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## Summerview

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SUMMERVIEW

by

Laura Breitenbeck

Bachelor of Arts  
Eastern Michigan University  
2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing**  
**Department of English**  
**College of Liberal Arts**

**Graduate College**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**  
**May 2011**

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## THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

**Laura Breitenbeck**

entitled

### **Summerview**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

### **Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing**

Department of English

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and Dean of the Graduate College

**May 2011**

ABSTRACT

**Summerview**

by

Laura Breitenbeck

Richard M. Wiley, Examination Committee Chair  
Professor of English  
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*Summerview* is a thesis-length work of fiction in fulfillment of the requirements of the MFA program in Creative Writing. It is a story about a religious family with a disruptive event in its past. It is also about objects such as billboards. Everyone in the story lives in the United States of America and is afraid of something.

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## Your Failures As A Miracle

In the first week of November, when Tina Blake was still your mother, she slit the throats of her five daughters behind the high brown fence that kept them safe. She meant for you to die and go to heaven with your sisters, and did not stop to think about how awkward Thanksgiving would be after. But you were brought back stitched shut and filled with strangers' blood, and your ingratitude and glibness have become as much a Blake tradition as Aunt Angie's request that everyone say what they are most grateful for and Uncle Scott's jokes about the struggle put up by the frozen turkey, throttled just now in your dad's garage.

Your dad, James Randall Blake, called Randy, went on TV in the weeks after the murders, watching his own face in the screens around the artificial living room and forgetting your age, forgetting the name of the doctor who had treated Tina's illness with Haldol. Noonian something, he said, but that was a made up name from long ago. The doctor's real name was Suleman Nassar, and you were eight years old as of November 17. He spent the trial crouched between two lawyers, playing a hand-held video game he believed could not be heard. Four times the judge asked him to turn it off, and each time he promised to silence it, lifting his knee to muffle the tiny speaker. The sounds persisted in all the silences that followed, under the photographs of sun-blached faces, of hollow Tina with her hanging hair on her admission to Trinity Methodist Hospital: a punch, a jump, the jingle of coins turning in the air. He followed the game with his eyes as the prosecution handed a series of children's clothes to the jury and listed the names of the deceased: Lily Silver, 7, Sharon Rose, 5, Jerusalem Saffron, 2 ½, Aimee Dove, seven months. There was a pair of lace-tipped ankle socks, as small as the lawyer's thumb, a pink straw hat with an elastic band, a pair of white tights with red heart-shaped nubs. Down steep repeating hills he raced the mouse or dog, and the sound of jumping was the same soft *whoop* every time, *whoop*. The prosecution raised a yellow dress and asked the jury to imagine the child

who wore it. “I want you to picture these arms,” he said. “I want you to see these feet in your mind.” Under everything the sound carried, the *huh, huh* of punching an enemy, *whoop*, jumping onto moving platforms, *whoop* rose soft into the cool air of the courtroom. What had those years meant— nine, ten years in which he had given up and learned so much for nothing, for big coins in the blue air, *huh*, how strange it was to be back in his old room in his mother’s house, with the dusty frames and the Scholar’s Bowl trophies, as if nothing had changed, as if none of it had been real.

The Dallas Local 10 news network named it Tragedy in Bent Lake, your sisters Slain Blake Girls, you Miraculous Survivor Cedar Blake, 8. One of the Local 10 anchorwomen showed up a week before Christmas at your aunt’s house in Coppell with a van full of gifts from strangers — crinkly bags full of pink boxes in pink and green paper— and men with huge cameras on their shoulders like monstrous heads. They followed you, focusing on the back of your head, the too-big sweater borrowed from your cousin, as you watched Aunt Angie open one present after another, your hands still in gloves to keep you from picking at your neck. Your cousins, whose faces did not need to be hidden, threw paper in the air and mugged for the cameras. Most of the presents went to the Salvation Army as soon as your dad found out what had happened. You were allowed to keep the Anne of Green Gables box set and the plush giraffe with a bandaid halfway up its neck, and your cousin Sarah got the calligraphy kit until you were old enough not to misuse it, which later turned out to be never.

Tina was Texas Killer Mom Tina Blake, and there was nothing left in her name but the deed. Now when someone with children is overwhelmed or overworked or crazy, people say: That situation is a Tina Blake waiting to happen. She *happened*, a starburst born and gone in a morning, and all that she had been before: the swimmer, your mother, your dad’s long-mouthed wife, the serious child with bad perm and braces— was burned alive in it. The years and their minutes collapsed to a point, the Terrifying Last Moments of Slain Blake Girls recounted by *Newsweek*, fixed forever at the edge of the black hole.



Your failure to participate adequately in Aunt Angie's Thanksgiving accounting of personal blessings is a yearly source of anxiety for your dad, who would prefer for you to do at least one thing right in front of Angie and her overachieving children. Everyone else seems to be able to come up with something that is not mp3 players or central heating or some other frivolous thing that no one really cares about. Give a real answer, Cee! But you overthink Thanksgiving, just like you overthink everything. Why worry so much? Let God get some of those wrinkles! All you have to do is say something simple, like the wisdom of the Bible. The wisdom of the Bible includes everyone and can't possibly hurt anyone, and no one will be able to say it isn't a real answer, even though it isn't.

But your stepmother Janet is the real problem with Thanksgiving. Janet, whose brain has been scrambled by unrelated head trauma, is unable to remember that "God gave me my wonderful husband Randy and our wonderful babies Micah and Amos," is and will always be the wrong answer. She knows what circumstance granted Wonderful Randy a speedy divorce and delivered him unto her via the grief support group at Heartfire Christian Assembly in Las Colinas, but from one moment to the next its significance escapes her, the reverence she should feel for the unknown dead girls and their family a disconnected blur among all the other things she knows. When she remembers, she's sorry, but she can't keep the words out of her mouth. Not even writing NOT R.B. in marker on her hand can stop it from flapping out of her, iridescent and oblivious pigeon of her gratitude.

When Tina Blake tried to kill herself, she took Tylenol PM and cough syrup in doses barely larger than the recommended. She scraped a razor the wrong way over her bony wrists, and did not even bother to put the wounds in water. She pointed knives at her neck and dropped them, filled her mouth with child-strength Benadryl and spit it out in the kitchen sink, brought her hands to her throat and squeezed, but not hard. A few days in the hospital was all it got her, a few

soft words from Randy and a flock of get-well-soon cards from the girls. But when she tried to kill her children, she left no room for regret or rescue. She scraped the onion knife sharp and struck deep in the carotid artery, a few seconds of burst blood and death as painless and certain as a heartbeat. She took care with their deaths the way she never did with her own. Only after unexpected struggle, in the panic after Lily called 911 and ran into the backyard, jumping face-first into the inflatable pool as if she could swim her way to safety-- only then, in her exhaustion, did she make a mistake. And even then, if the ambulance had come a minute later, if the doctors had been other doctors, if God had not been with them, you would not have lived to grow sullen and ungrateful, to pick at your green bean casserole and close your eyes to keep them from rolling at Aunt Angie's natural pride in the accomplishments of her children. Sometimes the papers called your chances one in twenty, sometimes one in a hundred, but it didn't matter. You were dead. You felt your arms and legs go cold, your insides vanish, before you were brought back in darkness by the mercy of Jesus, far from the arms of Jesus. When Tina Blake tried to kill her children, she did it so it took.

For weeks they let her believe you were dead. They had taken her clothes and her big mom-frame glasses, even her wedding ring, claiming she could use them to kill herself, not knowing how careless she was with herself. They had trimmed her nails and locked her in a small room to wait for a lead-lined safety gown to clothe her in. Are you aware that your children are dead, they asked. Are you aware of how they died? They asked her to name them and to give their ages and she gave them and yours was among them. She sat with her smooth stone eyes fixed on the wall and when the heavy gown was brought in she let her arms be lifted into the lead sleeves and let them fall. Through the window in the door, people asked her: Do you understand that your children are dead? Do you understand that you killed them? Her answers were yes and yes and no and silence. Her voice was as cold and flat as concrete. They left it to Randy to tell her

that they were not in fact all with Jesus now, which led her to think you had all somehow miraculously come back to life.

No. Not all of them. Just Cedar.

When she began to speak at last, it was all the wrong things. She could not stop apologizing for the knife she had used, for ruining the memory of the cutlery set they had put on their wedding registry. "Please," he said, "it doesn't matter; the knife doesn't matter." She remembered how they went through the department store picking out non-stick pots and sandwich presses, how they read the back of the box in snooty French chef voices, how there was a red onion half-chopped on the box, and the knives all in a row on a pine cutting board. They described to each other the dinners they would make in the future, the breakfasts in bed on mornings sun-white as in the commercials for coffee or insurance that always made Randy feel for her hand and squeeze it. She could not stop apologizing for the knife, in half-chewed words, for the cutting board, for the books full of pictures of the food they never made.

Then she looked away and said, "I hope you're happy." The prosecution made it an admission of guilt, a slip that showed she had planned the whole thing as revenge for some suspected affair or failure to change his share of diapers. But probably it was nothing like that. Probably all she meant was that she hoped he could be happy.

Of your cousins, only Sarah is old enough to remember the year and a half you lived with them in Coppell, and she is the only one of all your family who remembers that you don't like to be hugged without being insulted by it. You have tried to explain it to your dad and Janet but they are convinced that you are using your near-death feelings as a cover for silly teenage delusions of sophistication. "You never used to have a problem with hugs," your dad says, and he is right: things were further away in the past and you didn't notice them as much. Possibly you are subconsciously just trying to get attention, and after the right number of surprise squeezes you will learn to calm down and stop making them look bad, as if they aren't trying. Aunt Angie

remembers but always expects you to have grown out of it by now, and Uncle Scott never remembered in the first place. But Sarah takes for granted that you are telling the truth, and meets you at the door with a mock-stiff handshake and salute before running inside to tickle Micah and Amos.

When your cousins arrive for Thanksgiving, Janet is already anxious, in particular about the negative influence of Sarah who is three years older than you and goes to college— not even Bible but state college, in a town made infamous by drinking and liberalism. Your cousins have been raised under other circumstances, nominally but not essentially Christian, and even though they were good enough for you to live with while your dad was dealing with the trial and divorce, they are not quite trustworthy in their opinions. Conor's clothes are too loose, his Jesus Peanut-Butter Cup shirt could be arguably considered irreverent, and his sleepy eyes and casual posture are suspect. Alyssa's denim cutoffs drizzle frayed white strings on her skinny legs, her hair hangs perpetually in her face, and she is far too apt to carry around huge books with dragons on them and to sit on the arms of chairs instead of their seat. But it is Sarah you need to watch out for, Sarah in her pale jeans and gray sweatshirt, Sarah with her sleek colorless ponytail and knowing pink smile.

