretended not to care how many people were in the crowd or how anxious they were to see what he was selling. He waited until there wasn't a single person on the horizon. Then he paused for a beat smiled at the audience and removed a small bugle from his pocket. He played the sounds he used to wake up to in the army. The noise drowned out the murmurs of the crowd. He placed the bugle under his arm, put his hands on the lapels of his jacket and smiled at the crowd. Then he barked, "What has four eyes, two heads, and one heart?"

The crowd murmured.

One clever onlooker yelled, "A politician having lunch with a bishop!"

The crowd laughed.

In the dark behind the curtain, Jeffy whimpered and sucked her thumb. We shared hips, but I never had anyone to talk to. I didn't mind the dark. I could close my eyes and imagine that our feet were mine...until I heard the words:

“Pregnant women, shield your eyes!”

Henry tore the drapery away. For a second we saw only blurry outlines of women holding onto their men. We heard them gasp at the sight of us. Our dilated eyes adjusted, so we could see young boys tug on their mothers' aprons, craning for a better view. Older boys heckled us. We scooted ourselves off our three-legged stool.

Henry clapped his hands until the crowd broke out in applause. He walked to the edge of the stage. He pinched the record needle and moved it to an already spinning copy of *Bee's Knees*. We raised our arms and kicked our feet. The dull sound of the homemade tap shoes scuffing the wood invigorated us. Loose beads flew from the quilt of silver burlesque dresses that covered our shared pelvis, stomach, and separate shoulders. Our feet knew the routine and worked together to shuffle step in time with the other. The rhythmic tip tip tip, tap tap, clack clack clack echoed into our ears. Our hands swayed like flags. We gave the crowd a wink and a flash of our crooked yellow teeth. The music picked up, and soon—as predictable as the record, as familiar as Henry's lion tamer coat—the crowds' brows, that were furrowed in horror, began to rise with wonder. We were not horrible. We were tap dancers. We step ball changed, back shuffled, side shuffled, twirled, leaped, hopped, dropped, and heel toed until the music and awe were gone.

The townspeople cheered and dropped coins in the grass. A little girl with brown curls emerged from behind her mother's skirt. She crawled onto the stage and picked up

loose beads. She held them up to the setting sun and called them diamonds. Her mother smiled. She picked up the little girl, who then brought the beads to her mother's face, and asked if they could be for keeps. The girl's mother nodded. I watched the two of them walk away. I'd never see them again.

After the show we signed autographs, for all the children. Jeffy's writing was reasonable, but because I am the right side, no one ever expects her to pick up a pencil. She never made eye contact with audience members. Instead of playing along, she pretended to be deaf and dumb. She stood there with her thumb in her mouth, watching the horizon. I spoke to women with burlesque dreams. They wanted to know where we bought our hair and costume. And I allowed the boys with the strange questions about science and sorcery to pinch my skin and touch the space between our heads. Babies poked at Jeffy's cheeks or pulled at her hair, but it didn't faze her. Jeffy kept her eyes on a set point in the distance and kept working that thumb. I could feel the pressure of her lips warping that precious thumb bone. I glared at her. She was ruining that thumb.

After the show, we climbed back into the wagon. Henry counted the money. He reminded us that if we were good, we could keep the five cent pieces. The previous evening, he drove all night so it didn't take long for him to fall asleep in his clothes on the floor of the wagon. I asked Jeffy to escape with me into the woods, where we could climb a tree and get a clear look at our constellation.

"Georgie, I'm so tired," she said.

My cheeks flushed with anger. She tired easily because she never slept when I did. Just the night before, I woke up and she was wide awake. She whispered to me, "I'm keeping watch." I rolled my eyes and told her, "You're dumb. Go to sleep."

I compromised. I said if she went with me now, I would put curlers in her hair later. We snuck out the back of the wagon. Across the street in the school yard there was a water pump. Jeffy said if I were really going to make her run all through the night she needed a drink first. I pumped the water and Jeffy filled her cupped hand. She slurped it up and then went back for more. Before she had her fill, I stopped pumping. I thought I heard a noise. Beyond the schoolyard, I could see movement in the field. I whispered to Jeffy, "Be quiet, there are people in the grass."

She whispered back, "I can't see anything."

The boys and girls from the school were watching us. I waved. They froze like soft statues. Jeffy got nervous real easy. I took her back to the wagon. Inside she began to whimper about how sorry she was I didn't get to see our constellation. She knew how important it was for me. She promised to go find it soon as the sun set on the next town. I said it wasn't her fault. Those boys and girls scared me too.

While Jeffy sleeps I read by candlelight. When we left Montana, I made sure to pack the books from underneath my mother's mattress. In the constellation book, there is a whole page about Pollax and Castor, the Gemini stars. They're only twins in Greek Mythology. In Chinese mythology, one is a tiger and one is a bird. Jeffy coughs in her sleep. I turn to look at her and I see there is a small tooth fused to her lower lip with dried saliva. I set down my book and gently touch it with my index finger. It falls off her lip,

bounces our off our blouse and rolls onto the floor. I pick it up and examine it from the palm of my hand. There will never be a good time to tell Henry that Jeffy isn't going to make it as long as I want to make it. I tuck the tooth into my pocket. Something beautiful for keeps.

MID-THIRTIES

Eden poked her, husband, Eugene in the face while he was sleeping. He didn't even flinch. She plugged his nose with her fingers and covered his mouth. He didn't cough or struggle like you see in the movies. She thought there must be something wrong with someone who was so easy to kill. She had rarely slept through the night since they filed for bankruptcy two months ago. She blamed it on the light of the alarm clock and the distant yowl of a cat in heat. But really, it was guilt.

The covers were hot and heavy on Eden's legs. She kicked them off and snuck down the hallway to the living room. There Great-Aunt Gladys was watching QVC. In her hand, she held a special remote control that accepted credit cards. Eden flipped on the bathroom light. This apartment did not have vanity lighting like her old apartment. Under these florescent lights, she was a completely different person. Here, her skin looked ashen. Dark circles puddled under her eyes. Blemishes and old acne scars that she thought she was rid of were reemerging. Away from the warm lights of the city, she had lost her sex appeal. She opened the vanity mirror and pulled a pregnancy test from a tampon box on the second shelf.

On the toilet, Eden placed the stick between her legs and watched the soft flow of yellow urine drench the cheap plastic life-altering device. She set it on top of the tank and let her head fall into her lap. At the bottom of the toilet bowl was a dark tunnel. She watched it while she counted to sixty.

At first, it had seemed like a wonderful coincidence: they declared bankruptcy and lost the lease on their Manhattan townhouse the same time that home values and rent had

plummeted here. It'd be like living in Brooklyn before it was a thing or Los Angeles in the seventies. But there was no bohemian glamour in Trenton, New Jersey. The free paper that came to the house had only two sections: crime reports and obituaries...the rest was ads for barbershops and pay day credit loan companies. Eden hung a map of the neighborhood on the wall in the kitchen. She kept her mind occupied during the day by tracking the number of break-ins, drive-bys, and murders within a mile of her apartment using colored push pins. It seemed to her there was an emerging pattern of murders closing in on them. She called the police to see if they planned to step up their presence in the neighborhood. She was on hold for an hour. Eventually, a woman picked up. She said not to expect much since the city just laid off seventy-five percent of it's police force. Eden grabbed the stick. The symbol emerged from the circular abyss fuzzy. For a second, she thought it might go either way. She reached for the light switch, hoping for a few more moments of uncertainty. But the pink cross glowed in the dark. Eden thought that given the choice between Trenton, New Jersey, and the loving arms of God, any baby would choose to skip their Earthly experience entirely.

Eden and her bestie girlfriends had partied at a club in the Meatpacking district until three in three in the morning. Before work, she stopped off at her favorite bar on Wall Street. She drank Bloody Mary's while she watched the NASDAQ fall from the ticker on her phone until long after the bell rang. After the third, the new bartender asked where she worked.

Eden pointed to the television screen without taking the straw of her out of her mouth.

He grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. *MSNBC Money's* Maria Bartoloni was reporting live from in front of her office building.

“How much do I owe you?” she said with her teeth clenched around a chewed up straw.

The bartender shook his head.

The Lehman Brothers office was cold because a group of embarrassed men had thrown a conference table through a window. Mike, a man whose jokes Eden had casually laughed at, announced that he was going to be the first to jump. He said without insurance, there would be no way to pay for his cancer treatments and he'd rather jump now than drain his family's resources over time. Four other men joined him at the ledge. They linked hands, but at the last second backed away. Their wives were below waiting in mini-vans. Mike yelled that he would kill himself on his own terms while he packed a printer into one of the cardboard boxes that had been distributed before Eden had got there.

Eden didn't remember much more about that day except that she kept having to throw up, which was strange. Usually when she was really hung-over, she threw up once, and that was it. By her fourth trip to the toilet, it was apparent that the global financial crisis was unfolding in the cubicle perpendicular and parallel to her desk was having an existential affect on her. The woman in the next stall stopped sobbing to listen to her hack red vomit. She said, “Are you all right?”

Eden replied, “Yeah, just another wild night.”

She said, “You know there is not going to be a COBRA option because the company is bankrupt...” The woman resumed sobbing. Eden put the toilet seat down and sat quietly. She had put the kabbash on Eugene’s baby fever after Bank of America bought Merrill Lynch.

Now miles from New York City, Eden stood up from her own toilet and opened the bathroom window. The night breeze took some of the nausea away. She dangled the stick over the vacant street. Her steel *Do Not Call an Ambulance I Can’t Afford It!* bracelet glittered in the moonlight. Eden released her fingers and the stick fell to the sidewalk but did not break.

In the morning, Eden called her old insurance company and then ten others. No one would provide insurance to a pregnant woman after she found out she was pregnant. The customer representatives sounded overjoyed to hear that an ex-Lehman employee feared she might die during childbirth. She threw the phone across the room when one particularly bold representative said, “You should have thought about that while you were fucking the good people of America.” Eden abandoned the project and snuggled up to Gladys on the couch.

One woman eighty-eight years old, the other thirty-five, both in their pajamas at eleven o’clock in the morning. She stretched her arm around Gladys’ shoulder and rested her hand on Gladys’ leg. “Auntie, can you turn the TV off for a second.” Gladys raised her finger. This meant wait until a commercial break. Gladys was under the impression

they were the kind of friends who only did the things that Gladys wanted to do. Eden looked at the side of Gladys' face. Her eye lids dropped and the skin of her cheeks sagged past her jaw bone. Eden thought how much easier her life would be if Gladys fell down some stairs, or lost a reasonably quick battle with cancer. Eden was her sole beneficiary. Eugene wouldn't have to make sandwiches anymore and their unborn child would spend summers backpacking around Europe finding itself.

But right now Gladys didn't want to spend her final days in one of those all inclusive Disney World type resorts they have for older people. She wanted to live with her only remaining family, Eden and Eugene, in Trenton, New Jersey.

Eden laid her head in Gladys' lap. She blurted, "I'm pregnant" into Gladys' terri cloth robe. "I think I should have an abortion."

Gladys turned the television off and said, "I wouldn't throw a day-old pie in the garbage."

"You don't need insurance to keep a day-old pie."

"Princess, what do you need insurance for? When I had your cousin, Thomas, I just went out into the field at dawn. By dusk, I was dusting him off. Then I hurried back to make dinner before the men came home."

"But there's a lot not right about Thomas," Eden wailed.

"Precious, there's something not right about beef trifles but if I'm at a party and I'm served one, I eat it. I also smile, thank my host verbally, and then send a follow up card twenty-four hours later. It's the minimum."

Gladys stroked Eden's hair.

Eden sat up and said, “But we live in hell.” She glanced down at her stomach. It was bigger. She had an inkling that this was more a symptom of Doritos and Ding-Dongs than being with child.

“Honey, the holy slip-and-slide between you and God is barely a rickety ladder right now...wait any longer and it’ll be too dangerous for a baby.”

“We could adopt.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re going to go buy a pie at a store when you’ve got a homemade pie right there.” Gladys pointed at Eden’s bulging shirt.

Eden frowned. “This is why I’m telling you. I need money to cover the hospital visits and vitamins, and stuff I don’t even know about. Stuff I don’t know anything about.”

“Eden, once they get you into that hospital, those liberals will charge you for all sorts of tests, stitches, and cosmetic operations you don’t need. I know you’re not good for it. Not in a million years is someone going to pay you the amount that cartoon factory paid you.” Aunt Gladys turned the TV back on. Eden faced forward.

At the kitchen table, Eden Googled *how much will it cost to have a baby without insurance*. The numbers fell into two camps, births with complications and births without. Everyone agreed that there was no way to know whether a woman would have complications or not. Without complications ranged from nine-thousand to twenty-thousand, depending on the doctor and whether the patient opted for an epidural. The complicated camp ranged from twenty-thousand into the millions. None of those numbers covered the separate bill the baby would receive. On a scratch piece of paper she

attempted the math. Rent, electric, both of their student loans, and the car payment were already overdue. If she got a job or Eugene took another shift at Subway, they might be able to save five hundred a month for the remaining seven months of her pregnancy. They'd have four-thousand five-hundred dollars. That would only pay for half a delivery. Eden knew a bank would never hire her in this condition. She wouldn't trade again until she had her figure back and some seed money for a new wardrobe. She didn't want to waitress and she didn't want to pluck feet off chickens on some assembly line.

She stood by the window in the living room, watching Eugene park the car in front of their building. After ten years of marriage, he looked healthy and young. He was a wisp in his forest green polo shirt and black dress pants. He used to be the older one, but the last time they went out, a woman with a sexy lilt in her voice asked Eden if she could buy her son a drink. Eden had brushed it off. When they lived in the city, she worked out every day and had avoided carbohydrates for a decade. Here in Trenton, the Spaghetti O's were getting to her. One bowl was never enough.

Eugene was still outside when Eden opened the door. "I'm pregnant. But don't get your hopes up. We are in no financial position to go through with it."

"It's just the hormones talking, Eugene," Gladys yelled from the living room. "She'll get over it."

He entered the house, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her on the mouth. "You were worried that you'd be made fun of at work if you got pregnant. Now you don't work."

“Eugene, I didn’t plan for Lehman to go bankrupt. When you convinced me it’d be a good idea, I thought we’d have money.”

Eugene folded his arms and leaned back against the door.

“Right now we can’t afford it. I’m a pre-existing condition. One complication and we could owe millions.” She explained all about the abortion clinics she found on the Internet.

Eugene slid to the floor.

“I printed a list. They’re all good doctors.”

“Then why don’t they work at hospitals?”

“Eugene, they’re dedicated to women’s reproductive freedom. And some of them maybe mistake some mistakes in their careers. But I’ll let you pick which one we go to.” Eden grabbed the list. “Close your eyes and pick one. I’m going to warn you, number three is close to an Olive Garden.”

He looked up and said, “Eden, if you kill this baby, I’m going to start seeing other people. A lot of college girls come to my Subway.”

She laughed nervously. “Thanks, Eugene. Yes, I am going to ‘kill’ this ‘baby.’”

Eugene slapped down her air-quotes. “You were going to make money on Wall Street. I was going to be a dad. And now I make sandwiches. And you? What do you do here?”

“I crunch numbers. I’m trying to figure out a feasible option so that we don’t have to visit a food shelf.”

“I mean *here* as in *here* on earth. There are thousands of brokers out of work. Sober up, we’re not going back to New York anytime soon.”

Eden whispered, “I know you’re mad, but we just have to wait for Auntie to pass on and then everything will be fine. The baby will grow up in Bermuda or Paris or New York. Just wait a few more years.”

Eden brought her nightgown over her head and swung her naked hips back and forth. She blindly grabbed for his hands, and caught a piece of his shirt. She moved her hands up toward his collar and pulled him in the direction of the bedroom. He pushed her away.

“No sex then?”

He stood up and walked past her exposed bottom on the way to the kitchen. From under her dress in the dark, she heard him say, “Why is it my job to be responsible, and your job to be happy?”

“Fine!” She yelled. She used the wall to guide her toward the bathroom. She locked the door and pouted on the toilet. Eugene made his own dinner, watched the news, and went to bed early. Eden fell asleep on the bathroom floor.

She awoke to the sound of Eugene taking the hinges off the door. Eden opened her eyes. “Your aunt needs to use the bathroom.”

“Eden, you’re so selfish,” said Gladys as she stepped over Eden, lifted up her robe, and sat down on the toilet.

Eugene grabbed Eden's hand and yanked her up. "Last night I couldn't sleep." The kitchen table was covered with Post-it notes, notebooks with all sorts of numbers scribbled on them. Eugene read one piece of paper out loud. "Exclamation point Kung women give birth with the earth as primary midwife (a form of unassisted childbirth) walking away from the village camp as far as a mile during labor and birthing the child alone, delivering it into a small leaf-lined hole dug into the warm sand."

Eden picked up another piece of paper.

Eugene said, "That is a list of the vitamins you'll need. They are all available from this website. I've read dozens of stories about women who get in touch with the earth and their bodies and they have children unassisted."

Eden sat down at the table. "What about all the complications?"

"It is so rare. One in twenty, or maybe less. A hospital is a death trap for an infant, all the drugs and viruses just waiting to disrupt their tiny hearts." Eugene opened his computer and pressed play. Eden watched an elephant walk along a river bank in the Serengeti. At the ten second point a web blob slipped out the back of the elephant. Eugene pressed pause. "Did you see that?"

"I saw something."

"It's a baby!" Eugene pressed play, again. The next thirty minutes of the video, the mother elephant used her trunk to push the baby elephant out of the its mucus filled pouch onto its feet. If the baby didn't learn to walk, it would be picked off by a predator. "Eden, this is so you. You'd teach that baby elephant to walk faster than *this* lousy

elephant. If there is anyone who can birth her own baby, it's you. Watching this last night, I fell in love with you all over again.”

Eden squinted her eyes. “I am pretty tough.”

“You held your own in that misogynistic office for ten years.”

She began to nod her head. “Why else would I have worked with those people for all those years? Done those horrible things.”

“It could all have been for something bigger than you.”

Eugene pulled on his oily stained Subway polo and walked towards the door.

From the entryway, Eden heard him say, “The hospital thing is a scam. You don't have a disease.”

Eden crawled into bed. She lay on her back, placed her hands on her growing stomach and repeated the words “you are a slippery fish.” When she got up, she showed Aunt Gladys the elephant video. After it was over, Gladys said, “Oh, God. It's going to take longer than that.”

The closer Eden came to her due date, the more violent the city became. By the time she was eight months pregnant, she'd run out of pushpins for her map. She sent Eugene to the store to buy more, but of course he couldn't go at night because the mayor issued the first district-wide curfew in the state's history.

Eden gave becoming a symbol of womanhood her best shot. She wore homemade jewelry and let her hair grow long. She typed her birth plan on recycled paper. She joined natural birth websites like mybestbirth.com. However, not everything was going as

planned. She could barely reach her hemorrhoids whenever she tried, she feared falling over. Finally, she developed a method where she lay on her her side and reached behind herself while arching her back. So she could to dab at them with cotton balls soaked with witch hazel cream. The prenatal vitamins Eugene bought the website that also sold handmade bibles tasted like herbal pop rocks. The bottle advertised radiant skin and hair, a prenatal glow. The rash on the left side of her face was

During the day, she looked for a job. She applied to every bank in New York, a meatpacking plant, and a slaughterhouse. There was a rabbit factory within walking distance of their apartment. Online videos showed the men in the processing plant killing thousands of rabbits a day, pulling their skin off like Eden took off a tight tank top. The men doing the work didn't look like they had a certificate in CPR, let alone a GED. It was probably an administrative nightmare to organize all those bunnies. Eden had managerial experience and a Master's in personal finance from Columbia. She submitted an application. That was over a week ago.

She spent her afternoons watching TV with Gladys while she waited for the phone to ring. Gladys turned up the volume while Eden spouted new facts about natural childbirth. One website insisted that as long as the members of the birth team never used the word *pain* or any words with *painful* connotations. The mother's brain won't think to feel *pain* during the birth. "You just breath in to the pain. I mean sensations. You do some hypnosis, and then it's into the bathtub. Also, I learned Eze-Birth is a flower essence that helps with pai—I mean sensation management during labor."

During a commercial break, Gladys turned to Eden. She put her arms around her large stomach. “Baby bear, where do you think all of this is going to go? You can’t explain it out.”

Eden looked down. Her stomach took up her entire field of vision. “It’s going to slide right out like a slippery fish.”

After the elderly couple across the street were murdered, Eugene surprised Eden with a pair of night-vision goggles he found at an Army Surplus store. Two days later, the couple’s adult daughter and her fiancé moved into the apartment. Eden made a rare trip outside to offer her condolences. She said, “The crime wave seems to be hitting the retiree population the hardest.”

The daughter nodded.

“Is it a nice apartment?” asked Eden.

The woman picked a large box off the ground. “Yes, the interiors are mid-century modern with a late sixties minimalist twist.”

Eden said, “I don’t know much about interiors.”

The woman smiled. “It would be hard to replicate. That’s all.”

Eden nodded.

The daughter smiled and then looked at the box she was holding. “This is heavy. I’ll see you around.” She looked at Eden’s stomach. “You’re pregnant, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Stay safe. You can’t predict what people will do to survive in this economy.”

“How could I?” Eden went back inside and watched her new neighbor unpack her belongings until well after midnight.

By the time Eden’s friends in the city got around to asking if she wanted a baby shower, Eden wasn’t able to put her hands around her stomach. Eugene thought it was dumb to take the train into the city for a two hour luncheon. But Eden insisted. She thrifted a spandex body suit that made her feel svelte. She found a dress that fit her. And by the time the day of the luncheon came around, she was genuinely excited. Eugene was so happy to see a comb go through her hair and make-up on her face, he offered to drive her to the train station in between his early-morning bread-making shift and morning breakfast shift.

The baby shower was at Cipriani. Spending hundreds of dollars on a single meal was why she had to leave the city in shame. Eden got there early. She hid behind a shrub and spied while her friends entered the restaurant. Seven months of unemployment had not changed them one bit. Their business suits were black, spotless, dry cleaned, and pressed. Their hair looked full and professionally done. Eden ran her fingers through her hair to check for snarls. She threw the clump of brittle strands that came out with her fingers onto the sidewalk. She second guessed her choice to wear a full-length floral maxi dress with flip-flops. She panicked when she couldn’t remember if she put on her leather flip-flops or the plastic ones from Wal-Mart. Her belly extended so far, there was no way to find out unless she asked the hostess. Eden scrunched her unmanicured toes.

April, Megan, Barbara, Courtney, and Genevieve ordered decadent steaks and rum based drinks. Eden ordered a cup of soup and a glass of water. The waitress brought out two baskets of bread and set them on either side of her. The girls spent most of the lunch ignoring Eden's condition while they talked about their husbands' law firms and the different philanthropic events they were planning. April said she was happy Lehman collapsed. She had never slept so well in her life, and it gave her so much extra time to create new outfits with clothes that were not in her regular wardrobe rotation. Megan was thinking about suing the company for emotional distress. Her stomach lining was littered with ulceric craters, a symptom of the guilt she experienced from years of up-selling garbage stock to orphanages and teacher pension funds. By the time anyone asked Eden about the pregnancy, the bread in both baskets was gone. Barbara asked, "If there was a particular date she was thinking about for her cesarean section?" Barbara had delivered all of her children on her own birthday. "They're my little gifts," she said.

Eden said, "I definitely can understand why someone would want a cesarean, but Eugene and I are planning a natural birth at home."

The women quietly expressed different version of the words *oh no* under their breath.

Eden continued. "When a baby is born naturally, tons of love hormones are released which are good for mommy and baby. Unfortunately, you don't get that with a cesarean. And if you deliver vaginally in a hospital, the PEC can cause damage to the baby during labor. A lot of people don't know that an epidural can actually elongate the process." The girls at the table looked as if they had just seen something violent. Finally,

April let out a giggle and a moment later the whole group was laughing. “You’re pulling our legs?” the girls squealed.

“No, natural birth is best. I saw two documentaries about it,” said Eden.

“Eden, women don’t go into labor anymore. It’s barbaric. I’ll give you the name of my obstetrician. When I had Annie, I almost fell asleep listening to a recording of the New Zealand shoreline. Waves accompanied by the world’s best pianists. I didn’t realize she was out and ready to eat.”

“You guys are buying into that antiquated idea where you treat pregnancy like a disease.”

Courtney laughed, “No, you are buying into the antiquated idea that women need to suffer for the original sin-thing. You wouldn’t argue any other patient in the hospital needs to suffer.”

Eden said, “Courtney, that’s just it. Pregnancy isn’t a disease. We shouldn’t even be in hospitals.”

“My great-grandmother died delivering twins,” said Genevieve. “How do you know you’re not pregnant with a twenty pound baby?...Or four puppy size ones?”

Eden hesitated. “I never went in for a sonogram, but the law of averages says....”

“A woman bleeds to death during childbirth every four minutes,” said Genevieve.

Eden scoffed, “Oh, you’re being silly. You guys underestimate the power of the female body.”

“Who’s going to do your episiotomy?” asked Genevieve.

Eden shrugged her shoulders. She did not know what that word meant.

The girls frowned. They systematically began lifting up their blouses to reveal a small pink line across their tight bellies. April said, “That’s it. Everything else is left functioning normally. Eden, make it happen...like the old days.”

After the argument, the lunch was essentially done. They talked for a few more minutes about how surprised they were that pastel clutches were trending and then left. She spent the rest of the afternoon waddling up and down Wall Street. She made her way through the Occupy protestors and entered the Twenty-Five Bank Street building, where she used to work. There was nothing about it that reminded her of her old life. It was empty and quiet. On the train ride home Eden met an elderly couple whose adult children had moved them to Trenton from Florida. They enjoyed taking day trips to New York City, but were scared to death to even go to the grocery store. Eden concurred. She told them they were right to be afraid.

When Eden got home, there was a large box waiting outside her apartment. Inside was a huge wicker basket wrapped in cellophane. It was from the girls. There was a note that said *Best of luck*. Eden tore at the cellophane. She fondled each product, but could not decipher the theme of the basket. The products that floated on translucent pink Easter grass were foreign to her. She called Gladys into the kitchen.

Gladys put her hands to her face and said, “Who sent this?”

“The women from the shower.”

“Well, Eden you are very lucky. You have some very informed friends. They just saved you a bundle of money on your post-birth recovery. You’ve got about two-hundred

maxi pads that should last you for the first two weeks. You can stick those to your disposable underwear. Believe me, nothing sexy for at least three months after the delivery. This spray, plastic donut, and heating pads will do wonders for your hemorrhoids. This epsom salt will be great if your perineum tears, which let's be honest, probably will because you're not having an episiotomy. But that procedure is so old-fashioned. Better to just let it tear and heal naturally. And of course they gave you a blow dryer. You'll want to use this regularly to ward off infection."