Your dad and Janet are both afraid she will put ideas in your head. You have already shown evidence of ideas, and where did they come from? Not *nowhere*, Cedar, you know better! Thoughts come from God or they come from the world, and God, who has approved all of Janet's tastes from patterned jumpers to oily paintings of cottages and pools of red light on village snow, has assured them he had nothing to do with it. God may even have suggested that it's funny you should want to *go away* to school when you hardly seem to *care* about school. He can't imagine you would suddenly start to care just because you were somewhere else-- friendless and sleepless in a crumbling dorm, with thumps on the ceiling all night and four drunk girls shouting song lyrics outside your window. Maybe in a few years when you're more mature and know what God wants from you instead of latching onto everything your cousin says or getting wrong ideas from

books about what the world is like, you can enroll in an online course at College Plus or Bob Jones University.

When Sarah talks about college, Janet holds her thin smile steady but you can see the dangers of college life swirling in front of her. Sarah talks about Campus Crusade and the guitar game her roommate is obsessed with, but all Janet can see are orgies and empty beer cans rolling down bare cinderblock halls and inch-thick biology textbooks crammed edge to edge with lies.

“Do you think your professors respect your faith?” she says. Sarah chatters away happily, unaware that she is being tested. Her professors are amazing. Her friends are amazing. The kitchen light flashes on her tiny golden cross.

Now that you are sixteen, your dad wants you to take the GED so you can finish school and start helping more around the house, by which he means you should do exactly what you have been doing for the past four years without the added distraction of lessons-- chop the onions for Janet, read to Micah and Amos from *Noah's Wonderful Ark* or *My First Book of Virtues* or the Beginning Reader's Bible: *At first, it was dark. There was no world. First God made light. Then God made the world.* Micah is four and starting to learn his memory verses, and even baby Amos has begun to learn the names of shapes and the sounds of animals. For each Bible verse they learn they will get a paper star with the name and number of the verse written in the toxic glitter marker. Who will write it in the special swirly letters if you go away? Who will remember to put the marker back in the locked drawer above the cutlery if you're off somewhere drinking beer from plastic cups and getting eaten alive by mosquitoes?

If you wanted to be more useful, you could try a home business, like the girls on the Maidens Set Apart online community who make craft handbags and quilted wallets and sell them to each other. And there will be plenty of work for you to do when your dad's distribution plan gets off the ground. This time he is selling books for Silver Hills Online Bible University. The books are already waiting shrink-wrapped next to the computer in his study, and soon the orders

will come and her will ship them to Silver Hills students around the world for a modest but steady profit. When he makes his first sale he is going to take you all out for ice cream. Meanwhile the flat boxes he has bought to ship them in collect small crumbs and stray dried macaroni elbows from the food he brings to eat at the computer late at night.

After dinner, there is football on Conor's laptop, the picture as scrambled and halting as the game. Alyssa and Sarah want to show you the pictures of Alyssa's first Daddy-Daughter Ball at the Dallas Convention Center. "It's the funnest thing," Alyssa says. "Cedar, you should go. You would love it." They are so sure of what you would love that it would be mean to correct them. Here is bony Alyssa, hair piled high, twirling in a metallic chiffon dress, here the row of girls in ball gowns and perfect, waxy corsages, a preacher with a yellow goatee speaking from a lectern, long tables with silverware and white cloth napkins folded into pleats.

Here is the pledge the girls take with their dads: I pledge my heart to you, to guard and keep it pure for the man I will someday marry. You don't tell your cousins that no one is going to marry you, with your bad genes and your bad skin and your broken sleep, because they will automatically lie to make you feel better and it will look like you just said it for the compliments. They will not understand if you ask them what the point is of purity if you have no future husband to defraud. Your dad must know there is nothing particularly worth hoarding in you, or else he would have tried to drag you to one of those balls already, with your hair done up in a wreck of Janet-curls and sprayed lopsidedly in place and a horrible week of trying on dresses at the outlet mall in St. Joseph and Janet's experiments with makeup that would make you break out even more than usual. *Be thankful for something serious, please!* Here is Uncle Scott in a tuxedo that doesn't fit, the jacket too short for his long arms, beaming into a bright light. Here is a closeup of the locket he gave her, and here is the same locket, now around Alyssa's neck, with its long slit of a keyhole and the words Guard My Heart in slender chicken-toe letters. But you are not ungrateful, not really, and you will not dwell on what you wish, and it is not this, anyway, not

to be guarded and danced with and made rare. If God were not omnipotent, He might want those things for you, dabbing at his eyes and conspicuously sighing when the radio plays any one of several songs about daughters who are born and later married. But God is everywhere and everything is His, and what He wants for you is only what you are.

On the last day of your life you woke in sunlight and the sound of your dad's dial-up modem in the mockingbird's throats. The bedroom window was freckled with rain and there was no sound of breakfast dishes, no breath. You could tell before you opened your eyes that your sisters were gone, their sheets all turned down and twisted, as if the end of the world had come at last without you. Stacy Mcleod had always said you would be ashamed when the end came of your deeds and your thoughts in the dark, and she was right. You had dreamed of running and the wind in your blue nylon jacket, and empty land on all sides, and here you were alone, just like you wanted. You had to be careful because God always, *always* granted your prayers. And the nightgown was your cousin's, and your mom called it *occultist* and wanted to throw it away, but you whined and pleaded until your dad said you could wear it inside out so that the long-eared wood elf and its half-worn train of glitter faced your skin. Who did you think you were fooling? God could see in the dark. He could see inside your *heart*. At the Judgment specks of elf glitter would spark on your chest like tiny stars. You ran downstairs still hoping to catch up and apologize, and slid the glass door open on the backyard soft with rain and winter. There on the patio was your mother, wiping the onion knife on her old blue sweater, and she was so disappointed in you, so sad and startled at the sight of you, hands and face and hanging clothes all spattered and red and wet.

You woke far away and long after. So many days had gone without you that it was impossible to know if any of it had been true, and you squinted in the light like Zombie Lazarus in the game invented by Lily. It was wrong to play games with Jesus in them, especially foolish

ones with no purpose but silliness. The fool says in his heart there is no God-- was that so hard to understand? The foolishness of children is rebellion at its core. But Lily wanted to zombie-totter around the living room with her head lolled sideways, and *you* would be the one grabbed by the arm and squeezed if you yelled at her to stop it. Your misbehavior was a foothold, a door left open for the Enemy, and only prayer would shut it, until you learned to pray your own protection. Tina had pressed her hands against your forehead and let her head fall back, and the pressure of her big hands on your head was reassuring. Lord, protect this child. Lord, make her as a garden enclosed. But she had grown anxious and her hands cold, and by the end she left it to your dad to pray your protection when he came home from work. Something was the matter with you, some ugly mystery. You were unable to keep from laughing at wrong jokes. Did you understand what that verse means? By making a joke out of God's miracles, lurching around the living room with bottom lip hanging and rotten squinted eye, you are *telling God He doesn't exist*. It was bad enough that Lily thought it was funny, but you were older and should know better. Everything depended on your good example.

At dinner she would make the zombie face at you when no one was looking, whisper how hungry she had been in the tomb. She would slump into her zombie walk in front of everyone, right in front of Stacy's face on the TV. Stop walking weird, you would say, and she would answer: I'm not. She didn't care if your dad got angry, if your mom got sick again. "What?" she would say. "I can't help it if it's weird to be alive."

You woke at night, before anyone could tell you where you were. Your dad was asleep on the chair beside your bed, his game still playing soft quick music in a loop. Your mother was gone. In the early morning the nurse took your blood pressure and your pulse and called you brave. She left it to your dad to tell you your sisters were dead.

It was hard for other people to forgive Randy Blake the video games, the jokes that failed, the smile he later tried to hide with his hand. It was hard to forgive him for marrying again



so quickly and for wanting children. After his first son was born strangers sent boxes of condoms, to your house, even a pair of gelding shears from the Farm and Ranch catalog. They were angry because time should have stopped but it didn't. Something terrible had happened and it had not destroyed his faith in God or his desire to be married and have children or even his attempts to market his web design services as Blake Creations, Inc.. He was alive and recovering and they wanted him dead and inconsolable, face down on the Bent Lake lawn forever.

The Blake name followed him, with its train of little-girl ghosts and black headlines. The year after you moved there was a TV movie called *Living Sacrifice: The Tina Blake Story* in which your dad was played by a square-jawed scientist, a fictional tyrant who threw dish after dish at cowering movie-Tina in a kitchen that was nothing like any kitchen you had ever been in. In some places everyone knew who you were and in others no one did, and sometimes the people who knew pretended not to, but spoke to you in a high slow voice without realizing it, as if to someone just waking up from a coma.

He is sure the day will come when everyone has forgotten, though he doesn't know when. In another year, or five years, or twelve years and six months, the charge will have faded from the name Randy Blake, and he will be free to walk in the world unstained. He believes he will live to see it, as much as he believes in his salvation. One day there will be no more copies in the 3.99 DVD bin of *Living Sacrifice*, and strangers will be strangers again, nothing passing over them at the sight of his watery blue eyes and childish open mouth. All will be buried. All will be erased.

## Your Evenings At Home

In the evening you are sitting on the floor of your father's house and Janet is combing your hair with her fingers. She has a brush, too soft to work through the tangles, and a comb she uses to scrape a part down the center of your scalp, but the real work is pulling the tangles slowly apart. The comb would tear your hair and already it comes out in long cloudy wisps, “like an old lady,” Janet says. Your dad is pretending to read *The Seven Laws of Online Marketing* as Robby Coreana's live album plays in the stereo speakers. “Your poor hair,” says Janet. “How does it get so snarled?”

Janet has a lint roller, a sticky black cylinder to lift the loose hairs from your back and from her clothes. She will tsk and tilt her head in tender bewilderment at your natural unluckiness in the area of hair and your seeming refusal to do anything productive about it. “Don't you want to be pretty, Cee?” The Enemy works in women through their vanity, and ugly as you are you cannot escape the sin of vanity. The Enemy works in your desire to be loved, encouraging you to imagine this desire is not grotesque, not pointless. “I think your hair looks so much nicer in a nice braid, don't you think?”

In the old days of Vinelands Fellowship, before Pastor Mcleod's Living in Love and Project Nathan became nationwide ministries, the oldest Mcleod girls were in charge of the family newsletter, Cedar Beams Quarterly, each cover a new crisply Xeroxed photo of their thin smiling faces and their names in swirly font: Annalise and Jessalyn Mcleod, Daughters of the Faith. They would cut and fold the soft antique-yellow paper, taping photographs and blocks of text to the pages while Jessalyn drew curled leaves and butterflies with her colored pencils in the margins. You thought it was named after you, and the girls encouraged you because they thought it was funny. When Pastor Doug found out, he made you stand up in front of worship meeting and confess to everyone how vain you were. The selfishness of the child will exceed your wildest expectations, he said. The sin nature of a child is as deep as the ocean, as hard to escape as the earth.

You and Lily had been introduced too late to the Flesh and Fool-Proof System of discipline practiced at Vinelands Fellowship, with its emphasis on obedience, and it was easy to see how your character had suffered from your parents' weakness for leniency and compromise. Can there be compromise on earth when there is none in hell? Can we condemn our children for the sake of our own laziness and misplaced pity? When Pastor Doug, leading his family through the supermarket, clapped his hands and called out, Walk backwards! the entire Mcleod clan would change direction seamless as a centipede, Mrs. Stacy Mcleod included. "Jumping jacks!" he bellowed, and even the toddlers flailed and jumped. A child must learn to trust his protectors, and to obey without question as he would obey a commanding officer. Are we not soldiers? Are we not at war?

He liked to tell the story of how he made Jessalyn water the garden in the rain when she was thirteen. He wasn't talking about little drizzle, oh no sir. That might have made a little sense, wouldn't it? Over and over he said, Jessalyn, water the garden this instant, and he'll never forget (he'd chuckle) how she just *stared*, Lord! Oh, how she protested! He made his voice a shrill girl-whine, Jessalyn's: But daddy, they'll *diiiie*! Then in a whisper like gristle he would confide that she had, Lord forgive her, called him foolish. Called her own father's sanity into question-- *her* father, Douglas Mcleod! Yes, this same well-mannered young lady you see before you! But in the end, praise be to God, the Lord and the switch wore down her pride and she took up that watering can and she watered every one of those beans and tomatoes and peppers out there in the pouring rain. And every one of those beans and tomatoes and peppers was an angel rejoicing. For to question the obviously absurd was the first easy step on the high-speed moving sidewalk to Evehood. Begin by refusing silly requests, and soon you will find reasons to refuse more serious demands. Reason will wriggle its termite way into the foundations and the beams of your faith, and once inside it never fails to gnaw them hollow.

Pastor Doug Mcleod was grieved to confess that he and Stacy were concerned about the state of your soul and your sister Lily's, afraid perhaps, that foundations were already rotten.

Sharon and Roo, raised in the shepherding atmosphere of Vinelands, were as sweet-tempered and shy as the Mcleod girls themselves, but *you* were secretive and slow, and Lily was fueled by a reckless and inexplicable sense of justice. Who had taught her to scream *not fair*, or to question the fairness of anything? Who had shown her that it was even possible to kick Pastor Doug Mcleod so hard in the shin that he was able the next day to show your terrified mother and contrite father the bruise before the whole fellowship of believers? “What will this child be like as a teenager?” he wondered aloud, the morning light dazzling his silver leg hairs and the deepening purple above his athletic socks. “What kind of monster will you have created in ten years, Lord forgive you, when a five-year-old girl is already beyond your control?”

The copies of Cedar Beams, along with the Living in Love video series and the picture books Stacy put together especially for your family when you moved away from Vinelands against Pastor Doug's explicit warning, disappeared with the strollers and the teething rings, the plastic mirror mobiles and boxes of gauzy girl clothes your dad abandoned when he sold the house to National City Bank, leaving to strangers the refuse of his life and yours. It has been years since you heard Doug and Stacy speaking to you from the TV in Bent Lake. But the voices show up anyway, hanging in the air like images burned in old monitors.

The Enemy is born with us, ladies. Let us not flee from the facts here. Those sweet little babies are born chock full of sin and they feed that sin at our breasts. The sin of Eve is in every single one of us, and when that baby comes out into the world, why do you think he comes out screaming? Can he say to you, I have been born in a body of sin to a world of damnation? Maybe he can't say it, but he sure can feel it!

You try to fix your mind to the music. Robby Coreana live is even whinier than Robby Coreana in the studio, but it is God he whines to and God hears all sincere prayers. The song is better than some of his songs: an old hymn re-routed through Robby's contemporary nose. *Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love*. For as long as you knew the Mcleod girls

you believed you would grow up to be like them. Your hair would turn straight and glossy and your face serene. But you are the same age now that they were then, and no matter how many times you brush your hair before bed it stays dull and ragged and the snarls come out in clouds. “You always had such thick hair, didn't you?” Janet says. But Janet doesn't know what you always had, and she doesn't expect an answer anyway. She picks and brushes and pushes her fingers through the knots, turning your head with her small rough hands.

*Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God.*

You say, “This song is missing words.”

Janet scours a part into your scalp with the comb, then brushes over it again, dissatisfied.

“What words?”

You can't remember. It was one of the Mcleod's songs, one you used to sing with the Vogels and the nervous college converts in their pale blue jeans, when you were a child and had sisters, a long time ago. Does your dad think of Vinelands when he hears Robby Coreana? Your dad never mentions that time. Sometimes, when he is pretending to work, he visits the new Project Nathan website, now thriving: Doug Mcleod heading retreats in South America and Europe for eager scrubbed young men, Stacy and her daughters presiding over a series of books on godly relationships with glossy landscape covers. Most of the time there is no mention of the other life, the sisters, the mother with her low brown laugh, as if all of it had turned invisible with distance, the way even mountains eventually disappear. Your dad remembers he's supposed to be reading and turns the page.

*Here's my heart, O take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above.*

Janet is looking into your scalp as if the missing verses might be there. “I wonder,” she says. “Do you remember what they were about?”

It's the shapeless time after dinner but before evening prayer. Now and night are the times you are most afraid of doing something wrong. The effort of holding still pushes your mind down narrow stairways, into spidery basements. The wrong words bubble in your throat. Your dad

doesn't like to be asked how long, or for anyone to be absent during what is supposed to be family time. The worst sin of the present age, the greatest loss, is how no one seems to be a family anymore. Your dad has this on good authority from people you have never met, mostly co-workers with busy teenagers and manicurists, and Janet knows it in the same indifferent way she knows anything that everyone is supposed to know, by some combination of Bible Study stories and magazine headlines absorbed from the racks at Meijer. So you will sit and listen to Robby Coreana and try not to say anything that will sound like a secret message your dad and Janet will be up all night deciphering. “What are we going to do with this hair of yours?” says Janet. “What. Are we going to do. You know, I think we should consider cutting off just a couple inches. Don't you think?”

You shake your head.

“You know, I always trim the ends off, just the ends, to help it grow. Think how pretty it would look with all these ragged ends gone.”

But your hair has not been cut in years and Janet will not be the one to cut it. Who cares what your hair looks like? Not God. Not anyone who matters.

Janet is older than her age, gray and purpling where the veins have burst under her skin, and maybe that's why she is so hungry for your beauty that she doesn't notice it is nonexistent. You're thirty years younger than she is and you have long hair, that's all-- not even nice hair, just a fraying heap of it. The French braid she thinks looks “neat” and “elegant” pushes your square face forward, making your long mouth longer and your pimples more prominent. It brings out the zipper teeth of the scar on your neck, bright as whitehead pus in the lamplight, but a turtleneck is so stylish anyway, Cee, and makes you look so grown up, even though no single other person you have ever seen wears them except Janet and Janet's Bible Study ladies. For special occasions you are encouraged to wear your hair in a half-ponytail that contains the bulk of the frizz but lets a straggle of excess hair veil neck and ears and shoulders.

You are less concerned with the beauty of your countenance than either Janet or the Maidens Set Apart think you should be. Janet has bought you Clearasil face wash and you have let it sit unused on the bathroom sink. Clearasil is vanity. The pimples are your real face whether you want them to be or not. Swollen lumps on the edges of your mouth, on the ridge of your chin, sharp tiny blackheads: pits and bumps you can run your fingers over in the dark. A blind man would know at a touch how unbeautiful you are. You feel a perverse pride in knowing this. That, too, is vanity.

Janet finishes unsnarling your hair and pets your head with the useless nylon brush. Micah, who has started to crawl again, crawls toward you. "Micah, walk," says Janet. He stares up at her.

"Brush me next?"

"Sweetie pea, you've got hardly any hair to brush."

"Brush me, ok?"

"Do you want braids?" you say. You touch his wispy curls. He grins and nods with his whole body. Janet frowns.

"Come here, peapod," she says. "Stand up and walk and I'll brush your hair."

You make room for him and Janet wipes the brush over his silky head. "You have hair just like your daddy's," she says. "Why is it always the boys who get the blue eyes and the golden curls?" She crinkles her eyes at you but you decline the invitation to laugh knowingly. Janet's yellow-gray hair is as brittle as grass. She wears it long in a scrawny braid under one of her bright yellow or orange head scarves. Headcovering is her own personal conviction and she never misses an opportunity to remind you that she would never impose it on anyone. You separate the wet strands of your hair and braid them tight, starting high on the scalp. Micah watches as Janet brushes his bright hair, his drawstring lips open on thin milk-cloudy teeth.

"That's enough," says Janet.

"No."

“Yes. You're all brushed up.”

Your dad looks at his face in the black front window and the song that was playing fades. The worshipers in Robby Coreana's live audience have taken up the chorus and they are swaying back and forth now in the dark with arms outstretched, *take my heart, O take and seal it* -- as if they were holding up their actual hearts for God or Robby to collect. Then the final notes are swallowed in applause, and the album cuts Robby off mid-Amen. You can feel the wet hair sticking to your neck and shoulders, running slow trickles of water down your shirt. Maybe the terrible thing you're afraid of doing is really something simple and stupid, like cutting your hair when you know it would only make you uglier than ever. Or maybe it is just that you are going to refuse God something. You already know that there are things you would keep from God if he asked for them, sacrifices you decided long ago you wouldn't make, not for the stars and not for the sand. Maybe that knowledge is what you need to let go of. You only need to say, take my heart, and mean it.

A new song creeps in, a slow church song with guitars. The audience has already started to clap and sing along. Janet doesn't like Robby Coreana. She has said so privately to the women of the Bible study, as proof of what she is willing to put up with in the name of love. Too many flutes and whistles, she says, too much mush. She likes music with foundations and vaulted ceilings and solid stone walls. But your dad's tastes are different and it would be wrong to try to change them. It's important that your dad listen to the music that sustains his faith, which she talks about as if it were as fragile and suspect as your own. Maybe it is, or maybe Janet thinks of everyone that way, one wrong word from perdition. What Randy needs is comfort and conviction, she says, as the Bible study ladies nod and close their lips around forkfuls of carrot and sponge cake. “With everything he's been through, I think maybe he needs God to speak to him in the clearest way he can.”

Janet has also been through things. She has had skull and wrist broken by her first husband, lost her job as music director, lost custody of her children before she became Mrs. Blake



the Second. But Janet's faith is unbreakable and her comfort is the Lord, and she listens to Robby Coreana with a joyful heart because she is called to be Randy's helpmeet, even if that means sitting through the *Faith On Fire* double album seventeen nights in a row.

You have no stake in the unspoken Robby Coreana debate. He and Voices of Bethel and Michael Orrin and Joyful Noise are all one warbly blur to you. If anyone asked you, you would probably rather listen to Janet's music, especially her Beethoven CD that warps the air like a storm. Your dad acknowledges that it is good music, but he prefers songs with words that everyone can understand. He does not believe he should have to learn German in order to be uplifted. There is nothing wrong with Robby Coreana, but you have decided you don't like praise music voices. You like the inhuman voices of the music Janet puts on during the day to cook and clean by. Not inhuman, maybe. Sublime. Or does *sublime* just mean *more than human*? You might as well look it up so you don't accidentally misuse it and prove to your dad how not-ready you are for college.