"I'm going to go lay down," said Eden.

"You look green. Are you going to be sick? Here the kit came with a bucket. Take it with you."

Eden took the plastic puke bucket from Gladys. "Thank-you."

On her back in her bed, she put her hands on her growing belly and repeated the words "you are a slippery fish" over and over until she fell asleep.

Eden woke in the middle of the night. She didn't know if Eugene was still working the midnight munchies shift or had already left for the bread baking shift. She got herself a glass of water and turned on the computer. She started to type the URL for hippychicksgivebirthnopainnec.com, but stopped. She deleted it. She searched "natural birth complications video." Eden had to put her hands over her eyes and turn down the volume, but she didn't stop. She searched "natural birth death video," "natural birth baby death video," "Natural birth double death mother and child video." No matter what link she clicked on, blood overwhelmed the screen. She had never heard screams that shrill. Not on Wall Street. Not even in the middle of the night in Trenton. It made her light

headed. She wanted to run away from her body. Go out during the curfew and hope for the worst.

Eden woke to a dull ache in the middle of her back. She sat up and a wave of pain spread from her thighs to the pit of her stomach. She said, “Eugene?”

“He’s not here,” Gladys called from the bathroom. Eden could hear the bathwater running. She focused on the sound and stood up. The pain surged up to the base of her neck. A cloud of nausea overcame her. She lunged at the sink and vomited. The images from the previous night replayed in her head. The walls braced her body while she made her way to the bathroom.

She swung the door open and stumbled into the florescent room. Gladys covered her breasts. “Eden get out of here.”

Eden collapsed beside the tub. “Auntie, I need that cesarean section.”

“Pickle, you don’t know what you’re saying. In thirty or forty hours, it will all be over. Wasn’t it you who told me about the love hormones?”

“No Auntie. I need you to call your lawyer or accountant or whoever. Get the money together. Take me to the hospital.”

“Kangaroo, I haven’t driven since the sixties and I’m not going to start today. Where are your pain-relieving flowers? Why don’t you munch on them for a while and see how you feel?”

Eden leaned over the ledge of the bathtub. She grabbed Gladys’ arm. “The money, where is it?”

“Oh Eden, I don’t have any money.”

Eden sat up on her knees and moved her hands to Gladys' shoulders.

“QVC. I have a storage container with presents for you and the baby.”

“But where is the money?”

“I have a few thousand, but nothing close to the amount you're talking about. Go lay down.”

Eden moved her hands to Gladys' neck. She stood up and pushed down to support herself. Her elbows locked. Her belly dipped into the warm water. Eden watched Gladys' green eyes like bright pebbles at the bottom of a pond. Gladys jerked forward. Eden pushed back. Suddenly, Eden felt a pop in her gut. A sudden loss of pressure as if she was on a plane taking off. Eden stumbled backwards. She looked down. Her feet were sopping wet. She looked into the tub. Her aunt's nipples poked through the meniscus of the water like two lonely lilly pads.

In the kitchen, Eden clawed out the pushpins on the map, frantically looking for a hospital in walking distance. St. Francis was only four blocks away. Two, if she cut through the park. Eden held the sides of her gut and limped out of the apartment.

She made it halfway through the park when she had to lie down. She dug into her pocket and pulled out her cellphone. Eugene's phone rang four times before he picked up. “I need an ambulance! I'm a block from the hospital.” Eden choked on her tears. “Eugene, I'm going to die.”

“Honey bear, you're not going anywhere. I'm coming to get you right now. Just sit tight.”

“No, Eugene, I need an ambulance! Now!”

“Eden, where are you?”

Eden sobbed, “I’m in the park.”

“The park where that little boy was murdered?”

“What? How many parks by our house are there?”

“Ok. I’m on my way. Just breathe.”

Eden tore her *Don't Call an Ambulance* bracelet from her wrist and threw it in the grass. It hurt less if she held her breath for longer and longer intervals. Exhaling seemed to cause sharp pains to swell around her hips. She felt like her legs were being torn from her body. Even though her hands were shaking, she managed to bring up the elephant video on her phone. She held it above her head and watched the baby elephant slip out of it's mother like nothing. Like an accident. You are a very slippery fish.

TINY ANIMALS MADE TO DO UNNATURAL THINGS

The baby can't keep her formula down. I'm so used to being covered in vomit, I don't bother dressing either of us anymore. Eight times a day, I sit naked on top of a packed suitcase in the middle of my living room, bottle-feeding my four month old. You'd think because she's an animal she'd have some instincts about food, but she fights to cough up everything I put in her mouth. She lost a pound last month.

The pediatrician said it's just bad reflux and she will be fine if I give her less food more often. He helped me build the schedule I've been following since I brought her home. When I got pregnant at thirty-one, I thought I had waited too long to have a baby. I'd been so good at multitasking at the bank that I told my obstetrician I expected to be bored caring for a single baby. After twenty hours of labor, I knew I was wrong. They had to suck her out with a vacuum. I told my husband, Russ, I couldn't hold her because I was having visions of the baby rolling away out of my arms, down the bed, and onto the floor. The nurse told me that everything I was experiencing was normal. She later retracted that statement when she diagnosed me with primary lactation failure.

I phone and email my pediatrician regularly with questions about the simplest things. He suggests I take a note from his younger patients: sixteen-year-olds so misinformed about the consequences of the world they forget to burp their babies or check the nutrition label for incomplete proteins. Their babies always survive, he reminds me. Their babies will play on the football team with my baby.

The landline rings. I'm taken aback by how excited I am to have a distraction from my own child. I set the baby in her carseat and tighten her harness. On the floor is an old tee shirt I've been using as a burp cloth. I pull it over my head and go into the

kitchen. Across the street, my mother is watching me through a kitchen window identical to my own. She waves. I watch her reach for her phone while I reach for mine. The voice on the line says, “Hello, may I speak to Mrs. Ruth Moliter.”

“Speaking.”

My cellphone on the kitchen table begins to buzz and I stretch the chord across the room to reach for it. “This is Amy Williams from KARE 11 news. I’m wondering if you’d like to comment on the activity at the Miller Farm?”

“Are they digging it up again?”

“No Miss, I’m calling about the fire. I know that location is very important to your family. We’d like to have a statement from you for this morning’s broadcast.”

Reaching for my cell phone, I see the texts from my friend Carla, who is also a stay-at-home mom: *They’re covering the fire live. No Ellen. No PriceRight. :(*

“I can’t talk right now,” I say and hang up the phone. It rings again. I run into the bedroom and dig in the laundry bin for one of Russ’ robes. I pull it on and grab the handle to the carseat. My mother is waiting for me in the middle of the street. We don’t say anything while we watch the plumes of smoke rise up from the horizon and listen to the din of our cellphones ringing and buzzing. She says, “Do you think it has to do with Jonah?”

I say, “No.”

My mother brings her hands to her face and says, “But it will destroy the evidence.”

My mother had Jonah when she was thirty-five. I was a surprise at forty-one. She is in her seventies, but next to me, she seems younger. It’s early and she looks glamorous

in her cream Liz Claiborne suit, pink lipstick and dark blue eye shadow. The highlights in her ash blonde hair look fresh. I glance down. The dingy robe I'm wearing is covered in coffee stains. Suddenly, I'm very aware of my neighbors watching us from their second story windows. I'm embarrassed. "There is no evidence," I say.

"Not anymore." She answers her phone and says, "Don't talk to me. Put out this fire!"

The sound of our cellphones are drowned out by the drone of three helicopters. They fly so low that I can name the news personalities sitting in the passenger seat of each bird. The thrust of their rotors picks up our hair. We are silent as they pass over us. The noise draws the neighbors out into their front yards. The women stand in the middle of their driveways, bouncing their babies. The neighbors, the newscasters, the rubberneckerers—this town can't get enough of our misfortune.

I hand my mother the baby. She asks me where I'm going, but I don't answer. I follow the noise of the helicopters. Behind me, I can hear my mother address the crowd. "Thanks for your concern, but we'll just have to wait and see..."

I'm out of shape. The last three months of my pregnancy my obstetrician put me on bed-rest. She told me even walking upstairs might cause me to become unpregnant. I pump my arms to move my legs faster, but I'm stiff and I want to give up. The street ends. I run down a grassy ditch. Momentum propels me into the cornfield. The crisp leaves cut against my thighs. I tuck my chin and follow the noise of the sirens and choppers. I come out of the field and hike up a steep incline to the side of the road. This is where I last saw my big brother, Jonah. Across the road is the gravel lane that leads to the Miller's farm. That driveway is where they found Jonah's last footprint.

I don't cross the street. Police cars, a fire truck, and an array of news vehicles are parked in the front yard. The main house is on fire. It's so strange to look into those windows and see light. Over the years, I've only ever saw dark squares the shape of window frames.

The firemen wave at me. They give me the thumbs up sign. They know who I am and are happy to be a part of another chapter in Jonah's long story. I press my palms together and say a prayer that they lose this fight and that the house burns to nothing. A pile of ashes that I can put in a jar and dump in the water.

I see Agent Martin. "Randy" as he insists my family call him. He is being interviewed by reporters from three different stations. He must have gotten up early to already be here from St. Paul. He's the FBI agent in charge of my brother's case. You can't tell by looking at him that he's from here. He looks like an actor dressed as a police officer. His hair is slick. His jaw is sharp. He wears dark glasses and a bullet proof vest. He really believes danger still lurks here.

In 2000, eleven years after Jonah disappeared, he requested the case be reopened. He got a warrant to search the Miller house and found pictures of children taken at a nearby playground on John Miller's computer. Mr. Miller said he was testing out a new camera. Randy harassed John until he agreed to undergo a lie detector test. The results came back inconclusive, which was a guilty verdict for the town, but not the courts. Randy flew in the best criminal hypnotist in the country. John didn't want to go through with it, but the community made it so. Church leaders refused him communion and his boss threatened to suspend him until he complied. The hypnotist released a statement saying John had been a victim of molestation as a teenager. He said that John was too

unstable mentally to undergo additional testing and flew back to Boston. John lost his job anyway. He spent a year in a mental institution. While he was gone, Randy got permission to excavate the entire property. He dug six feet down and didn't find a shoe lace, a bone shard, or a strand of hair. The grass never fully recovered.

Randy turns his head toward me. Because of his dark shades, I cannot tell if he sees me. The newscasters put down their microphones. He shakes a few hands and then trots across the yard in my direction. He stops in the middle of the road to watch two dump trucks and a flatbed with a Bobcat turn into the gravel driveway. He puts his hands up like he is directing them onto the property. The driver's of the vehicles are not looking at him. After they've passed, he crosses the street and extends his hand. "Lucky for me, I spent last night at mom's."

"Must be some kinda coincidence," I say.

"Ruth, don't worry. This isn't a set back. It's an opportunity."

I nod.

Randy wipes sweat from his brow. "Every burnt piece of this house is going into evidence. Now that it's a crime scene again, we can dig in all the areas we missed in 2000."

"But it's on fire."

"No Ruth, this is good. DNA evidence is complicated. You'll see. We'll find stuff."

"Was John inside?"

"No, the lucky son-of-a-bitch isn't home. I'm sure he's hiding because he knows he'll have to deal with me. Soon as the office folk give me the go ahead, I'm going to dig

behind the silo. I'm going to get some dogs out here and maybe dig in the field. All I've got to prove is that John set this fire and we'll be one step closer to locking him up."

Randy flexes his muscles. His biceps press against the sleeves of his blue shirt.

"My mother will be very excited."

"Yeah, why don't you go get some rest and take a shower."

I brush my hand against my neck and realize that I am encrusted with infant vomit. "Looks like I need it."

"I'm right, Ruth. There never was a car. He was taken from this spot and walked into that house. What's that saying, 'the simplest answer is usually the right one'?" He turns and walks away. I can hear him mumbling to himself. "Everyone wants to believe the world is so complicated..."

When Randy reopened the case, he cited me as the main reason the first investigation went awry. I was an unreliable eyewitness. Hundreds of man hours spent looking for a car that didn't exist in places that Jonah couldn't possibly have been. It used to offend me. But now I get it. I was six. I *was* unreliable.

My cellphone buzzes. My mother says I should hurry home. I ask her why and she says that the baby is crying. I look at the time. It's nine in the morning and the feeding schedule is already a mess. I take the long way home.

I let myself into my mother's house. The baby is asleep on the living room floor. I tiptoe into the kitchen. The teapot is boiling. I turn off the stove right as it begins to squeal. I don't want anything to wake her. My mother says, "Ruth, go ahead and cut some

lemons for the tea.” I open the refrigerator and grab a lemon with one hand and open the silverware drawer with the other. “Ruth, please use a cutting board.”

I turn around to shush my mother. I see my mother, my father, and a man who looks my age sitting around the kitchen table. I smile at the stranger and whisper, “It’s fine, Mom.” I take three cups from the china cabinet, and pour the scalding water. Then I drop a bag of Orange Blossom into each. I serve our guest first.

“And who are you?” At that moment, the baby begins to cry. I turn my attention to my mother. “Do I keep formula here?”