As soon as you get up, Janet says, "Where are you going, Cee?"

"I'll be right back."

Janet scrunches up her forehead anxiously. "Are you going to the restroom?"

"Cee." Your dad sounds tired. He turns the book in his hands so that its raised gold letters catch the yellow light. "You were asked a question."

"I'm going to look something up in the dictionary."

"Look up what?" says Janet.

"Just a word."

"Cee," says your dad. "What are you hiding?"

You are hiding nothing for no reason, just like always. Why not just say, I am looking up *sublime* to see if it means what I think it does. Wouldn't that be easier for everyone? There is no point in keeping meaningless secrets like balls of tin foil. Who are you keeping them from? God sees everything, and your dad and Janet just want to help, and no one else could possibly care. No

one would object to you expanding your vocabulary. Your dad is already worried enough about your declining interest in the GED and the tiresome conversations that follow from it. Looking up a word would at least show focus and initiative. But you don't say it. You sit on the floor next to the couch and finish braiding your hair, down to the thin tips. Your dad says, "You're welcome to ask us any time there's a word you don't understand."

Janet says, "That's what braids are *for*, sweetie-pea. For long hair, like Cedar's." The human voice of Robby Coreana moans that Jesus has followed him, even against his will, to the ends of the earth. It pleads that Jesus might be kind enough to lead him home.

Your dad is tired of this silliness, understandably tired of this teenager act. He has taken the door off your bedroom in response to suspected secrets, and he will not put it back until you have proven your ability to tell him what you are thinking. Everything is so simple, so clear. He has said before that there will be no secrets in his house, and that includes no clandestine visits to the dictionary, even though the dictionary is Bob Jones approved and unlikely to contain dangerous material unless it was deliberately planted by the Enemy to undermine the Christian homeschooling community, which, when you think about it, is not a bad plan. You picture the Enemy like a cartoon devil, sneaking into the offices of Bob Jones University Press with a folder full of spells thinly disguised as the definitions of obscure words. Nearly all the Maidens Set Apart have a Bob Jones dictionary, and half the Bible study ladies, even the ones who send their kids to public school. A few changes could turn thousands of focused, initiative-taking young Christians into unwitting servants of Satan within a month-- much faster than the made-up school for sorcerers book your Grandma Wizeck tried to give you eight years ago, where the spells were all obvious and printed in capital letters and everything was a pun. Your edition is already full of typos and misplaced pictures, a giraffe squinting serenely next to the entry for dodecahedron. No one would look closely enough to catch it before it went to print, and by the time anyone noticed what was happening, it would be too late. Charter schools, foreign missions, after-school Bible groups-- no corner of the world would be safe. Worst of all, the smartest kids would be the first to

fall, lured by their natural love of dictionary definitions into summoning demons. Was it possible to lose your soul without meaning to? It must be. There were cases of possession where the victim called on Satan through some slip of the tongue, the way stickers and temporary tattoos carried drugs into children's skin mixed with the glue. Hadn't there been a boy in Maine who tried one of the pun-spells in that sorcery book and paralyzed himself? Janet sent something like that to you in an email, even though you live in the same house and can talk to her anytime.

You picture the cartoon Enemy skulking around the BJU Press file cabinets and motivational posters, Scotch-taping a black rite over the entry for *hare lip*, a family curse under *obsequious*, chuckling at his own cleverness until Jesus claps him on the shoulder. "Satan! I should have known!"

Your dad sets the book against his knee. "What's so funny, Cee?"

"Nothing." You put your hand over your mouth, a gesture your dad hates because he does the same thing. His mouth twitches.

"Something is funny."

"It's just a thing I was thinking."

He looks at you.

"If the-- maybe if Satan put spells in the dictionary, so if you look up a word, you actually--" Your dad's face tightens. Janet makes the small false laugh in her throat that means she is deliberately refraining from saying anything about how badly you have offended her.

"Never mind. It was just a dumb joke in my head."

"Is that funny?" says your dad.

"No. I'm sorry."

"Is that why you were going to the dictionary?"

"*No.*"

If only Robby Coreana would stop his gulpy crescendo. If only evening prayer would start so you could eventually go to bed and be alone with the gaping door and whatever thoughts

find you. There are no clocks in the living room, just the dark deepening in the marsh beyond the window, and the yellow lamps. Micah leaves Janet and crawls to you, arms and legs sprawled and swaying. “Micah,” says Janet. “Walk. Come on. Big-boy walk.”

You bring it on yourself. When you store up secrets the fragments slipped out are worse than the truth you can't tell. The word “sublime,” the Satanic dictionary: they all look crazy. They connect to nothing. Ever since you were born *to a body of sin, to a world of temptation*, secrets grew in you, pushing inward, filling up the space meant for prayer. If you could let go of the least of them, if you could love God and mean it, if you could show love for anything that mattered. But everything you love is wrong, and wrong words crowd your mouth like cockroaches.

Having secrets, your dad means but won't say out loud, is how people go crazy. That is how it will happen to you. No one will notice the warning signs because you will hide them, the way you hide everything, until it's too late. Better for your dad and Janet to think you're a dumb teenager than to think you're crazy. A dumb teenager might grow up someday to be a nice normal person, but a crazy one is crazy right to the bone. “We should have seen it,” they'll say. “There were so many signs.” They will talk about the unused Clearasil, Exhibit A, and the thing with the dictionary, and the time you kept skipping the page in *Noah's Wonderful Ark* where the dogs and children are drowning.

That's his real fear: that inheritance. Your great-grandmother on your mother's side-- wasn't there something about her going into a rest home at some suspiciously early age? Wasn't she addicted to some household tranquilizer-- Valium or something? Your Grandma Wizeck, with her sorcery books and her documented bad behavior at funerals, is obviously unstable, and there is your rumored-violent grandfather, with his ruined wartime nerves, and your mother's alcoholic brother, and the other one no one talks about, probably for good reason-- and others, cousins and great-uncles you have never heard of but whose ragged and crooked neurons are echoed in your own. Tina thought she could swim free of their genes, but their seaweed fingers grabbed and pulled her down, down. Now he thinks it's your turn. Now every dumb idea that

tumbleweeds through your brain sends your dad into a panic. Is this the beginning? How will he know? Cedar lags behind in her lesson plans, but thinks she has to go to college. Cedar looks up words in the dictionary, but won't say which ones or why. Cedar imagines Satanic conspiracies unfolding in the halls of Bob Jones University.

Better for him to think you are turning into one of those dead-eyed scowling teenagers he is always pointing out to you at Meijer or on magazine covers as examples of what not to be. Better to joke about tattoos and nasal radio music, and to scold you for closing the bathroom door to wash your hands as if that were teenager code for something shameful. In real life, of course, there is little to no reason to imagine you would ever be tempted to streak your hair with ugly white stripes or stuff your fat thighs into a miniskirt with SEXY on the back, but he will scold you about those things as if you had already done them. Typical Teenage Behavior is the dollar store mask he puts on over his fears for you: it may not look anything like a real face, but it's better than what it hides. Better that he should spend twenty valuable minutes per day lecturing you about the brain-rotting properties of the music you don't listen to and the phone you don't have than to name the thing he fears and risk it answering.

Maybe in his mind that doesn't count as having secrets.

Your dad marks his place in the book he hasn't read. He pushes himself out of the tan armchair and goes into the dining room to light the candles for prayer. Micah jumps up and tugs on your hand. "Prayers time," he says. "CeeDee, prayers." You try to remember what it was like to be four, but it's too far off. At five you could draw God in a cloud; by five you knew that God might ask things of you that would be wrong, except that it was God asking. You learned that you were going to hell, because you could not do what Abraham did. Who told you that story? Maybe it was Stacy, who liked stories that made people angry-- nothing was more convicting than anger, she said. Maybe Lily, who even at four knew more Bible verses than you, who stomped her foot and *cried* when you got your own white Bible for your seventh birthday-- it wasn't *fair*, she said, for you to get your own Bible, when you were stupid and she was smart. "Think for a minute,

Lily,” your dad told her. “What have we learned about what would happen if life was fair? What does God tell us would happen if we all got exactly what we deserved?”

Maybe you were older than five. Maybe you didn't think about Abraham at all when you were little. But in your mind you are five and the Bible is Jessalyn's old Greatest Storybook Bible with its muddy paintings of yellow rocks and sunburned-looking faces, and you saw yourself telling God no, shaking your head at the pillar of fire or the black cloud on the mountain, no, Lord, I will not. How many people had He called before Abraham? How many generations before He found someone willing to walk off into the desert, with his bundle of sticks and his son and an oily torch burning like the village lamps in Janet's favorite paintings? No, not me. Not me, Lord. You were proud of yourself-- that was the worst part-- proud that you had preemptively decided to disobey God's command because you thought you knew better. It was not your first secret, but it was the first one you knew you could never repent of. You could not pray for the faith of Abraham and mean it. *Cedar, your mind is so literal!*

Your dad reads his text of the day, a psalm.

*Come and see the works of God; he is terrible in his doing towards the children of men  
He turneth the sea into dry land: they walk through the flood on foot.*

Why this one? Some days he has a message and goes to the index for the verse that says it best. Some days he opens the Bible at random, and some days he flips through looking for the one he remembers and settles on something else. *He ruleth by his power forever; his eyes behold the nations, let not the rebellious exalt themselves.* Your dad is not a confident reader. If there were any decent church within two hours' drive, he would take you there instead, and stand silent with his hands folded behind his back and his eyes closed. But all churches are of the world and will be till the world ends. So he coughs and wipes his nose as apology for stumbling. Janet lifts her chin into the stream of his voice. When *his eyes behold the nations* you see places rolling past you, hills and bridges, cities at daybreak, and you are pulled upward by a wish to be outdoors and

alone, to go somewhere. *Let not the rebellious exalt themselves* is obviously meant for you. You try not to notice that Janet is doing her fast-nod when she hears it.

Then there are prayers against the sins of the nation, against the president and the eyes of the state, and Thy will be done, Lord, thy will be done, as if the Lord needed constant reminding about his own will. Maybe He does. Maybe if no one told Jesus He was Lord of all, he would forget the suffering on the cross and all the suffering it stood for. Maybe if you *don't* pray, some part of him can rest for a minute. If you spent one evening thinking *nothing at all*, would that part of him that watched you be still? You try not to hear the prayers, to fill your head with the words *don't worry*, but your dad has reached the part of the prayer that is about the nation's need for cleansing blood. Isn't Jesus sick of the word blood? If it makes your nostrils flare and makes the taste of iron to sting your throat, it must sting His. Who wants to be told what they already know? Please don't worry about that, don't worry about the *sins of our nation* and the *murderous designs of our elected officials*, don't think about it right now. Just rest.

Of course Jesus isn't like you. He isn't secretly sick of all your problems. He wakes and wakes to every voice that calls him, and every call is as bright and sudden as if He has never seen the world. All He wants is to gather your little sorrows with his bleeding hands and vanish them. He *wants* to watch you when you sleep.