“Yes. I’ll warm some up in a second. Have a seat.” My mother’s cellphone begins to buzz again, but this time she turns it off. My mother says, “This is Jonah...” She says it so quietly at first I think I have misunderstood her.

I look at the empty spaces around the table and say, “Like in spirit?”

She shakes her head and looks at the man sitting on the other side of my father.

“He knocked on the door right after you took off running.”

I look at him. “You know you’re the third one.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know anything.”

There is nothing about him that reminds me of the age-progression photo the police station puts out every five years. This man is thin. One of his front teeth rests on his bottom lip when he closes his mouth. His blonde hair is shoulder length and fine, not brown, thick and bobbed like when he was a child. Then he was big for his age. Muscular, even for an eleven-year-old. He was healthy, fast, and dreamt of playing baseball for the Twins. I turn my head and try to read my father’s face. I think I’ll be able

to sense his disappointment. The man interrupts me. He reaches his hand across the table and says, “You are now the sister of all the people of Transfalgazar.”

I shake his hand, but look at my mother.

“Jonah has been telling us all about a new planet. All this time, he’s been there. And now he’s home.”

I look at my dad. “It’s always the last place you look. Huh?”

“I’m just glad he’s home.”

I excuse myself. I hurry up the stairs and lock myself in my parent’s bathroom. I dial my pediatrician. He makes it clear I should talk to a psychologist or a police officer, but offers some advice. “Ruth, don’t push him to discuss anything. He’ll give up on the space thing when he’s relaxed and feels safe.”

“What are my parent’s thinking? It’s just another guy, another guy who says he’s him.”

“Ruth, why did you call *me*?”

“I don’t know.” I hang up the phone.

I examine my skin in the mirror. I wash the dry vomit from my neck. When Jonah was taken he was five years older than me. This guy looks like he could be my age or younger. I poke at the laugh lines and crows feet. I open a few drawers looking for foundation or something I could use to hide the purple bags under my eyes. Nothing. I go back downstairs and pick the baby up off the floor in the living room. When I reenter the kitchen this man, this Jonah, stands up. He shakes my hand again and says, “The people of Transfalgazar have kept me safe.”

My mother perks up. “Jonah wants to take a nap before we decide anything.”

I say, “Yeah, me too. She needs to eat and Russ is probably already home. Why don’t you come over later and grab those ingredients you need for the thing you’re going to make?”

She puts her hand on my back, walks me out of the house, hands me my carseat and says, “I sure will.”

The door to my parents home shuts before I have a chance to say goodbye.

Russ works nights at the local casino. He’s a blackjack dealer. He always comes home horny. Most days, he walks through the door already unbuttoning his shirt. Today he’s asleep on the couch. The television is on but muted. Video of the fire fades into a photo of Jonah at Pee Wee baseball practice, his third grade class photo, and the image of what he’s supposed to look like as an adult. I set the baby on the floor in the kitchen. I try to warm up the baby’s bottle without waking him. There’s ten seconds left on the microwave when Russ runs into the kitchen. “You can’t use a microwave to warm up a bottle.”

“I know. I just wanted it to go quicker.”

He scoops the baby off the ground. “This floor is filthy! I told you to stop letting her crawl around on this! Do you use the microwave when I’m gone? Don’t even use it for cooking when she’s around.” Russ looks at my feet and sighs. “One of the waiters told me about the fire. You went over there?”

I test the bottle on the back of my wrist and then give it to Russ. He tilts the baby back gently and she drinks like a camel come to water. “He’s over there right now. Up in his old bedroom.”

“Who’s over where?”

“Jonah, at my mom’s.”

“How do they know it’s him?”

“He says it’s him.”

Russ goes silent. I know what he’s thinking. *Here we go again.* Then he says, “Just call Randy right now. God, I’ll do it.”

“Randy’s busy. This morning he filled me in on all of his big plans. I’d be surprised if he wasn’t coffin-deep right now. And it’s not *me*. I didn’t encourage those two. This is a thing they do with or without me.” I walk into the living room and collapse on the couch. Russ follows me with the baby. “He thinks he’s from outer space.”

“Randy?”

“Jonah.”

“Like Saturn?”

“I can’t pronounce it. Deep Space 9 or something.”

Russ puts his arms around me. “So you think this guy in your mother’s house started the fire?”

“I keep thinking about John. What if he were in there?”

“What about the baby? How many times did she eat?”

“Once for sure.”

“You’ll have to feed her every hour and fifteen minutes to catch up before tomorrow.”

“Randy brought up the car.”

“I’m going to write down the schedule, again. I’ll do it until my shift tonight, but then you’ve got to feed her while I’m gone. Why don’t you take a shower?”

Russ usually sleeps during the day. Today, he makes a pot of coffee then dumps the baby’s toys on the floor in the nursery. She laughs at the colorful rainbow as it spills all around her. I’m in the shower when I hear him yell from the living room, “What is this suitcase doing on the floor?” I yell back, “I have no idea.”

Russ takes the baby on a walk in her stroller while my mother and I talk. She tells me that when she took Jonah up to see his old bedroom, which she has not touched since *that day*, he didn’t recognize anything, not even the baby bear wallpaper. Or the baseball bats still dusted with dirt from his last home game. She says that when she showed him the home run hanky from ’92, the year the Twins won the World Series, he asked her what a *world series* was. She told him about my father paying three hundred dollars for a ticket to the game and the *We’re still looking for you* tee shirt he had screen printed. He was so sure wherever Jonah was he’d find a way to see that game.

“What did he say?” I ask.

“Competition is not something they encourage on his planet.” My mother laughs. “You’ve got to laugh or you’ll just cry.”

“Let’s call Randy and have a DNA test. If he has problems and started that fire, Russ isn’t going to want him to be around the baby, even if it is Jonah.”

My mother sighs. “I don’t want a DNA test. I want a son.”

“A son?”

“Maybe it’s better this way. Your father and I never knew how we’d talk to him about what happened, all the things those monsters do to young boys.”

“But Mom.”

“So what? I liked those other boys, too.”

“I’m calling Randy.”

“Will you wait until after dinner?...Besides, he said he was going to call me after he had a chance to look through the debris.”

“What does Dad think?”

“He hopes it’s him. He thinks this space story is nice. It will be easy for the congregation to go along with it until he’s better. He’s probably just protecting us. It’s sweet.”

My mother pulls a handkerchief from her pocket and dabs at her eyes and nose. She folds it up and puts it back. “I’m going to go start dinner.” She stands up and lets herself out.

The first man to come forward and say he was Jonah retracted his story. He was shocked to learn that Jonah Wilcox, himself, was not eligible for the \$100,000 reward the FBI put up for providing information which lead to the location and recovery of Jonah Wilcox. After Randy reopened the case in 2000 another man came forward. He looked identical to the age-progressed photo, except he spoke with a Louisiana accent. My mother had a great time cooking for him and learning about Creole traditions. He was with us for seven days. Then one morning, before the sun was even up, a crew from WDBC FM Krazy Cajun morning show in New Orleans knocked on the door. They revealed live that it was all a prank for their listening audience.

The 2000 investigation petered out and we had a funeral for Jonah. He has a gravestone a mile from the house. The empty hole is in between grandma Rose and our

golden retriever. My father thought the funeral would be good for my mother. But she won't change the phone number or go unlisted. We've gotten calls from people pretending to be Jonah from as far away as Pensacola, Florida.

Russ needs sleep before his shift, so I bring the baby to dinner. My mother and father bow their heads to say grace. *Give us this day our daily bread...* Jonah hums and whistles in short spurts. It makes the baby laugh and I am thankful for that. We all say, "Amen" in unison.

In the living room, the television is on. KTCC Channel Five is re-airing the segment they produced for the tenth anniversary of Jonah's disappearance. I suggest to my mother that we turn it off, but my father insists it's better for Jonah if he hears about all the things we've done over the last two decades to find him. The sound of my mother pleading with the public to call with information is louder than the clinks and clanks of the good silver against my grandmother's china. From my chair, I can see the screen. I've seen it so many times: her big 1989 perm, florescent glasses, and red blazer stuffed so thick with shoulder pads she looked more like Sally Jesse Rafael than the mom who had to ask me why I was alone crying on the front porch? Why wasn't my brother looking after me?

I watch my mother lift her head twice, like she is going to speak. Finally she says, "Jonah, I want to take you into town tomorrow. We have a Walmart *and* a Target. Between the two, you won't want for a thing."

Jonah smiles. "Earthly goods are no use to me."

My father wipes his face with his napkin. “I agree with you, Jonah. You’re mother spends hours at that Target. She comes home and says, ‘Look at this doohickey I got on clearance.’ I say, ‘Martha, we didn’t need that doohickey to begin with.’ Isn’t that right?”

My mother frowns. “There’s no harm in getting some razors and a toothbrush.”

“I won’t be here long enough to make use of it,” says Jonah.

I pull the baby’s bottle out of her duffle. “How long do you plan to stay?”

“Oh please, I don’t want to talk about that. Promise me you’ll come to church on Sunday,” says my mother. “We’ll make a whole day of it. Afterwards, Ruth can show you around the community college. She loved it. Didn’t you, Ruth? Tell Jonah how much you learned...and The Pony Espresso on main street is hiring. The manager, Shirley, is a good friend. She’ll put in a good word for you.”

Jonah doesn’t say anything.

I get up to warm the baby’s bottle and turn the TV off.

From the other room I hear my mother say, “Tell us about Transfalgazania. Every detail.”

While I eavesdrop on Jonah describing energy sources made out of air molecules, I count down the seconds along with the microwave. I keep forgetting why the microwave is so terrible. It must be some sort of radiation, but why is it called a microwave then? I check the temperature. The formula burns my wrist. “Fuck!”

“Ruth, you know you’re not supposed to put bottles in the microwave. Use the pot I left out for you.”

“It’s fine,” I say while I empty the bottle and start again with the stove.

My mother was a bank teller for her entire adult life. After Jonah disappeared, she took herself off the drive-through. The cars would be backed up around the corner to avoid her lane. Even close friends were perplexed about how to make polite conversation week after week, month after month. After a year, trying to come up with something for her to do, the bank's manager made her a spokeswoman. Her face is on billboards all around town. They say *River Street Bank - Never Giving Up On You*.

My father used to be a foreman. When he was a kid, he told me real men wore jeans to work. He oversaw the hammering of shingles into new homes on the rich side of town. One day, the crew was rough housing during their lunch with a couple of carrots. When they noticed he was watching them, they apologized. My mother said he was crazy to think it had anything to do with Jonah, but he quit the next morning by phone. He's been retired ever since. Twice, he's surprised my mother with cruise tickets. Both times she decided at the last minute to stay home and stuff mailers for the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

When I get back to the table, Jonah is describing to them the beauty of a Transfalgazar sunset. The way they look at him you'd think they never saw a sunset before. The baby is fussy and spitting up. I stand so I can more easily hold her upright. I rub her back and sway back and forth. No one looks in my direction.

I interrupt, "So how long have you been on this Transfalgaland?"

Jonah says, "Time works differently on *Transfalgazar*. I have no idea how long I've been there."

My father leans back and crosses his arms. "Ruth, why don't you give the baby to your mother?"

She extends her arms toward the baby. "I'll take over."

I put the bottle down. "Fine. Baby doesn't want any more. Baby doesn't have to have any more." She vomits on my shirt and I wipe at it with an already dirty napkin.

"You know, *Jonah*, my brother was kidnapped. I saw it..."

My mother sighs. "Oh Ruth, why don't you go upstairs and change into one of my shirts?"

"No, it'll dry." I turn my attention back to Jonah. "He had a gun to his head. There *was* a car. It was the color of maple syrup. They drove away. But you, who just got here, don't remember, so let's forget about it."

Jonah pounds his fist on the table. The cups and plates bounce. "On the planet Transfalgazar, memory is kept in a separate location. No one holds all of their memories at once. We are allowed to make strategic choices about what we keep and what we store elsewhere. Critical thinking and decision making is much more efficient this way. So my memories are not with me and I do not wish for them to be here."

I bend over and put the baby on the ground. "Did you start that fire?"

My father says, "Ruth, it was just a very, very old house. You're so tired. Why don't you get some rest and we'll all go to church together in the morning."

"Not until he tells me he didn't start that fire."

My mother has tears in her eyes. "Stop it! John Miller can take care of himself. If he didn't want all this attention, he should have had an explanation for that footprint in his driveway."

"Mom! Lot's of kid wore size 7 Nikes."

"But he doesn't have any kids, Ruth!"

My father shakes his head. “It always has to end like this even when he’s here, right here.”

I look at my mother and fake a smile. “I’m sorry. I am tired. I’m going home.”

My mother picks the baby up off the floor. “It’s fine. We’ll go to church together tomorrow.”

I extend my hand to Jonah. “I’m sorry.”

He says, “All is forgiven.”

“That’s perfect.”

My mother hands me the baby. I grab her duffle and we let ourselves out.

Outside my parents house, I stand on the side of the road. I close my eyes and pretend that across the street is the Miller’s house. What did I see? A ski mask with wobbly eye-holes that looked like they were made with a finger. A belt buckle the shape of Wyoming. My brother pounding on the passenger side window of a car.

I have no memory of screaming. The ski mask told me to go home. “Go straight home and say you saw nothing.” Maybe he said go straight home and tell them you saw a car. If I think about any scenario long enough, it’s there and I can’t get it out. The night after Jonah disappeared, I crawled into bed with my parents because I saw a monster under my own. They asked me to describe it. I said it was like a bear with a long neck and long ears and huge teeth. It had a dark blue tongue and red eyes. It’s still just as real as anything. The truth is I spent my whole life second-guessing what I saw that night. A year after the incident, I convinced my mother I was blind and needed glasses so thick

you could run your bike over them. I told the doctor I was sure I'd been blind since birth. He laughed.

Struggling to find my keys in the baby's deep duffle. I read the note Russ taped to the front door. *Remember 9:15, 11:45, 2:15, 4:45, 7:15...Then I'll be home and will take over :) Love you.* I drag myself into the bedroom. My suitcase is lying open on the bed, empty. All of my clothes are folded neatly in the dresser. I start to refill the suitcase with stuff I don't want to live without when I realize it's time for another feeding. Again, she doesn't eat. I'm desensitized to the sight of her choking, but not to the thought of her starving. I bathe myself and the baby. Then I put her down. I don't mean to fall asleep, just to shut my eyes before I have to heat up the next bottle.

The dry hinge of the front door wakes me up. I hear heavy shoes in the entry way. I look at the clock. It's two in the morning. Under the covers I yell, "Russ?...Russ? I'm getting up right now." I sit up in the dark. The bedroom lights flip on. I scream. Jonah is standing in the doorway. The baby starts to cry.

"Sorry about that."

"I don't think you should be here."

"Can I show you where I've been?"

The baby screams louder and the thought of dealing with her infuriates me.

"It won't take long." He looks toward the nursery.

I look toward the nursery, too. "I don't care how long it takes."

I pull on a pair of red garden galoshes. He takes my hand and leads me out the front door, and around the house to the backyard. There we lay on our backs. I listen as he talks about space travel and time travel and particle manipulation. He is at ease with his knowledge of the universe. I close my eyes and try to remember my brother's voice. Jonah picks up my hand and points my index finger to the sky. He uses it to draw a path from one star to the next. After Ursa Major he pauses. "I was right there the whole time."

"Weren't you afraid to be so far from home? You were so young."

"Up there we weren't young. We were all black spheres full of dense matter that exploded from every angle. Each piece spiraling off from the surface, reproducing in every direction. I multiplied, on and on, over black oblong holes. Every piece of me spun in a different direction. I'd awake just a random sliver in a new place. There were no hands or feet or eyes. We were dark pulsating brains creating a million new worlds...And then a piece of me landed here."

I sit up and look at his wrists and hands. There are no scars. They are so smooth. He is not someone who has been bound and gagged for the last twenty years. Whoever he is, I hope his story is true. "We were so afraid for so long."

"There's nothing I can do about that."

"Don't you remember E.T.? You could have phoned home?"

"It's not like the movies."

"So you remember movies?"

"Yes. I remember movies."

"You know I went away, too. I went to Florida."

He looks at me and smirks. "All the way to Florida..."

I gently punch him in the shoulder. “It was far for me. My whole senior year, I insisted I was going to college at the beach. But when I got there, everyone kept asking me about you. They kept asking me what it was like to see you go, what I hoped did not happen to you, what I’d say to you if you ever came back...I just decided it was too much of a hassle.”

Jonah doesn’t say anything.

“It doesn’t matter. I met Russ at the college down the street.”

Jonah says, “Worse things have happened.”

Jonah leaves. I watch him walk in the opposite direction of my parents house and into the darkness. The oven clock says it’s 4:30 in the morning. I boil water and fix the bottle. I grab the baby and the half-filled suitcase on the bed. I take my clothes off. Then we sit in the living room and struggle.

When Russ comes home, I don’t say much. I meet him in the driveway with my hands clutching the handle of my suitcase. It’s light. There isn’t much in it. He parks and gets out of the car, leaning his body against the driver side door. He says, “What are you thinking?”

“I need some sleep.”

“I need some sleep too.”

“I need to be alone. You can drop the baby off with my mother.”

He hands me the keys to the car and asks me how the feeding schedule went last night. I tell him it went fine.

I check into the Super 8 on Minnesota Street. The person behind the counter wants to know if they found anything in the debris of the fire. I shake my head. They frown.

“I’m sorry,” she says as she hands me my room key. “It’s down the hall.”

I open my room. It smells like cigarettes, but it’s quiet. I pull back the sheets and get under the covers with my clothes on. Even through my jeans and sweatshirt, they feel starchy and cold. I reach into my purse and grab my cellphone. I turn it on. Missed calls from Randy and my mother. I fall asleep.

My phone vibrates. It’s Randy. His voice is so loud and jubilant that at first I think he’s calling from a party. He says after the Bobcat scraped away what was left of the house, they found an underground bunker. It wasn’t pretty. He says he’d understand if I didn’t want to know the details. I pull the sheets around my body like a cocoon and tell him I want to hear it all.

He says, “Well, Ruth, it all began with a hole the size of a quarter. It was under some cracked tile in the bathroom. One of the guys from the station picked at it until it was the size of a fist. He reached in and pulled out a handful of cobwebs. I spent the next four hours on my hands and knees. Honest to God, there are no stairs—no hatch, at least not anymore. A few of the firemen had axes and they went at it for a good hour until the hole was large enough to send someone down with a headlamp. We’re going to send an expert down tomorrow. He’ll be able to tell us how long it’s been sealed up. He reads the dust levels or something.” Randy pauses.

I turn on speaker phone and rest the phone on the pillow beside me then I pull the blankets up to my eyes. “What was down there?” I say.

“Are you sure you want to know, Ruth?”

I hesitate. Then I say, “Of course.”

“Well, okay. In the center of the room there were these three large cages. They are all five feet by six feet by five feet. They all contain the same thing, a duvet cover stuffed with hay and a shelf full of comic books.” I turned away from the phone and pulled the blankets over my head. Randy recited a list of things he had found down there in the dark. A couple of fake passports. Burnt out flashlights. Candy wrappers. And the possibility that in time they would find a piece of hair or who knows what...I reached behind myself and turned the phone off. When it came down to it, there was nothing that proved Jonah was ever taken to that house, so close to home.

MY VERY OWN IRANIAN PRISON MEMOIR

The United States issued the first official student loan to the general public in 1957. It went to a Nebraska farm boy named Ken Miller. His father, William, owned a tractor repair shop and had every intention of passing the family business to his son, Kenny. The problem was Ken didn't want to spend his life out in the shed fixing John Deers and Massey Ferguson. Ken read in the papers that the Soviet Union launched into space a satellite called Sputnik. In response, the United States would build an ambitious space program to compete with the Soviets. Money would be made available to any student who wanted to study science. Previously, Ken had thought space travel was impossible. Just a fantasy he read about in the comics he kept under his bed. In September Ken enrolled at the University of Maryland's physics program with a \$200 loan from the U. S. Government. He got a job at the local Dairy Queen and paid the loan off the following month.

Alone in my cell, I've come down with a severe case of writer's block. I keep second guessing where my Iranian prison story begins. The Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University has a library with a whole section reserved just for prison memoirs. Katie Couric, Dan Rather, Daniel Pearl—they all got their start in an exotic foreign prison. I cannot draw a straight line between that beautiful library and this lonely cell, but somewhere in those pages was the match that lit my imagination.

Through the cold cinder block walls that surround me, I pick up the faint sound of contraband pens scribbling on stolen napkins. One of my cell mates is having a productive day. I tell myself the library, the Barnes & Noble, and especially the Amazon are big enough for all of us, yet deep down I wonder if I have the magic like they have

the magic. I've counted twenty or so American girls like me, and a dozen Asian students with American educations. The U. S. media will only be able to turn so many of us into national treasures.

My Interrogator loves to gossip during our interrogations. He says there's a rumor going around that Brandy (MIT '03) spit in a guard's face so that he would squeeze her wrist. Even an impermanent mark is fodder for great storytelling. And then there's Skyler, a Berkley grad who is one-eighth Iranian and is milking it like a golden calf. During her interrogations, she sobs about the price her family paid during the Iraq/Iran War. She says mostly it was the not knowing much of anything about her home country that has left the deepest scar on her already brutalized soul. Her family narrowly escaped the war by already being in America for one hundred and fifty years and buying a seven bedroom six bathroom single family home in Orange County to cement their immigration status. When it was safe to return, they chose not to go back because the schools were so good.

Fear and Loathing in Tehran is the name of her Iranian Prison Memoir. She wrote it on the wall in the shower room. Underneath the words *Tell Penguin, Tell Phaidon, Tell Simon and Schuster* were also scratched into the cement with a dull bloody pencil. I know I shouldn't be covetous; we're all in this together. My mother used to say a rising tide lifts all boats. This is why I feel awful when I scratch out her S.O.S. message in the bathroom and replace it with my own words from my Iranian prison memoir. If someone finds my message in a bottle, I'll make sure all of my fellow cell mates are taken care of. They can ghost write for my blog Iranianprisonfrontlines.wordpress.com.

“Ginger, the act is up. You owe Wells Fargo \$252,347.” Albert dips his spoon into his ice cream and takes another bite. He continues with his mouth full. “And that’s today. Who knows how much you’ll owe tomorrow. If you like, I can get out my calculator again.”

“No, thank you. It wasn’t much help the first time.”

Albert picks up on my sarcastic tone. “Don’t underestimate the seriousness of this situation. I’ve seen them take a dog in the middle of the night. No one felt remorse when they strung it up a tree.”

“I don’t have a dog.”

“I know you don’t have a dog or a house or even a decent amount of aluminum, which is why we need to take a different approach with you.”

“Like adjusting the principle?”

He takes another bite. “Many high-level executives list good communication as their number one desirable skill. You just received a communications degree from a prestigious university, so why don’t I make some calls for you?”

I contort my face so Albert knows I’m disgusted with his idea. “Albert, I don’t want to work just anywhere. I’m a journalist. I’m a truth teller. I can only work at a newspaper or a fact-finding website like Politico or Amnesty International.”

“A newspaper?”

“It’s been my dream to work at the *New York Times* since I was 23. But I wouldn’t mind working at the *The Washington Post*, or *The Wall Street Journal*. Do you know anyone who works at one of those places?”

He takes three or four pills from his pocket and drops them like sprinkles on his last spoonful of ice-cream. He swallows hard and drops the spoon into the empty porcelain bowl. The sound is cold and makes the hair on my arms stand up. “For your sake and mine can we set those dreams in this bowl? There’re not dead yet, just resting in this bowl. Now, take a second, refocus and tell me what your plan B is?”

“Like blogging?”

“No.”

“Public Radio?”

“No.”

“Community organizer?”

“NO.”

“Generic activism?”

“Why don’t you stop right there,” says Albert. He smiles. “This is all sweet, but until we know you’ve gained meaningful employment, I can’t pass your case to my superiors.”

I frown.

“And by meaningful, I mean monetarily gainful, of course.”

I frown deeper.

“In the meantime, I’ll set up your first interview. Show up. Look good and I’ll ask our job coordinators about the papers.”

“Really?”

Albert reaches across the table and touches my shoulder. “Put in a few good years at an investment company or a pharmaceutical, show us you’re not the type to fake your own death, and we’ll work with you.”

“Years?”

“Ginger, I’ve seen people not win the lottery or inherit a large sum of money for twenty or thirty years...some people go their whole lives without either. But look at the bright side. In the society you live in, you’re already well past your prime. In the U.S.A women are nearly invisible after thirty-five. Here at Wells Fargo, we take a broader approach. You’re a *strong young woman*. Your body is still very muscular. If this newspaper stuff doesn’t work out, you’ll be capable of carrying and pulling things for decades...in almost any capacity.” Albert gets up and bussess his bowl. He walks to the door. “Try to imagine that you’re falling through a bottomless pit. I’m the one offering you a hand. Refuse it and there’s no telling how far you’ll fall.”

Professor Baltimore spansks me with yesterday’s *New York Times*. He says, “You need to think Waco big,” as he winds his arm back for the next seductive wallop.

I unhinge my jaw from the pillowcase and gag until a wet goose feather lands on the mattress. “Wells Fargo isn’t fucking around. This guy Albert wants to steal my dog.”

“Don’t worry, Boo. You don’t have a dog.” He spans my already magenta ass with the newspaper.

“They’ll garnish my wages. Take my savings.”

Another whack.

“Okay! No savings. But they’ll confiscate my car. Harass my mother.”

I reach back and rub the sore area underneath my peach-lace bikinis.

“Ginger-baby, who’s a bad girl?”

I prop myself onto my elbows and peek over my shoulder. His giddy smile is disturbing. He keeps saying he is the long lost twin of Sean Connery, but I do not see it. His thick jowls sag like wet towels and his dark eyebrows are popping up in the most obscure places.

“Charles, I could go to jail.”

He brings his index finger to my upper lip. “Please be quiet. Barbara only allows you to keep coming over because she noticed how visibly relaxed I’ve been looking. How about a cup of coffee?”

This is our weekend ritual. Meet on Friday night. Coffee, news, sex until Saturday afternoon. I slide off the mattress and grab the warm carafe from the bedside table.

I top off our white china cups and say, “Give the paper a call for me?”

He reaches for his cup. “Honey, that’s nepotism.”

“What about Barbara?”

He stops mid sip. “That? It was hardly nepotism. In the seventies we needed strong, intelligent women at the paper to cover liberation issues and talk to effeminate

dictators who were intimidated by the Crocodile-Dundee-type reporter of my day.

Barbara filled a void. And let me say one last thing about her, it was the biggest mistake of my life.”

“I’d never outshine you.”