Your dad's prayers end in a stutter and a silent nod, and in the quiet that follows Janet murmurs *amen* to remind God that she is still praying and not thinking about your split ends or wondering whether she should buy the hamburger tomorrow at Meijer, and Micah and Amos shout in response: "A-men!"

Your dad blows out one candle and lets Micah blow out the other, and lists the things you will do this week, the ways in which his new business is getting ready to thrive, the latest injury among his coworkers at St. Joseph Medical Billing Services. After Janet has chased the boys into the upstairs bathroom to brush their teeth, your dad follows you to the empty door of your

bedroom with the candles in his hand. He says, "Cedar, I know if there were something wrong, you'd tell me."

"Yes," you say. The word sticks.

"Are you sleeping ok?"

You shrug. "I guess."

His pale blue eyes search the air around you, fixing in the middle distance for a moment and then shifting away, afraid of being followed. "Janet thinks you might be experiencing a crush. Is that true?"

It is not. The idea is ridiculous. You see boys at Meijer and nowhere else.

"If something's bothering you, even if you think it's silly, I just--" he puts his hand on the wall next to you and drums his fingers. "Promise me you'll let us know, ok?" He tries to look you in the eye, but flinches and settles in the red skin between your eyebrows.

You promise you will tell him and the promise is a lie.



## Some Ways the World Failed to End

In the meantime there is milk to buy in gallons yoked together by blue plastic, and Parkay Whipped Spread. There are Amos' diapers in huge green packages and bulk boxes of bran flakes and the double pack of eggs and ground red meat in little pools of liquid. On the way to the Meijer Superstore in Maris, the radio will twist in and out of WFAM, Daily Praise Favorites for the Whole Family, but not soon enough to prevent Jars of Clay from rocking out to "It is Well With My Soul," the classic hymn of your whole family dying. The song will come cracked and washed with static as if sea billows really were rolling through the recording studio, but your dad will refuse to acknowledge noticing either the song or its breakup. He will let it play out, static and encroaching talk radio and all, and pretend not to have been listening when Janet says, "I think we're losing this station."

Janet will warn the boys to be on their best behavior and joke to you about your imaginary rebellion. Being sixteen makes you a target for pierced nose and tattoo and cell phone jokes even though your dislike of needles and your carefully enforced phonelessness are well known to Randy and Janet, the same way your dad teases Janet about shopping and Janet ribs him right back about golf and football even though they both know Janet buys only necessities and a few collectibles and Randy can barely tell one kind of game from another. "We all go through that stage," she says, of your ongoing non-rebellion. "I have faith in you. You know what my mother used to tell me? She said, if you want to know how your daughters are going to turn out, just look in the mirror." In her head-trauma fog she is incapable of noticing what everyone else is too polite to mention: that you are Tina Blake exactly, down to the clogged pores of your long nose and the frown pushing out through every tight-lipped photo smile. In your Christmas photo you look like a sullen babysitter adopted out of charity, with your Tina-brown hair and wide Tina mouth, an odd olive duckling in a pink and white flock. Micah and Amos are laughing and their parents smiling over their downy heads. The photographer held up a yellow puppet with a bulby nose and made it burble to them, and that was all they needed to half-choke on their giggles and

sing out after him the name of a cheese they had never seen or tasted. *Bel-BEE-ta!* You have curled up the corners of your mouth but your eyes are elsewhere, the lines of your face Tina-vague. It takes more muscles to smile than to frown, Cee. Why waste the energy?

On billboards just past the Meijer, Krazy Kaplan, cartoon mascot of Krazy Kaplan Fireworks in Hammond, Indiana, tilts his head to the same snapped-neck angle on either side of the freeway. His cartoon eyes bulge white and round from spiral sockets and his mouth hangs blackly open. When you were shuttled north in your dad's new sedan in the wake of the Blake murders, ugly whitish scar and ugly swarming thoughts and all, Krazy Kaplan was waiting to greet you at the border, leather-strapped to his bed to keep him from giving away Indiana's largest selection of top-quality name-brand fireworks for free. Even now he has broken the belt of his straitjacket to offer you a sparking Roman candle. He is holding it out as a child might hold a rock or a ball of clay for the name you will give it, oblivious to how close he has been all these years to blowing his own head off in a burst of cartoon blood.

Janet comes with coupons she has printed, pages of them paper-clipped together by kind of food: one for dairy, one for things that go in lunch boxes, one for squares and bars, one for things that come in cans. There are always too many for her to keep track of at a glance and she walks slowly past the dairy case, trying to match the Ologos Greek Yogurt Singletons with their coupon, and the coupon for Kraft Mexican Blend with its corresponding bag of pale orange and white cheese shreds. You would be happy to stay home, even to watch Micah and Amos, but neither your dad nor Janet trusts you alone in the house. Why should they? You *would* go searching if you were alone. You would open the steel drawers in the basement and look at the wooden box where your dad keeps photos of your sisters. You would pick through the faintly photocopied admissions forms from Trinity Methodist and the reports of your mental state post-Shocking Blake Murders compiled by Dr. Raine Heinz of Dallas County Health and Human Services. You would do these things not because there was anything for you to find out really, but because you are perverse.

So the weeks pass with the snow falling in and melting from the Meijer parking lot. In December and January the blizzards cover the yellow fishbone lines that mark the parking spots, and the snowplows build mountains of snow that survive the melts and freeze again and turn black. By April they have shrunk to little hills, the last of the winter. At Meijer there are birds in the ceiling, far above you among the hanging lights. You can always look up, to avoid seeing those things that signal the imminent end of the world, which according to Janet include every cover ever printed of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, every cover of *People* and *US*, and the entire Rap/Pop/Hip Hop aisle of the music department. There are the bright frightening TVs with their flashes of car crash and liquid orange flame, and the music piped in through faraway speakers. Janet is comforted by her awareness of the world's wild tailspin into obscenity, and takes pride in her ability to recognize the signs, to see through the bright tile-gloss and the solid colors to the rot beneath. She is comforted, too, by the thought that she will not have to live much longer with the rude girls in their too-short shorts and the dough-faced boys drifting on their skateboards over pothole and asphalt. She will not have to listen to heavy bass and snarly nasal voices on Meijer Radio for more than another decade at the most, probably less. You have never seen the world end yet, and you are not sure it will end now just because some fake-hair lady wears a tight dress on a magazine. But there is no point in telling Janet this.

Part of the problem is the place you live in, a skewed nation gone awry. In other countries it is easier to be good because punishment is swift and certain. The streets are clean because anyone caught planting empty cans and wadded-up bags in the bushes is whipped in the public square at nine the next morning. Janet can't remember the name of the country where this is true, but it was somewhere in the Middle East and one year an American college student was given thirty strokes with a cane for relieving himself on a public building. The liberals made a fuss, of course, and she can't say she wouldn't be upset if it were her own son being caned, but at the same time you can bet there is not an epidemic of public peeing in that country. In fact it is safe

to assume that public peeing is practically nonexistent along with violent crime, pickpocketing, graffiti, and very short skirts.

Here, by contrast, we have lost our way. Here a man can't protect his home from burglars, or bring up his children without interference from the professional kidnapers of CPS, but violent criminals and drug dealers relax in prisons full of amenities. The state has given children power over their parents and in that way made the world less safe. No one learns discipline because there is no model for discipline. In other countries things are better. The skinny barefoot kids look up from their soccer games when they hear the familiar sound of bamboo hitting flesh, and understand at once that someone who has been bad is being punished and that it will always be this way. The women walk in the market in groups of two and three with still faces, and the blows walk beside them like silent bodyguards.

When you were still young enough that you might have been changed, your parents had tried everything Pastor Mcleod insisted on and everything he warned against: spanking with switch and hand, bribes and isolation, ignoring you-- finally explaining everything they had hoped to shelter you from, in hopes you would understand the importance of good behavior. God died for your sins. God died for all of your sins and the more you sin the more he is still suffering, there on the cross. The cross is not just one moment in history; the cross is eternal, and Jesus, though risen, is still nailed to it, still bleeding. Did they dare neglect to teach a child that hell is real? Did they, in their misplaced compassion, leave the worst and most fundamental truth for later, when it would be too late? This was their great mistake, and there would be no way to make amends. If you were to be saved you had to know what was at stake. And even then it was not enough. When you were afraid of punishment or afraid of disappointing, or to make your sisters look bad, you pretended to be good, but you could feel rebellion growing. You could hear Eve's selfishness, Eve's arrogance, Eve's thoughtless curiosity, hissing up and down. Everything you were afraid of becoming you were.

You didn't know CPS was a name that stood for something when you were little. Doug and Stacy pronounced it *Seepy Yes*, pulled out and sinking in the middle like a stretched piece of Silly Putty. *Seepy Yes* is watching you girls, whenever you skinned your elbow or spilled boiling water on your legs or cried too long over something you were too old to cry about in the first place. Is that face that proclaimeth joy? *Seepy Yes* was watching, a hundred hidden cameras tucked between branches, snubbed against the little windows. When your dad moved you into the camper on Doug Mcleod's land and took up the cause of Christ, he put you at risk. Righteousness in a world ruled by the Enemy is always a risk, for children especially. *Seepy Yes*, servant of the government, is drawn to your prayers and your rebellion alike, because the law of the land is *not* the law of the Lord and the law of the land resents that you are saved without it.

You knew it had something to do with the first ever yes Eve said to the serpent when it hissed slick promises of liberation in her ear. That sin seeped down to all the generations after, and that yes would climb and claim you like red dye climbs a stalk of celery in the *Wonders of God's World* video. There were rules to guard against it, a wall of no to keep it out. Do not tell outsiders about the Fellowship. Do not tell outsiders how you are disciplined. Never complain about your parents or your pastor, even to each other, even as a joke. *Seepy Yes* will use the words to find you. Before you know it, your sisters will be dragged from their beds one by one and some FBI agent will have his clammy hand on your shoulder. You did the right thing, he'll tell you-- meaning it was all your fault.

*Seepy Yes* was a whisper. It would speak to you so softly you thought you were hearing your own voice for the first time. It got into your thoughts. Once you knew it was possible to be stolen by the government, sent to government schools and made to sleep in gray camp beds in some woman's living room, you couldn't help remembering your parents, your sisters, as if they were already gone, or keep from pretending to pray in secret, practicing for how proud God would be of your resistance to the world. The same pride made you walk slow past the bushes at Centennial Park in the hope of drug dealers, summoning in your mind their palms full of pills,

their needles and promises, so that you could give them the no you had practiced, a no so strong, you were sure the North American drug trade would never fully recover. You see how subtle the Enemy is, girls. See how he makes a sinner of us, sowing pride and vanity even in our love of God.