“Ginger monkey, it’s too late. There’re more boobs in the pit than a Manilow concert. And *who* has a Pulitzer?”

“Barbara.”

“And how did she get it?”

“She went undercover in Yemen. Tracked the nuclear trade route between North Korea and Syria by camelback. Broke the story of North Korea’s nuclear facilities, which led to the embargo and the eventual disarmament of hundreds of bombs.”

“Sure, a story like that is easy to make sound good. But it was pedantic — no heart! She has a Pulitzer because I gave her a job. That was the year I wrote my exposé on illegal immigrants raiding food shelves in Washington, D.C. Dozens of people were deported because of me. And what did I get?”

“A personal phone call from the president,” I say.

“And?” He leans back against the headboard and looks to the ceiling. “None of it makes me special. The answer is nothing.”

“A home in Lincoln Park?”

“Sorry, honey, if you want a job, you’ve got to compete with me, and her, and Richard Engel. When was the last time you or one of your sniveling classmates were punched during a freedom protest in a fascist country?”

“You thought my story on the Nicaraguan copper pirates was informative and tasteful.”

He sets his coffee cup down and wraps his arms around me. “Boo, my note still stands. You didn’t go to Nicaragua and you didn’t talk to a single copper pirate. Sometimes it takes years to break a story. Catch someone important with their pants down. I spent months researching my first story.”

“You lived among Congo refugees in Zambia for *years*. You stumbled upon a diamond mine and traded the location for an interview with a terrorist leader.”

“*And* it was only a coincidence that I showed up at NBC with the story the day their editor, who was known for his chemical imbalance, threw out the tapes for that evenings broadcast—”

“—out the ninety-seventh story window.”

“It was a different time back then.”

“But how did you pay for it all?”

“You’re going to get a job. Just be a man. Put on some shoulder pads. Stop walking around in heels. I remember the first time I saw Diane Sawyer in fatigues I had to sit down. My dick was so hard it made me nauseous. She’s been shot a dozen times. You’ve been shot zero times. You and your entire graduating class haven’t been shot half as many times as Diane Sawyer. Let’s meditate on that for a second.”

“You love my heels.”

“Ginger. I’m not going to give you a job.” He turns his attention back to the paper.

I close my eyes. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

A source calls. Charles asks me to step out. I tell him I'm not going to steal his story and he says he's heard it all before. He hands me my jeans and a tee shirt and kisses me goodbye. I dress myself in the hallway then I hop the L back to the south side of Chicago, where my mother and I share a one-bedroom. She is a neonatal nurse a few blocks away at Provident Hospital. She moved here from the upper peninsula of Michigan after I was accepted to Northwestern. Back then, all she wanted was a new wardrobe and young people to hang out with on the weekends. Now, after being puked on and robbed at gun point for an iPod Nano and a few sticks of gum, she's moving back to the U. P. on the thirtieth. My rent is going to jump to two thousand dollars a month, which is eighteen hundred more than what I have been paying. From the train, I use my phone to create an ad on Craigslist: NEED 10 ROOMMATES TO SHARE SIZABLE 1 BEDROOM APT. //COUCH AND LOVE SEAT INCLUDED.

The top of the stairs reveals a handwritten note. *You see I know where you live. You have no rights in this new wild west of debt collection. Get a good night sleep. <3 Albert.* I tear the paper off the door and shove it into the back pocket of my jeans. I pull out my phone, which has been on silent. I've missed a bunch of texts from my best friend, Crystal. *Im n the woods...Im cant breeeeth...Please bring booze to the hospital.* As if my day wasn't already horrible. It looked like Crystal was breaking her first story.

At the hospital, they are keeping Chrystal in a room surrounded by thick glass. I watch Crystal's olive skin turn a mustard yellow while a nurse explains to me that the nuclear radiation Crystal was exposed to is radiating off her skin. I set the bottle of Bacardi 151 I brought on the floor and pretend like it's not mine. The nurse says she

might not recover. They give me a light blue rubber suit with it's own ventilation system and a thirty minute course, describing how to put it on.

Inside Chrystal's hospital room, Chrystal is hooked up to more tubes than an astronaut. She tries to lift her hand to greet me, but is too weak. There are tears in her eyes. "You think this means they'll take me off obituaries?" she asks quietly.

I reach for her hand and say, "Of course not, you write the best obituaries."

"Ten people under the age of thirty have died this week. All female. All within a mile radius of the nuclear plant. Rebecca told me I was finally going to make a real contribution to a story."

"The editor who hit you with her car on New Years?"

"Yeah. She strapped a device to my back that measures radiation levels. It was a long pole and it was really heavy. After the explosion, everyone ran. I couldn't keep up."

I nod compassionately and remind myself that this girl is my best friend and though she has had more success than I have, she needs me. "That is so *Rolling Stone*," I say.

"I was so far behind the group that I couldn't see them anymore. There was no way to remove the poll. In the ambulance, they had to cut it off me."

"It sounds expensive. They must trust you a lot. Have you mentioned me yet?"

"I don't think I'm going to be in the paper. They made me sign all of this confidentiality stuff."

“You mean exclusivity. I’m sure they just want to make sure you won’t go to another paper. Have you had a photographer shoot your skin yet? Wells Fargo is going to make me mop floors at Morgan Stanley if I don’t start generating an income for myself.”

She tried to sit up, but couldn’t. “How could I go to another paper? Rebecca asked if I would administer her infertility treatments at lunchtime. She needs the emotional support and I’m the best at that.”

“You are the best at that. You’re so lucky she hit you.”

“Except for the pain...”

“Of course ... have they talked about paying you yet?”

“No...But Rebecca told me in the ambulance she might move my desk out of the lobby if I pull through.”

“Help me come up with a story. Charles thinks I that if I uncover something big. I’ll be blogging for *The Atlantic* in no time.”

“Ginger, the ground was covered with this thick ash that rained from the sky. Maybe two inches of it everywhere. It got on my hands. Ginger, it got in my lungs. What was it?”

I’m not sure and I don’t want to scare her with theories. I stay silent. Blood begins to run from Crystal’s nose and I fetch a nurse from the front desk where they’re all cackling about last night’s episode of *Grey’s Anatomy*. Two of them begin to suit up so they can investigate Crystal’s vitals. She passes out before they can figure out where to insert their oxygen hoses in the suits they are wearing. Crystal is out for ten minutes when they begin testing her blood for infection. One nurse tells me her body is

decomposing from the inside and there isn't much they can do. Except amputate the parts where the infection is the deepest. The machines beep faster and faster. Every minute, more and more doctors enter her hospital room in colored plastic suits. The swell of people pushes me further and further away. Through a crack in the moving bodies, I watch them tear off Chrystal's gown. Throw a blue sheet over her and begin prepping for surgery. I have to turn away when they take out the scalpels. A young technician puts his hands on my shoulder and directs me into the hallway. He thinks I should go home. He says if I want to visit tomorrow, I should call before I come.

On my way out of the hospital I notice Albert taking notes across the street. At first, I give him an annoyed look. He doesn't stop writing. I put my hands in the air and yell, "Go away!" He writes my actions down in a yellow notebook. Then he makes the international symbol for money, money, money with his fingers.

At home my mother and the dream pop band Cauliflower Six are sitting at the kitchen table opening my mail and organizing it into piles. The band is here in response to my Craigslist ad. My mother does not look amused. The lead singer Baxter is the first to speak. "Please take a seat."

I'm jittery with adrenaline, but I do as I'm told.

My mom says, "Ginger, when were you going to tell me about your student loans?"

“Excuse me. My friend just died, which means there is an internship opening up at The Daily Herald, Chicago suburbs’ leading source for news and information. I don’t have time for a confab with you and a bunch of strangers.”

My mother jumps in. “How much does it pay?”

“Mom! It’s a foot in the door.”

“You mean nothing?”

“Experience is worth nothing? It’s everything!”

The band members give their two cents. The drummer agrees with me, but thinks the amount I took out was excessive; the lead singer thinks if I really wanted to be a reporter, I would have found a way to do it without going to college; and the bass player suggests I drop the idea of being a journalist all together, he thinks I should move to Silicon Valley and do a startup.

My mother fingers my latest last notice from Wells Fargo. “If this is true, you’re completely fucked. Three thousand dollars a month? How will you live?”

“You’re such a hypocrite. You have no problem if a premature baby racks up a million dollars in hospital bills, but you’re freaking out over two hundred and fifty-thousand for two years of quality education.”

“Please. Journalism isn’t a fucking education, it’s a lifestyle.”

She keeps talking about other things I could have done with my life if I’d actually wanted to help people. Soon, they’re all having a conversation about why there aren’t more social workers and whether society needs art to thrive. By the end of it, the drummer and the xylophone player aren’t speaking. My mother takes the conversation

back. She says, “In conclusion, I’m signing the apartment over to the band and you don’t have a place to live.”

“Don’t! I’m starting over right now. I’m going to be a different person.” I grab the pile of credit card offers they so nicely organized for me on the table and head toward my room. From the hallway, I can hear the band members share personal stories of how each learned the value of a dollar.

I open the window in my room. I put one foot out and sit on the ledge. I hope to be pulled one way or the other. The cold whips against my exposed ankles. The credit card offers are still in my hands, each one connected to an airline.

Just one ticket.

Away.

Africa?

That’s so passé.

I’ve been in prison in Tehran for a year. The current political administration does not care to rescue me and that’s just fine. The longer I’m here, the more I’m tortured, the better my memoir will be. My Interrogator has set my ransom at \$500,000. This is a fair amount. My advance from Random House will be double or triple and obviously I’d use what ever was left over from paying my student loans to make a sizable donation to both political parties.

The first time I called the State department, a woman answered the phone. My Interrogator and The Translator gave each other high fives. I covered the receiver with my sweaty palm and shook my head. It was not Hillary. Their shoulders slumped. I asked

to speak to Ms. Clinton and I was immediately put on hold. The three of us stood in silence listening to Elton John's "Rocket Man." The damp room in the basement of the prison, where the really violent stuff happens, gets surprisingly good reception. The three of us just use it for making phone calls. My Interrogator and The Translator agree that if Ms. Clinton answers my call, there is at least a possibility that Johnny Depp will play The Translator in the movie version of my life. My Interrogator wants Arnold Schwarzenegger. When he says this, I nod. I don't tell him he doesn't look like Arnold. I'm crossing my fingers for Emma Stone.

One day they hope to be American cinema legends and make too many zeros, but right now they know it is important to be humble and start small. Network or cable television is a respectable starting point. We all know the pretense for which I was arrested was made up, so we have a lot of time to talk about what color tie they should wear during the future hour-long CNN interview with Anderson Cooper. I say, "Anderson Cooper is gay." The Translator laughs and says, "If Anderson Cooper is gay sign me up. If Anderson Cooper is American colonialist devil, then I will be American colonialist devil. He is hot hot hot right now in America TV digital culture." I roll my eyes and say, "You guys, he's so yesterday."

Unfortunately, Hillary Clinton never picks up. America is going through a period of austerity. I am transferred to voicemail day after day, month after month. My Interrogator and The Translator put their arms on my shoulder and say, "America phone is broken. No surprise. Phone is inferior Japanese product." I nod and feign tears, but I know the truth. America doesn't care about the patriots stuck in this prison. This would be fine if Iran stopped accepting want-to-be journalist into the prison, but they just keep

packing us in. Yesterday, a graduate from Duke and one from Yale entered my floor. They immediately started hassling the guards and writing incessantly.

I know the jig is up when I see My Interrogator's March issue of Entertainment Weekly ripped to shreds on the floor of the interrogation room.

Albert says, "Ginger, maybe I should have been more clear at our meeting. Wells Fargo equates people who risk their lives trying to be imprisoned in a totalitarian country with those that fake their own death, and of course, the one's who succeed with the real thing." He pauses, collects himself. "Wellsfargo gave you a gift and you threw it away."

My Interrogator is in the corner sobbing. "Now we'll never be American movie stars," he moans.

Albert stands up and comes around to my side of the table. He grabs my elbow, pulls me out of my chair, and walks me down a long corridor. The many men with guns that line the walls salute him as we pass. When we get outside, Albert pulls a black pillowcase from his coat pocket. I push it away and begin to beg. I say, "I don't even have fifteen pages. If you gave me more time, I could do it. I will make my payments."

Albert dangles the pillowcase in front of me. I look at him and try to muster a sad puppy impression, so he will take pity on me. I can see in his eyes he does have pity for me. I watch all of my fellow memoirists from cellblock 4C exit the building with their Wells Fargo representatives. I take the pillowcase from Albert and pull it over my head.

On the plane, I whisper to the passengers around me. I ask them how much they owe? I don't know anymore was the response I heard most of all.

We are taken to a place where there is no sunlight because there is no sun. The florescent bulbs flicker before they go out and they are never replaced. When I arrived here, so many days ago there were thousands of translucent bulbs, but every day one or two dies. I know when they're gone, they're gone. We'll answer calls in the dark. There are thousands of people here with me. I don't see them but I can hear them typing. Almost in unison, they press their green buttons and say, "Hello, how can I help you?" I can hear them repeat checking account numbers and Social Security numbers. I can hear them say, "Did you say B as in boy or D as in dog?"

I have no idea what country, what continent, this building is in. From my desk, I can only see a small sliver of a wall in the distance. The rest of the room is a sea of small collapsable squares. Something about the way this wall indents and juts like dozens of embossed frames makes me think it used to be covered in windows. Maybe it's black paint? Or some sort of dark sticky vinyl? How do men break boards with their hands? Concentration. Could I run with enough concentration into that wall? What if on the other side there are the green hills of Silicon Valley or the majestic peaks of the Himalayas? I do not know when, but one day, I'll do it. I'll break through that wall with my mind and my body. Then everyone in the room will stand up and walk — skip out the window. We will lie together in a pile at the bottom of the building, all free.

HOOP DREAMS

I don't get up in the morning. I pretend to sleep until the baby screams. So I'm awake when I hear the screen door screech open and slam shut. Someone is in my house. Their footsteps pause in the living room and then slowly approach my bedroom, where I lie with my eyes closed. "Go away, I don't owe you a Goddamn thing," I say.

"Marlena, where's Travis?"

I open my eyes. My Auntie hovers above me. Her arms are crossed and her glasses are placed on the tip of her nose. She wants a good look. My head aches. Last night, I drank outside by the fire. She can't be mad at me for that. I remembered to pick up the cans. They're in a sack under the kitchen sink, not rinsed, but hidden. There is a picture in my head of a man with a beard. I look around the room. He's not here, so he's probably gone. The face she makes isn't doing anything for her fine lines and wrinkles, squinting her eyes and scrunching her nose like she's looking at a sprung mouse trap. Busted brains on the floor she's going to have to clean up. I turn my head toward the wall. I don't know what time it is, but the sun is beaming in and her hair is already washed, dried, and pulled into a tight bun. My baby girl, Infinity, and I are still naked, sprawled out on the sweat-soaked bare mattress. The smell of stale cigarettes and wet dirt radiates off of us. It's one of those humid summers in South Dakota. The heat never lets up. Not even at three in the morning, when the dew comes in steaming and salty. Auntie's dark, scaly fingers reach down and grab my moist chin. She jerks it side to side. I forget what I'm supposed to do to prove I am not messed up, follow her eyes or follow the room. I attempt both.

“Where’s Travis?”

“Must be out with friends.” I have no idea where he is. My eleven-year-old boy is not forthcoming.

“When was the last time you saw him?”

I remain silent and do not incriminate myself with half-thought-out lies. Infinity squeaks, gnawing at my breast with her new baby teeth. A little raccoon. I’m uncomfortable and my Auntie doesn’t move a muscle, even though her back must be hurting.

“He’ll be home soon. We fought, that’s all.” This comes out loud and annoyed. The baby breaks the tension with soft cries and Auntie reaches her hands between us to pry Infinity from my chest.

“Get up and don’t leave this room until you are decent.”

I pull myself out of bed. My clothes, a pair of worn denim shorts and an over-washed halter, are thrown on Travis’ crumpled math homework. I couldn’t sleep because the heat was too much, so I gave long division my best shot. There is a cloud in my brain where that knowledge is supposed to be. In my mind, the symbols are nothing but strange hieroglyphs, ancient teachings, and history was always my most painful subject. I ended up leaving it alone, but I promised myself that if he comes home, I would focus and we would work on it together.

In the kitchen, Auntie inspects the refrigerator. I hear old salad dressing bottles hit the floor and roll, bang another blunt surface and roll some more.

“Where’s your juice? A growing boy needs juice.”

I stumble in and take a seat at the table. I place my head on the hardwood surface.
“My juice is at the grocery store with all the other juice.”

She slams the fridge door. Barren and single, she doesn't know how hard it is to raise two kids without Travis' father, my boyfriend, Michael. She likes to tell me that after my father left my mother didn't get into half the trouble that I do. I'm nothing like my mother. My mother was white. She was always afraid to go outside.

“Did you call the tribal police?”

I lift my head. “He wants to scare the shit out of me. Make me crazy. Watch me run all over town, screaming and hollering for him.” I shut my eyes and yawn. “I'll go to the school. Him and his friends, I bet they show up for free lunch. Just do me a favor and watch Infinity.”

“No. You've got to learn to love that baby as much as you love yourself.” She quickly performs the sign of the cross. “God help her.”

I rest my head back down on the table. Infinity starts to cry and again my nipples drip milk. The wet stains grow on my shirt and I leave the kitchen to feed her.

Travis went missing three days ago, but it's not the first time. When the kids take off to get high, huffing, they still show up for free lunch. The last time Travis told me he never wanted to see me again I caught him this way. None of the houses he crashes at have anything to eat. Before long, the kids get hungry. Their minds wander and they think how good chicken patties feel in their stomachs. My Auntie doesn't understand how to raise boys. At a certain age, boys leave and when they come back, they are men.

Auntie pushes me and the baby out the front door. She makes it clear that it will not be right if I come home before I find Travis. She says, “Look in your heart. You’ll find him.” And then she shuts the door on my face. I hear the key turn over. I stand on the broken sidewalk in front of my house. I inherited this piece of shit from my father when he died, like everyone else, young and exhausted. One side is slightly lower than the other, shingles missing. The local gang spray-painted the words *Dreams Die* on the front. I’d like to clean that up before Travis comes home.

Infinity is on my hip. She is cute and heavy, like a toy bear stuffed with sand. Most people don’t believe she was ever inside me. I know I don’t. When they ask me about my adorable sister, I nod and agree, half believing she must be a distant relative that was dropped at my house by mistake. All I remember from Travis’ birth is white lights of pain, but her birth seems like a hazy nightmare. Tall white doctors with bright teeth did it by c-section. Four adult-size hands clawed her out. The nurses named her Ava for avocado pit. I named her Infinity because it’s going to be such a long thing, motherhood. It’s two miles to the middle school and she is already restless, pulling at my hair, whimpering for my breast.

It occurs to me to hide behind the house until my Auntie leaves. Lay in the bushes like a child ditching, smash a window, and spend the day in bed. I’m about to pick up a large rock when I realize this doesn’t make any sense. There isn’t anything to drink inside. I have a hazy memory of trading my EBT card for a bottle of Vodka. A big one. A glass one. A friend of a friend smuggled a few onto the reservation. I remember I was going to steal the card back after sex, but I couldn’t find it. He woke up to the noise of me

emptying his cupboards, crying. He grabbed my hair, drug me through the living room, and pushed me out the front door. My bare toes caught themselves on a step and I tumbled down to the sidewalk. I had nothing better to do, so I spent the afternoon pounding on the front door, yelling about the cost of graham crackers.

I walk on the white line painted along the shoulder of the highway. Right foot then left like I'm on a balance beam. Infinity laughs when we lunge or jump or plie or almost fall. If I want, we can walk down the middle of the road. No one comes here. I've watched cars pass the green sign that says "Entering Pine Ridge" and heard their breaks squeal as they do U-turns on two wheels. Either way, the shoulder or the middle, there is no shade. I roll my halter top up to my bra. It's still morning and I've already sweat through both layers. The tornado that killed Michael also took the trees. A year later and the ditches are still full of the same trash: broken baby toys, telephone poles on their sides, and miscellaneous car parts. It smells like an odd combination of ashes and alcohol, hairspray and blood.

Infinity sees two stray dogs fighting over garbage. She garbles, "Puppy, mommy, puppy, mommy." They snarl like big wolves, bracing themselves to hold ground against the other. A rabbit carcass is stretched like a drum between them. I shake my head. Stupid dogs, bunny ears don't yield much meat. They struggle and it tears like a shirt, each takes a side, a half twin of the other. One decides to investigate us. No collar. No one looking for him. His fur is white and he is free. His ears prick up and, I believe, he can hear mystical sounds that I cannot. Infinity reaches for him and he bares dark teeth. Gums full

of old blood. I hold the baby above my head and pretend to be taller, stronger. I growl and bark and spit. He puts his tail between his legs and runs past the green city limits sign.

“Don’t come back.” I yell. “Woof! Woof! Woof!” The dumb baby laughs. I pull her off my neck and blow on her round belly to keep her giggling. I got pregnant outside on a sunny morning just like this one.

“Who’s a dumb baby?” I pander.

Travis’ friend Martin lives across the street from the school. I pound on his mother’s screen door. The peeling paint leaves splinters in my chapped hand. No one comes. I lean my face all the way to the glass and peek inside. It is dark. There is still an hour before lunchtime. I take Infinity to see the miniature buffalo they keep in the backyard. From far away it reminds me of a bald eagle, festive, religious, almost patriotic. Up close his hair is made of thick, knotty Rastafarian dreads. The animal can’t possibly see. It’s eyes are incrustated with dark green scabs that are failing to hold back a clear ooze. It hangs its head almost to the ground, but doesn’t eat. A stuffed garage sale version of its self. I snap my fingers and it does not budge. I start to walk backward. I say, “Germs are bad, baby.”

From ten feet away, I repeat, “Don’t ever go near germs like this.”

The door opens slightly, but the chain is still on the lock.

Through the dark crack Mary Ann speaks softly, “What are you doing here, Marlana?”

I turn toward the house and shout. “Is Travis in there?”

“No.”

“Is Martin? I need to talk to him.”

The door slams shut and I hear the chain slide off the lock.

I follow Mary Ann’s broad hips, draped in hot pink crushed velvet. The house is full of clutter: boxes and broken small machines. The walls blossom with black mold from the flood during the storm. Her kitchen is the worst.

“Dishwasher’s backed up.”

The smell is pungent, like overworked bodies. The flies are so numerous the buzzing makes it hard for me to hear. It has been like this for a while. Dirty pots and pans nest awkwardly on the tiny gas stove. Boxes of Saltines lay open. The waxy wrappers agape, littering the counter with tiny crumbs. Clear plastic bags full of trash hang from every cabinet knob. Green fur grows on two butter knives encrusted with sandwich residue. This is how I live. I should not be repulsed but my stomach is turning.

“He’s down there.” Mary points to a dark stairwell. Each stair creaks and twists slightly under the weight of my body. I reach for a hand rail, but there is only moist air. There is a small amount of light peeking out of a dusty window-well in the back corner. My eyes adjust. I can make out an arm chair, a tire, one section of a pool table. Tribal symbols hang from the walls knit into old blankets. I spot airy rings rising from the back of an overstuffed La-Z Boy. “Martin, you and Travis play basketball today?”

Martin spins the chair around. Tupac Shakur’s glow-in-the-dark face is painted on his shirt. Both of them stare right through me. “I haven’t seen Travis for a week and I’d

know. He owes me money.” Martin is husky for a thirteen year old. His voice is rough, like a man’s.

“What are you doing smoking? You know how your Dad went.”

“Well, he ain’t here to stop me. And I ain’t seen Travis.”

A large coil of rope lays on the pool table. Images of all the irresponsible things boys do with rope flash in my brain: a noose, a trap, a weapon, a trick. I tiptoe around the empty cans of modeling glue and kneel down at the boy’s feet, place my hands on his knees while Infinity holds my neck tight. I struggle to speak. “Martin if something happened, you’d tell me?”

“Bitch, I don’t know anything.”

Up close I can see that his face is covered in acne. He is young. “I believe you,” I say.

He kicks the ground and spins the chair in the direction of the back wall. I head up the stairs.

At the school, the clock says it’s ten-thirty. The secretary scans my midriff and cleavage. She tells me the principal is in meetings all day. The door to her office is open and I can hear voices mumbling within, so I shout over the secretary’s head.

“Ma’am! Ma’am! My son is missing. He’s about yay high. He’s wearing a purple jersey. The Lakers or something?” The principal pokes her head out and sees Infinity screaming and struggling to get away from me. She notices in the worst way.

“Miss, wait one minute.” The principal is big and imposing. One of the first female marines to become a SEAL, or so she says. The administration treats the parents as if they are a sloppier group of students, who keep the children from pursuing their dreams. I let the kids waiting behind me go ahead. They huddle around Cheryl, the secretary. The younger kids are met with a smile and together, they speak Lakota. The odd sounds feel scrambled and foreign to me. I plug my right ear with my pinky to block out Infinity while I listen close with my left, thinking I might pick up what’s going on, but the only thing I can figure is their names and something about Pizza Hut. Travis never speaks Lakota.

I sit on a tiny chair and bounce Infinity on my knee. She curls her hands around my pointer finger, then puts it in her mouth. I should’ve brushed my hair. Shouldn’t have worn flip-flops. My toenails are ingrown and my skin is covered with callouses. Next time I come here, I’ll wear socks. The Principal escorts a young white man in a crisp blue shirt and cargo pants out of her office. He is so full of pockets he looks like he is on safari. She stops in front of me and frowns. “What do you want?”

“Permission to go to the lunchroom. My son, Travis Oglala, he’s coming for lunch. He’s been skipping school.”

“Miss, why don’t you wait outside? I can’t be letting parents hang out in our lunchroom. You want Cheryl to call someone at the station?”

My shoulders fall. I don’t want the suits getting involved with my business. “No, I’ll find him. Can you tell me if he came for lunch yesterday...or the day before?”

The principal limps over to Cheryl's desk, picks up a phone and makes a call. Her cheap red pumps are contributing to her mood.

"One minute," she mouths while the phone rings.

"Travis Oglala....Yesterday...and—....?" She hangs up the phone and turns toward me. "He hasn't swiped his lunch card since Friday."

"And what day is it?" I ask.

"It's Tuesday."

Outside the school, we have nowhere to go. We relax in long unkempt grass. I pick used cigarette butts off the ground so Infinity doesn't choke. We can see the front door of the school, although I am less convinced Travis will come. Infinity straddles my stomach. I kick my flip-flops off and lay on my back. It's a long walk back. I'm not in a hurry since all I have to do is scrub graffiti and call someone about replacing my EBT card.