At first it was the end of the world that brought your dad back to Vinelands from the condo in Irving you don't remember, and all of you with him. Pastor Doug, who had led him to God from the campus of Rice University before you were born, laid prophecies before him, evidence so clear there was no choice but to retreat from the nation's collapse, decay so deep that words had lost their meanings and language no longer named the world. Your dad tried to explain it to you, but to speak of it calmly made him red and clenched. Your mother tried to explain, but she bowed her head and bit down hard on the inside of her mouth, unable to say what it was. It was up to Doug and Stacy to impress on you in their rough way what had happened. The idea of the family had been taken over by the state-- the baby-snatchers, the ones who would carry you off if you said the wrong words. Marriage was no longer marriage, but sterile impermanent coupling, what a dog does with the edge of a table, and the innocent word *gay* had been dragged around a bathroom floor somewhere. There was a worm in everything, everything chewed and brown, and no world to give you anymore but the next.

“We have sown our own destruction at last,” he used to say. “Praise to the Almighty Lord, Who causes everything we sow in our hearts to bear fruit.” The end would begin on New Year's Eve. Every computer in the world had been given a certain kind of clock, a clock that would reset at zero when the numbers rolled beyond 1999, the last year before the Judgment, the year mans' pride and recklessness had made. Power would be cut off, birth records erased. Even the government was afraid of what would happen then. But for the faithful, there was nothing to fear. People would die, but you would not be among them. Your dad would lose his job, but losing it would save him. When he burned your birth certificate, you felt proud without knowing why, and deliciously afraid, as of Christmas morning or the answer to a math problem you had

just begun to understand. “Bye-bye, Caesar,” he cooed to the flames. He held Sharon's pale baby hand in his and bent it back and forth over the light. He lifted her high over the fire to drop the last scraps of paper and they danced on the thin smoke as she watched with nothing in her face but flame and attention and the little curls of black ash grew light and were lifted. “Bye-bye, Mammon, bye-bye.”

New Year's Eve came and you lay on the Mcleod's driveway trying to feel the earth turn for the first and last time through the gravel. Everyone who was with you then had gathered: all eleven Mcleods and their brother-in-law, the Vogels, Matt and Martha Donnell and their grown sons, the four college students who had just been baptized and were still wearing their soft white robes, smelling of chlorine and corn oil. Your mother squeezed your hand when the candles were lit, and kissed the top of your head. “Be good,” she said. “It won't be long.” As the numberless gold and white clock on the mantel moved toward midnight, you listened for the sound of guns and helicopters, and even Lily, who earlier had fired imaginary rockets at the ceiling, was chastened and quiet. When the clock chimed, she closed her hand on yours.

At ten minutes past midnight, Stacy handed her baby to Jessalyn and began to sing Psalm 1, the first you had learned, calling on God for roots to clutch the earth, and Pastor Mcleod's huge red voice rose in the light of the camp lantern: your protection, Lord, in this time of trial, in the coming age of darkness, in your will be done.

In the morning the world was the same as it had been. Your dad went back to work in Dallas and your mother walked around dazed in the bare garden, staring at you startled as if certain she were dreaming. Nothing happened the way it was supposed to. The drug dealers never gave you a chance to turn them down in all the summers you spent walking past the bushes in Centennial Park, and Jesus wasn't waiting in the garden with his sticky hands turned toward you on the days you were so certain were the day of his return. No one carried you away before the end, not even death, and yes seeped in despite the walls around you.

## Your Imaginary Friends from the Internet

Your dad was afraid you would grow up unable to tell the difference between TV and real life. He was always saying, “Won't these be nice memories to have, instead of TV?” as if you were at serious risk of mixing up the two. Like most of his worries it was grounded in science. Studies had shown the brain's foolish love of the moving image. If you put a child in front of the TV it will begin to reach for the images as if they were living faces. The brain grows toward the image like a sunflower toward the sun.

This had happened to him. He was sure he had lost something that should have been a part of him, something that in the past he would have taken for granted but which he could not now reconstruct, except in you. Doug had noticed it at once, the first time Randy came to visit him, when Living in Love Ministries was just beginning to grow. “Something is missing in your heart,” he said. “This culture has broken your connection with others.” The world was full now of people like him, who had never learned how to live or to see, how to be a whole person. Stacy squeezed his hands between her own and said it was common in people of his generation. She was only a few years older, but since her conversion she always spoke as if her life had taken place long ago. The screens had lured him and made him blind: not just the TV of his childhood but the arcade and the computers he had been drawn to soon after. They had confused the connections between him and others, between him and God.

TV was responsible for his lack of discernment not only about the woman he married, or the Mcleods, who in the end never paid him for six months of work on the Project Nathan website and almost got him fired from his job at Electronic Data Services when he left the Fellowship, but also about a dozen earn-from-home scams and allegedly life-changing success strategies. He believed, for example, that he could earn thousands of dollars per month selling Amway affiliations at dinner parties, despite hating parties and having no particular loyalty to Amway. He believed it right up to the second he stepped in front of Janet's couch to deliver the sales pitch he had been taught at the training weekend, with everyone he knew in Southwest Michigan



watching. Only then did he see how few of them there were and how little he knew them. Their pity and annoyance passed over him like searchlights as you stood in the kitchen waiting for the film to start so you could set out the tray of half-frozen cream puffs and mini cheesecakes from Costco. He stood there for what must have been minutes, with the DVD in his hand, pushing up on his toes as if to get a glimpse of the world of wealth and leisure he knew had never been waiting for him. “Ok.” he said. He shoved the DVD behind the monitor he had brought out of the study to serve as a screen. “Would anyone like some dessert?” The product catalogs and the circulars showing laughing couples toasting their Amway profits he pushed into a corner of the basement behind the Christmas decorations, and you were proud and ashamed of him at the same time.

He blamed TV for his embarrassing TV appearances, and for his inability in the terrible days that followed the murders to find a footing between glibness and its opposite, the black hole. His own memories were all mixed up with cop shows and afternoon movies, and the stories he told were all from TV, it turned out, though that didn't make them bad stories. He used to tell you how lucky you were to have real memories, and how grateful you would be for them, so often that it was a family joke to say you were hoarding up memories, like Ebenezer Scrooge and his tottery pile of coins. One for the bank, Tina would say. The memory fund, instead of the college fund. Which was more important?

You remembered TV anyway, the news and the commercials, cars gliding through empty mountain passes, huge kitchens smeared with mud and made clean. TV habits seeped into your speech, the space left for the tumble or wrecking ball that signified a curse— *What the! Why, you little!* and your sisters crashed against the couch with cartoon sounds. Lily held her arms out stiff and lifted her flat feet high, cartoon of a monster in a movie she had never seen. Later the news reports reached you even though Aunt Angie and your dad tried to keep them away: the white caskets, your dad's helpless smile, Tina in her dirty orange jumpsuit and the glasses that were not her real glasses, came to you from far away. For years you remembered the camera's slow pan

over the damp stuffed animals and the little candles in the long grass by the fence as if it were your own memory, as if you had pressed your face to the window of the ambulance as it rolled away too slow to save you, and the homemade crosses tied with ribbon, the sad-eyed dolls and the real and fake flowers rose around the road like extras in a movie musical, waving and singing you goodbye.

Then he was afraid you were too alone, with a dangerous freedom to mope around reading the bad-for-you book of Ecclesiastes and those old novels that have turned your speech clipped and funny. He can hear it when you answer the cashiers' innocent questions: the way the end of the *yes* hisses a little and the consonants are snipped abruptly like cigar-ends, the wrongheaded way you use the words "oh" and "so" and lower your eyes automatically at any face, as if Charles Dickens had implanted a meekness chip in your brain. Not that he would want you to be like *most* teenagers, loud and blurred-looking and blunt, not that he would want your voice to rollercoaster up into that familiar unknown shriek or for you to toss your head and blink when he spoke as if his words were a shower of motes in your eye, a mere annoyance, or to go around dressed the way teenage girls do, like a whore whose streetwalking clothes have turned gray in the wash, but there was no reason you shouldn't have friends.

Youth groups were no use. The youth group leaders imagined all young people wanted noise and songs with the word "awesome" in them, as if bad taste were a necessary stage of development needing to be nurtured. You were presumed to be sufficiently in love with long-ago TV stars to care what they thought about evolution, and to be deeply fascinated by the mechanics of the human body. In the bright false voices of the youth group leaders, even Scripture sounded like a commercial for some sweet unwholesome drink. Their voices pushed you away, smiling and shouting, until you lost balance, and it was the same everywhere.

So he forged your conversion story and filled out the application for admission to the Maidens Set Apart community, whose screening process demands adherence to strict Terms of Use forbidding, among other things, negativity, premarital kissing, and the promotion of androgynous fashions. The Maidens, with their lace-edged personal web pages and Jane Austen theme parties, were safe friends for you, striving as you should strive to serve the Lord, in but not of the world.

The importance of encouragement and fellowship is brought home to him every time he listens to the radio or buys groceries. It is made plain every time he checks his email to see if anyone has ordered a Silver Hills textbook. It was bad enough when he was growing up, when it was still possible to turn off the TV even if no one ever did. Now the air itself is noise. There are microwave towers and cell phone towers just beyond the trees, and satellites in orbit beaming trashy bikini challenges from the heavens. A million needless or desperate conversation hum through the day without stopping. Even the marsh behind your house and the weeds around the narrow dirt road you live on are loud with misspelled words and teenage candor, tangled in the wind in the flowering plum trees. Everything calls you into the world.

“She’s got cabin fever,” your dad will say to Janet, meaning you, having never lost his habit of talking about you as if you were a baby to whom his words were sounds only until her turned his face toward you and cooed. And Janet will agree and wish out loud that you knew what kind of world it was you wanted to be conformed to. With this in mind, Janet has begun to gather friendly warnings of the dangers outside, newspaper columns and mass emails with titles like LADIES: Please Read, full of tips on how to avoid getting raped while walking alone through a parking structure. Rule number one: don't be in the parking structure. Rule number two: don't be alone. She writes your name at the top like they're birthday cards and highlights the most important passages, filling you with commonsense precautions like small stones.

Why don't you confide in the Maidens? Why not tell them your story? You wouldn't have to tell the whole truth. You could tell them you lost a sister to leukemia. They would understand leukemia. Tell them your father is remarried and you don't know what God thinks of that. They will swarm you like ants and write your name in layers of parentheses to show that they were hugging you, (((((Cedar))))), from their white living rooms and cushion-covered laptops in Andorra, Texas and Ruby Falls, Arkansas and New Madras, Indiana. They are only waiting for the chance to shower you with evidence of their Christlike hearts. But the violet-and-cream web page your dad set up for you is empty except for his own collection of uplifting links and the Maidens At Home seal of approval. You don't fill out their long surveys ("What is your most painful memory?") or their illustrated quizzes designed to reveal which literary heroine or type of fabric you would be, if you were a literary heroine or a type of fabric. You don't answer when Kaylee167 or Abideinhim ask for photos. *Hello, Lovely maidens! I'm making a collage of all our favorite things! Please help out by sending pictures of yourself in your favorite outfit, or anything that makes you feel inspired!*

It has never occurred to your dad that you might not like the Maidens. He thinks you are just shy and need for him to leave heart-shaped sticky notes on the computer monitor to remind you that your new friends want to hear what you have to say. He doesn't know that you have nothing to say to them. Their giggling piety, their dress-up parties and family scrapbooks might as well be in another language. But you are being watched, you have to remember, and so it's only fair to assume that they are also being watched, so you try not to blame them for being boring. Sometimes you pretend that their costume updates and games are an elaborate code, and every new recipe for Green Gables Plum Puffs or acrostic poem on C O R I N T H I A N S or string of one-word answers to The One-Word Survey (Answer Using One Word ONLY!) will one day reveal a pattern, and the pattern will say: I am not these slivers of light. I am like you. Because you're only pretending, you can pretend that you will instantly be able to respond in the same code. Even though you're pretending, you don't know what happens after that.