"We did all we could do, huh?" I sit up and look at her. "Don't you think we did everything we could do? Say 'yes' for Mommy. Say 'yes'."

My attention turns to the opposite side of the street. The white man from the office in the blue shirt is talking on his cell phone, leaning his elbows on a banana colored Audi. The color is so vibrant it hurts my eyes. I can't remember the last time I saw something so alive that wasn't the television.

"You're not from around here," I shout.

He puts down his cell phone and looks at me.

“What do you do?”

He makes a shy motion to his chest.

“Yeah, you. That’s a nice car.”

He looks both ways and walks across the street.

“You got a private meeting with the principal. That’s hard to do. What are you, like a senator or something?”

“I’m Dan.” He reaches his hand down and I shake it.

“That’s a nice car, Dan.”

He looks back and shrugs his shoulders. “It was a gift.”

“That’s a nice gift, Dan. What did you do to deserve such a nice gift?”

Dan blushes. “I’m a photographer for the *Rapid City Journal*, but I suppose that’s not what I did to deserve such a nice gift.”

“You want to take some pictures...”

“I was hoping to.”

I pick Infinity up and plop her on the grass behind me. I lay on my side, throw my head back and bat my eyelashes. “Like of us riding buffalo and wearing leather underwear.” I laugh alone. I bring my chin down, roll my eyes up, look directly at him and whisper, “Dan, I’ve got leather underwear.”

“No, I got a little assignment. Just trying to meet some locals.”

I stand up and put my fingers in the dark curls spiraling out of his black baseball cap. He is younger and shorter than me. He takes a step back.

“Why don’t you buy me a drink? That’s a good way to meet a pretty local.”

“You’re serious?” He glances at Infinity.

“We’ve had a big day and she’s due for a nap.”

“I thought you guys didn’t have bars around here?”

“I know, let’s take your car.”

I am halfway across the road before I remember Travis is still missing. Serves him right. He’ll be so jealous when I tell him about this car. The interior of the Audi is fresh. The smell is not like cleaning products or folded laundry, but clear air from a place I’ve never been. Dan watches as I run my hands across the dash and play with the buttons on the door. He says the back has a built-in car seat, but I don’t want to bother. Infinity is fine on my lap.

“What direction?”

“The fast one.” I shout and clap Infinity’s hands.

Twenty miles from the Nebraska border, the corn grows tall. This land fetched the most money from those who thought it best to sell rather than starve. This is where you go to get a drink because there are no bars on our land, even though none of us is sober.

I demand he drive faster and faster, and we tear through loose gravel on roads more sketched than drawn. He talks about all of his earnest endeavors: Twenty-four and went to college at the University of North Dakota, Fargo; has a degree in accounting, but couldn’t get a job; borrowed money from his parents and bought a camera on Craigslist; determined to “make it” as a photographer; and wants to define success for himself, be on his own and stop relying on his parents for help. This reliance is like a drug and it, he

says, is bullshit. He stops talking about himself and takes in the view. “No way there’s a bar out here.”

“Just keep driving.” I curve my neck and push my head out of the window.

On the horizon, a rusty blue school bus emerges half covered in overgrown yellow grass.

“Corky’s!” I squeal.

The yellow car turns onto the dirt path that leads to a small dirt lot. I watch people on the bus wipe their moist windows to get a better look at the car, parked between rusty pickups and broken bicycles. Dan gets out and stretches his arms. I roll down the windows and leave Infinity in the backseat. I walk away and she begins to cry, but from way over there, no one will hear her.

I see him open his wallet and reach for his debit card.

“You’ve got cash right?”

He digs his hands into his pockets. The bartender, Rick, a white man, sits in the driver’s seat and opens the school bus door. We get on like kids.

Dan says, “This is exactly the thing I was looking for.” He begins to unpack his bag of equipment. I smile at Rick, who gives me a blank expression.

“Two Camos and two dixie cups,” I say. Malt liquor so cheap it has to be washed back with water. So cheap if a man is in the habit of drinking it straight, you know he’ll die young. The bus is filled with regulars. Each row contains one man who is either deaf or blind or dumb or unconscious or overcome with physical and mental pain. Their dark skin is bloated and wrinkled, like a child’s cheap mask. Their teeth are wicked and jagged and awkwardly exposed. The drink has caused all this and I know it when I order.

I leave Dan on the bus. Tunnel vision takes over as I grab the cans and make a beeline for the exit. Somehow, nothing that I've seen changes the fact that the first sip is heaven. I fall to my knees and say a thankful prayer. I sit in the dirt and drink. It feels like forgiveness.

Inside the bus, Dan takes pictures of the guys. I can hear the clicks of the camera. The flash powering up and popping small lightning bolts in the faces of the men who used to tell the stories I listened to growing up. Rick cranks open the doors and walks over to me. Even in my blessed haze, I can tell he's mad.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm having a drink like all of you."

"Why do you bring these guys around here? They're not welcome."

"I just wanted a drink, Rick." I snap open my second.

"You want to not be welcome?"

I pick myself up. Back on the bus, I walk up to Dan and put my hands on his shoulders. I whisper into his ear, "You're really good at this." He ignores me. One man has pulled his jacket over his face. Some of the men are asleep. Others in the back are mumbling. I hear the word *Wasicun* and I tug on his shirt collar to get him off the bus. "Come have a drink with me," I say.

He doesn't respond.

"You going to put this in a magazine?" asks the man currently in his line of sight.

"I hope so," Dan smiles and gives the man his business card. "I'll call you when you're in Vanity Fair."

The man tilts his head. “Well, I like the sound of that,” he says and then raises his hand to Dan. I physically pull him down the aisle and out of the immobile vehicle. As I pass him, Rick hands me a new Camo.

“What a great group of guys!” Dan repeats while he takes pictures of the exterior. He looks every bit the part of a photographer I’ve seen on TV. I give him a Camo. He takes it straight and grimaces. “God, that’s awful.”

“You get used to it.”

Thirteen-point-five percent alcohol, so it only takes two for us to get rowdy. I stand on the hood of his car and practice line dancing to the music in my head. After number three, Dan puts his camera down and joins me on the hood. We watch the sun seep into the horizon arm in arm as if we’ve known each other for an entire weekend. He turns his head and looks into my eyes. I’m sure he is going to ask me to marry him when he says, “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

My buzz slips away just a little. I drop his hand. “I’m supposed to be looking for someone.”

“Why aren’t you?”

“I want to stop feeling bad about it.”

“Who are you looking for?”

“My son.”

“I’ll help you find him. Where do you want to look? I’ll bring my camera. We’ll kill two birds with one stone.”

“I told him Native Americans don’t play basketball.”

“Native Americans play basketball.”

“Oh, come on. Like who? I just wanted him to study, learn math and do stuff. Be an electrician.”

Dan wasn't listening. My fingers twirl his hair, grace his cheek, and turn his head. I kiss him, sure he will pull away. Then he leans in.

“Why don't we buy some for the road and head back? I'm sure you can find something to photograph at my house.”

He smiles then walks back to the bus and negotiates a price for a twenty-four pack. He pulls enough cash from his pocket to cover it all at once.

He puts the car in gear and asks, “What's your son like?”

“Tough. He doesn't take shit from anyone. He looks like his father, a buzz cut and a light mustache growing over his tiny lips.”

Infinity falls asleep on my lap and I tell Dan to head north. The bugs are out and I listen to them sing all the way home.

When we pull into the driveway, my Auntie is standing on the stoop in the dark. I can hear her reminding me of the guilt I'm supposed to have from inside the car.

“Why did the electricity shut off?”

“Keep your voice down. Infinity is sleeping in the back.”

“Drunk again, huh? Shame on you.”

Dan and I get out of the car. He grabs the Camo and I hold Infinity. We enter the house with my Auntie following. “No. I had *a* drink. I'll pay the electric tomorrow.”

“How much is the bill?”

“It’s not important. Don’t you care there is a reporter here? He’s like Matt Lauer or something. Dan, this is my Auntie, Elizabeth Red Cloud.”

“Why don’t you get outta here? Can’t you see my niece needs to fix dinner for her children?”

“Just be friendly and shake this polite man’s hand.” I smile at Dan.

She walks to the kitchen. Opens the dark freezer and pulls out a chicken wrapped in plastic, dripping water and blood. “This is still good. For God’s sake, make your son some dinner in case he comes home hungry. I’m going to call the police.”

“That’s all some great advice.” I hold on to her shoulders and firmly push her towards the open door. “I will call the police. Long day of hectic searching.”

“You make so many poor decisions. Won’t you just change a little?” She puts the chicken in my hands. It’s cold and reminds me of my first week alone with Travis.

“Yes, I know. In the morning, everything will be better.”

She walks out the door, down the driveway, and onto the sidewalk. She and her shadow stand on the corner guarding against ghosts. The chicken is dripping blood on my feet. I go and get a paper towel.

In the living room, Dan has his camera in one hand and the doorknob in the other. I pull the sweaty halter top off. My breasts hang in the air like a bad joke.

“Where are you going? I just need ten minutes to feed the baby and then she’ll sleep and I’m free all night.”

He turns the knob. “I’m sorry. I should know better. I almost made a big mistake.”

I take a step towards him and gently lift his hand from the door and place it on my breast. Our eyes meet and he's so sober. "Please, wait one minute. Take a seat and have a drink. One minute, that's it." I keep my eyes on him and nod until he's transfixed and begins to nod. Then I remove his hand. I grab Infinity from the floor and take her to the kitchen. She latches on in a second. Over the sound of her gentle squeaks, I hear the screen door screech open and slam shut.

I put my hand in the air and signal a tired *bye*. The engine purrs. He drives away. When Infinity is done, I walk to the living room and look out the window. My Auntie is gone, too.

Outside, I build a fire in my front lawn. I sit on a metal folding chair and watch as the chicken boils over. I've lost interest in whether I eat or not, if the chicken burns or doesn't. Many liquor cans are already empty. I lean my head back and wonder at the luminous sky. At night, there is no industry to block out the stars that hang low over the many graves, marked and unmarked, that litter this town.

I awake to a cloudless sky. It's so blue that it is hard to believe that even up there danger lurks. Last year, Michael saved Travis from a tornado. He heard the sirens and ran out of the house like he was possessed by the holy spirit. Michael found him videotaping the storm from the middle of a cornfield. He knew where Travis was and I didn't even know he was missing. By the time I caught up, all I could do was watch from the road. The dark tower was so much bigger than all of us put together. Michael pushed Travis to

the ground and Michael went straight up, became a whirling black spot that my eyes couldn't follow.

I hear the sound of kids playing. I roll my head toward the noise and see four small girls coloring with chalk in the middle of the street. They watch me struggle to stand and I watch them collect their chalk and go inside.

I'm about to give standing a second try when I see Martin. He is thugged out in a sideways cap, steel chains, and low-riding jeans. He sways side to side as if he is listening to music. I stand up. My knees and hips crack. I'm only 26.

"Hey Martin, you getting your homework done?"

"Yes, Ma'am." He wipes his long bangs out of his eyes and spits the toothpick he is chewing into my yard. "I shoulda told you."

I purposely don't say anything. If I look angry, he'll hold back.

"He left town."

My head ached. "Martin, you got to tell me how. My Auntie is going to kill me if I don't get him back."

"Travis and I were shooting hoops. Johnny came by and offered us his stash of Camos. He said he wanted Budwieser. He asked us if we wanted to go on a trip. Told us the Camos we were drinking cost a ride on Route 18. He snatched my dad's keys from my hand."

"You let Johnny handle your dad's car?"

“Miss, we shouldn’t have gone. It wasn’t like the shacks or Corky’s or even the Sports Bars in Rapid City. Before we even sat down the bartender was hassling us. He gave us all whiskey. He said we couldn’t handle it.”

I smirked. “I bet you showed them.”

“Yes m’am. We were drunk. And a big guy from the back took a seat by Travis and asked if we ever been to California. We said we never been to North Dakota. He bought us another round of shots and told us about the ocean. Said there’s salt in the water and it makes your skin feel smooth. He asked Travis to touch his palm. It looked old and wrinkled, tough and dry, but Travis said it was smooth.

It was still light out when Johnny’s EBT card ran out of money, so we went back to the station wagon. The engine wouldn’t turn over. I popped the hood. The battery was gone. It was fifteen miles back to the reservation and I told them we could walk it. Johnny disagreed. We’d get picked up for being drunk outside. He said he was tired and said fuck it, he’d sleep there. He pulled his knit cap over his ears, crossed his arms, and curled up around the tires. Said, if someone tries to steal her, he’ll have to wake up....one way or the other. Then the guy from California came out. Travis asked if he could take us back to the rez. He shook his head and said he wasn’t going north, he was going west. I walked back. I haven’t seen Johnny or the station wagon since. I should have told you, but I thought you’d tell my mom.”

“So Travis has been with Johnny in White Plain for five days?”

“No, ma’am. He went to California.”

I thanked Martin for his honesty and promised that his secret was safe with me. I went back inside and looked through the closet for Travis' geography book. Inside the front cover, there was a picture of the United States of America. I opened the book on the floor. There were so many spaces, full and empty, to explore on the way to California. On the map, I trace the roads with my fingers, hoping a place will pull at me. I feel nothing. I close the book and open the windows. It is going to be another hot day.

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