## Janet is Careless with Your Mail

One day, when the mounds of black snow have almost melted, there is an envelope addressed to you, stuck between the pages of the youth newsletter from Grand River Right to Life (Be A Riot GRRL!) that you have received without fail ever since Janet ordered one of their calendars. The envelope is addressed to Miss Cedar Heart Blake, a name you never use, and there is no return address, something that if Janet had checked she would have known was a sure sign that the envelope contained anthrax. But she handed it to you along with the Beyond Rubies catalog with its four smiling girls modeling prairie skirts with the same gesture in front of the white church, the picket fence, and the rose bower for forty pages. As soon as you see the row of words in green marker, you know it is from your mom. You fold it closed and curl the newsletter around it before Janet notices anything is wrong. A blank seeps over you, white pool on white screen, and you carry your mail to your room as Janet sorts through the stack of glossy coupon catalogs and imagines you are off to dream of yourself in Beyond Rubies pleated jumpers. “You can read it down here,” she says, meaning she wants to give you her opinion on which necklines and colors are best for you.

“I need to get my test book,” you say. “I have to practice.”

“Don’t worry so much,” she says, with her serene squint. “God isn’t worried, so you shouldn’t be, that’s what I always say. You have time.”

Upstairs you hide the letter in the blue GED Success Guide and carry it into the bathroom, which used to be the only door in the house with a lock until your dad decided too much privacy was a peril. Now the button on the doorknob that used to keep it from turning connects to no mechanism, though you still press it out of habit. You turn on the fan and sit down against the door to read the letter but your hands are shaking and the green marker letters run together like drops of water. *I am reading more these days, not books of instruction but fiction. I think of you. . .* The K in *books* and the K in *think* are both dense and slanted backward, as if she had written the wrong letter and had to correct it. The back of the page is blank, but the marker

has seeped through in deep green blobs, and the next page is full of thick, dark Ks, a constellation of blotches. The third is just a phone number, and a note: *Your grandma would like to hear from you if you get the chance, she was not the best parent but she cares about you. It has changed since I sent it to you before.*

There was a *before*. Somewhere in the house are letters addressed to you. You put the letter and the envelope on the floor. Soon you will have been in the bathroom too long and Janet will begin to be suspicious. She will naturally want to know what you are doing and if you are sick, and how you managed to become sick so suddenly, hours after breakfast, and she will want to know if she should call your dad and have him pick up some Pepto-Bismol on his way home from work. Then there will be more questions, and maybe your dad will decide that you are pretending to be sick to get attention, or that you have managed to have sex somehow and are now pregnant, or that you are really sick and the whole family needs to prepare for a month of the flu. Meanwhile, Micah and Amos are waiting for you to come back downstairs so that you can help them fill out today's square on the Virtue Calendar: Self-Control. You run the water in the tub, thinking she won't open the door if she thinks you might be naked. But now she wants to know what you're doing taking a bath in the middle of the day. "Are you ok?" she says anxiously. She knocks on the door, four quick raps. "Why is the water running?"

"I want to shave my legs."

There is a pause and then the knock again.

"Don't come in."

"Cedar. What do you want to shave your legs for? Do you have a husband I don't know about?"

You push on the door in case she tries to shove it open. She says, "You're going to regret it if you shave your legs now. Before I shaved my legs, I had the softest leg hair. You couldn't even see it." She clicks her tongue. "I think you should wait until your dad gets home." But you hear the creak of the floorboards as she leaves the door.

There is the letter on the tile. You should put it under the water and turn it to pulp, but what good would that do? If you destroyed it your dad would find the pulp and then he would know. It would be worse than if you had left it as it was, because he would know for sure that you had read it. He would want to know what it said and how you felt about that and most of all *why* you had opened mail without him and *why* you had destroyed it. You open the drawer where your dad keeps razors and shaving cream, uncap a yellow plastic razor and swish it around in the water. Janet is knocking at the door again.

“Don't come in!”

“Are you sure you need that much water?” she says. “How much water do you need to shave your legs?”

You turn off the faucet and splash water on your head to make it look like you had a legitimate reason for being in the bathroom. Then you fold up the letter and its pale purple envelope and tuck them under the wire of your bra, where they press into your skin. There will be red marks, but no one will see them. You flush the toilet and turn on the taps of the sink.

When you emerge with your GED workbook and the pack of graph paper on which you will write your sample essay, Janet says, “That was quick.”

“I decided not to shave my legs.” you tell her.

“Why not?”

“You said it was a bad idea.”

She narrows her eyes, confused.

Already either your dad will find out and scold you for not telling Janet, or Janet will find out and the hurt laugh will bubble in her throat, or no one will find out for months and there will be a family conference on honesty and openness. Then he will want to talk about it and be unable to, and it will grow between you like a cyst. The corners of the envelope dig into your skin. In the evening you lie on your stomach on the couch and wait for your dad to come home so you can pretend that nothing happened.

The unborn don't know that it's rude to wish for someone else's death. They never had the chance to know anything. They only know when their friends are near, and that soon their friends will be happy in heaven as they are. They swarmed your sisters with joy when they arrived, and together they waited for you to join them, all skinless pulsing, all nameless and hungry love. In dreams they hover around you still, a cloud and a swarm, patient and plaintive as the ghost fetus Aunt Angie let you watch on Cartoon Cavalcade. He followed a living girl around, white rags drifting in the air behind him, trying to make her his friend. He spoke to her in secret and did small favors for her, and kept the grown-up ghosts from scaring her family away. But she would grow up and move away, and he would be dead forever.

You wrote your sister's names at first in your prayer journal and tried to remember their faces. In your big lopsided cursive you pressed the names deep in the paper, so that when you turned the page you could feel the indentation. But your dad read it and said, "Are you trying to tell us something, Cee?" It was always *us* now, him and Janet. So you wrote initials instead, and turned the lines of their faces into vines and spirals that filled the pink pages. Still your dad imagined that everything written to God was a message to *him*, simply because he took it from you. So you tore those pages out. You wrote and tore until all the pages were gone or erased, and then you dropped your prayer journal in the toilet and pretended to be upset. Your dad didn't believe it was an accident, but he couldn't imagine why you would do it on purpose, so he let it go. He bought you a new journal, a cheaper one, and told you to be careful. In the new journal you made circles, one for each name. You filled them in black and covered pages with them. What was the point of that, Cee? Why do you have a prayer journal if you're just going to waste it?

Now you have a code, tiny circles with lines through them you hide in the loops of ds and fs and js. It was wrong to pray for the dead, like second-guessing God's judgment. You can't pretend that God won't decode your symbols even if you keep their meaning pushed out of your



mind and call them circle, dot, circledot, dash. Who made your thoughts, Cedar? Who folded the flesh of your brain and trained the nerves of your body to be soul and speech? Every thought is like a note already written, Janet told you. She said it because she thought it would be comforting, because what is comforting to Janet and what is comforting to you are two different things. For her it is a sign of God's grace that nothing could have been otherwise: not the fall or the cross, not her children's angry distance or the blows that border her past or the terrible thing that saved her. She can hear the old-movie violins swell around her redemption, and even your ugly teenage discord will be resolved in it. When she says this she sighs and clasps her hands, a gesture she learned to mean sincere childlike faith and that is used by no child you have ever met personally. All will be revealed, she says. She means that too to be a comfort.

Awake late at night you remember the green words and feel prickled all over as if tiny insects hatched and scrambled under your skin. If you turn on the light to read it, it will wake your dad or Janet, so you don't. When your dad finds out that *you know* it will mean more needles of concern, maybe a week off work to take you somewhere, as if sand dunes or pine trees were a truth serum. You want to go downstairs and look for the other letters, but what would they say? Every time you try to read this one, the words stick together in heavy clumps. *Spring is almost here in Texas.* Was there any reason for you to have it?

Your dad should wake up when you leave the bed, but he doesn't. He should hear the drawers roll open and the clumsy shuffle of socks and sweaters, winter hat and scarf, but he doesn't and it is his fault. Restless Janet should be stirred awake by your feet on the floorboards, by the weight of your zebra bookbag on the bed and on your back. She should come squinting forward in her long pink flannel nightgown at the creak of your feet on the stairs but she won't. Time passes without them. The kitchen fills with light and goes dark, the file cabinets open and shut. Things disappear that they will not miss for days: the pocketknife saved for improbable future camping trips, \$20 bills and quarters from the grocery jar on the stove: criminal actions,

grounds for arrest. If the garbage bag ministry Janet likes so much, where they stage a kidnapping and you have to live in a basement for nine weeks, met you at the door with their bags and their white van to carry you to a secret location in which you would learn to behave properly, you would have no cause for complaint. It would be better if they did, if they gave up trying to understand and guide you and simply *took your heart*. Janet and your dad can read your prayer journals and take the door off its hinges, take books out of your hands and act offended, but to force you to be good, to break the bad wires in you, requires extraordinary measures.

The kitchen door opens and closes as they turn in whatever dreams surround them. The front porch light is the only light on the long dirt road and the sound of insects is all around but you walk into the dark and keep walking. Your feet scrape the road and your wet braids dance again your back, *take my heart, O take and seal it*. As soon as you are out of sight of the house your pry open the pocket knife and saw through the right braid above the ear. It takes longer than you expect and when the hair comes away in your hand you throw it rubber band and all into the marsh. You don't hear it land. Then you cut the other, closer to your head. This is a pointless measure because you will be recognized anyway, pointless because you are outside and alone. *Predators go for long loose hair*, says Janet's safety tips for girls, but a girl on the road alone at night is already as naked as a girl without clothes. You can be wearing a too-big turtleneck and baggy jeans and the stupid flimsy loafers that make you look sixty-five years old, but night and aloneness rip the clothes right off you. If you are going to get anywhere, you have to keep walking anyway.

## Your Parents Before They Were Your Parents

It was your dad's job to tell the story of how they met, and your mother's to object on the grounds that you would all be bored silly hearing the same old thing. "Don't tell them it was love at first sight," she warned him. There was no such thing, not anymore. Your dad used to say that he was the last one ever, last of the pure devoted lovers before "lover" turned into something crude and inappropriate, like the bare legs of girls in drugstore posters. He had been brought in by the high school where Tina worked to teach computer skills to the new teachers. Later she claimed that she did not think of him at all the whole time, barely noticed when he covered her hand with his to move the cursor over the wastebasket she could use to delete a file he had created. Your dad pretended to be hurt by her indifference. "She didn't notice me at all," he would say, hoping she would correct him. But she had a hard honesty about things like that, as she had about the mole on your dad's cheek and the odd, ladylike way he held his hands in public. That was when Grandma Blake meant when she said, "That woman gives you no respect."

She had more than one future then, and she moved between them as she drew expanding circles with her blue pen on a notebook marked Windows, Fall. What were they like, those futures?

"Peace Corps, travel the world," she said. "Silly things like that."

"I might as well have been invisible," your dad would say.

"I guess so," she would answer. But she smiled when she said it, and she loved him *now*. That much was clear. She was only honest because she could not be otherwise. She smoothed his colorless hair as he drove and there was no question, no shadow of doubt. God had shown him then, and God would continue to show him. As he drew task trees on the blackboard with a cylinder of new chalk, faltering before the glassy eyes of the high school teachers, God spoke to him in her body; God whispered a smile into her long dark mouth; God knit her

eyebrows into a quizzical slope as she sorted his abandoned handouts into a pile after class to return to him, her big hands clumsy and delicate like a fish's gauzy fins. You were proud then of his certainty and of her luminous tolerance. At the end of the last class he asked her a question, his boldness already surprising him: Do you want to have coffee sometime?

When she gave him the first of her slow daybreak smiles, he knew, and when she said Ok, how about now. He knew when she raised her unkempt eyebrows in the mirror strung with beads and when they sat down in the huge cushioned booth at Lone Star Espresso only to confess that neither of them liked coffee. Already his real life had opened in front of him and he had only to walk toward it. That is the gift God will give you, he said, when you're ready to meet your partner in life. That is the gift He gives everyone who waits patiently for His will to be revealed.

After a week, he introduced her to his new church family, Pastor Doug Mcleod and his wife Stacy, their tall quiet children and their friends the Vogels. Everything was happening so quickly. He held your mother's hand and Pastor Mcleod and the pastor looked right past her. "The questions he asked!" Your dad was amazed by his thoroughness and his coldness, as if in the absence of a father he was questioning a prospective date. "He asked about my intentions, if my intentions were to marry her or if I was just having a good time. I said my intentions were absolutely marriage. There was no doubt at all in my mind."

"It was the first I'd heard of it," said your mom. When she laughed, you all laughed, even shy staring Roo and Aimee, who didn't know words.

The church group held a meeting right there in Pastor Mcleod's living room, with your dad and mom standing outside not knowing if they would ever get to be your mom and dad. It was before Vinelands had a name, years before anyone would live there but Pastor Mcleod and his family. The room that would be the classroom was full of potted plants then and framed paintings leaning against the walls with no nails to hang them to, and the watery light waited with them while the Mcleods and the Vogels whispered. "I can tell you, it was pretty awful!" your mom said. "I thought, are they going to kick him out of his church because of me?"

“But they loved you,” your dad said. “You were perfect.”

You already knew how it ended. You couldn't remember a time when you hadn't heard it a million times already but you wanted to hear it again to know it hadn't changed, it had always been true, to assure them both that it was going to turn out all right— you were here, weren't you? Weren't you proof?

“No one is perfect,” said your mom sternly.

She prayed the same prayer you had learned along with language. Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed. If your dad hadn't known before that day, he knew then. She prayed the prayer right out loud on her knees on the green shag carpet not yet ripped up for shining hardwood, and closed her eyes for the anointing. You can imagine her as if it were you, the damp pressure of Pastor Mcleod's red thumb in olive oil, the lukewarm water in her hair. She walked into it without fear, so your dad knew that he could, too.

When they met, your parents didn't know they were your parents. They didn't know it was the past. If you could go back in time, it would change nothing. You'd show them the pictures you brought back from the future: the white baby caskets with their wreaths of yellow flowers, Tina in prison orange, her lank hair hanging, the candles and teddy bears propped up outside the fence. You'd give them newspaper articles with their names highlighted: Killer Mom, 36, Pleads Guilty to Murder of 4. They will shake their heads and smile as at a long boring dream retold at breakfast. They are not those people. The dates in the newspapers are years in the future, and the future is not fixed. They are young and full of nervous love and Tina who will be your mother has just found Jesus with Randy's help. With the prayers he taught her and the guidance of Living in Love Ministries she has felt in the dark for his face and found it close before her. “You don't understand,” they would say. “We make our own future. The future can be anything.” They would smile indulgently at your childishness and squeeze each other's hands.

## No One is Convinced That You Drive A Truck

By the time you reach the highway and the Meijer parking lot, the stars have been eaten and a thin light is spreading. The woods open to fields and the fields to scrapyard, and huge trucks gray with grime pass where the road past your house meets US-12 and bends into the freeway. There is no shoulder now, only tall grass and plastic bags and clumps of toilet paper growing clear in the new light. One of those trucks could run you over without stopping, one jolt under the wheels and the smooth road after. BLAKE SURVIVOR FOUND DEAD, the papers will say. SUSPECTED SUICIDE. *What Was She Doing Out By the Road Anyway, Police Wonder.*

You should have stopped walking long ago and gone home, but you have not, and there is no answer to the obvious question, only a clumsy buzz in your head and one step and another. Past the freeway and the huge ringed eyes of Krazy Kaplan, the parking lot covers the whole hillside, sloping down to the familiar building, smaller and flatter than you remember with trees and pastel storefronts painted on it. Behind it the road into downtown Maris, where you have seen the bus station and its high glass windows a thousand times when your dad took you out for ice cream. Past the pawn shop with its barred windows and rainbow letters, past the bar with its dimmed neon and the blue incurious pigeons the bus station looks lost, embarrassed by its height and its windows, transported by mistake from another town with more theaters and fewer bait shops. Already more of its windows had been broken than the city could afford to fix, and strips of plywood covered the holes like itchy blindfolds. Someone has written a name, a scribbled signature in dusty blue over the hours of operation, and there are already men standing outside with dusty faces. They watch you under eyebrows and foreheads, through the shadows of black hat and baseball cap, clearly in the wrong place, in the wrong clothes at the wrong hour. "It's closed," one says, "Where you going?"

Under the blue flourish the hours are 8am to 9pm, No Loitering. The man who did not speak spits on the ground, makes a phlegmy sound deep in his throat, and spits again. The saliva glistens in the air and falls.

“It's closed,” says the man in the baseball cap. “Where's your parents at?”

“I don't have any,” you say.

“Get out of here.”

“I'm forty-three.”

He sputters a laugh and shakes his head at the sky. “Forty-three, better don't be out walking around at five in the morning. And don't get on any bus, either. Bad things happen on a bus.”

“Ok,” you say, and start to walk away, down the street as if you were always headed for something else in the first place. There is nothing you can do about how dangerous the bus is. God won't protect you in your disobedience. The other man is leaning forward to say something to you as you walk away. It's not safe— is that what he said? Or was it something else? In the Meijer parking lot someone is always asking for money. They follow your dad from his car and rain on him long stories of hard luck. Maybe it was something like that: out of a job, child on dialysis, house repossessed. But he is far behind you now and you didn't hear him, and you can't be blamed for not hearing someone.

There is a restaurant down the street with the door propped open, one you have seen before but never entered. The sound of frying crackles in your head and there is a neon sign in the window, pie-shaped with the blinking red word PIES, and you want to eat French toast with syrup and try to decide what you should do.

Bunched up against the door is a black mat turned up and wet with mud, and the sign PLEASE WAIT TO BE SEATED. People-- men-- are already eating, some hunched on barstools, some in narrow booths. Truck drivers, maybe, who will have to get back into their trucks in a minute and drive again for hours. “Just sit wherever,” says the waitress, and walks past with white shoes squeaking. You find a booth against the wall with a constellation of crumbs and a piece of white napkin stuck to the table with syrup. The song on the radio is a woman bragging about how she has destroyed her boyfriend's car. The guitars swing triumphantly around her righteous anger

and the song ends in a flurry of talk about the road conditions this windy April morning, for those traveling on US-12, for those traveling on I-94 or Pulaski Highway. The caged clock over the grill says six-twenty. So the man outside the bus station was wrong about what time it was, or he meant something else, or time is trying to help you for some reason, brushing hours away like flies.

“What can I get you?”

The waitress leans a clear plastic pen against a pad of green paper. Log fingers of her hair float in the breeze from the dusty box fan. It's more suspicious not to look up; if you don't look up she'll know you're hiding and guess right away that you don't want to be recognized. Better to act like someone who comes in all the time, or someone who is just stopping through town and orders breakfast in a different town every day. A truck driver, maybe. You try to picture the inside of the truck you have just climbed down from after sleeping by the side of the road, the steering wheel and the high cloth-covered chair. You have been driving a truck for years and eventually you have made friends with a few people. Maybe the waitress is new, and doesn't know you always order coffee with five creams and French toast, and sometimes hash browns cooked black. “Hash burns,” they call you. “Hey, Hash Burns! How are things on the road?” You try to imagine how things might be on the road, or to think the words *I just climbed down from my truck and I would like a French toast*. But you can't seem to lift your head the way you should. The waitress knows you aren't a truck driver. You don't even know how to drive a car. Maybe she can tell you've never driven any motor vehicle just from the way you sit in the booth, the way Janet claims she can tell whether any woman is a virgin or not from the movements of her voice. The waitress is blinking at you impatiently and flicking the pen back and forth between her fingers, but you still can't look up. Four long hairs windmill from the mole on the back of her hand and it is rude to stare at them.

“Looking for a menu?” she says. She pulls one from behind the wire ketchup holder and sets it over the crumbs in front of you. The plastic is peeling off in one corner. A grinning



collection of ovals holds up a platter of pancakes. BREAKFAST ALL DAY LONG.

“Thank you.”

“Need a minute?” The words swim under the smudged plastic.

“Could I have French toast, please? And a coffee?”

“Stuffed or regular?”

You have never heard of stuffed French toast. You imagine ground beef spilling from an ugly slit. “Regular, please.” She slips the menu back behind the ketchup racks. As soon as she's gone you realize you should have ordered eggs, which are cheaper and more nutritious. If you are going to be homeless, or even if you were a real truck driver, you have to think of these things. But you wanted something sweet and easy to swallow. You pick up the menu to see what the French toast is stuffed with: cream cheese or fruit compote. The menu is full of better breakfasts you could have had: oatmeal with bananas, banana bread, eggs and sausage, orange juice and apple juice. But the flesh calls, the flesh wants syrup and soft bread. The sin nature of the child is enormous, ladies, bigger than the child when he's born. It will grow right along with him, ladies, if you don't take care.

With your wool cap and your new-mangled hair you look like a fat boy delinquent, one of the dough-faced boys who drift around the Meijer parking lot on skateboards. It would be stupid to envy them their weightlessness and their lazy fly-circles. Your problem is always your failure to understand the *meaning* of the world. In fact those boys are uneducated and mean, and their movements a nuisance. They came from *broken homes* with *working mothers*; they eat fast-food tacos out of paper bags because no one has ever bothered to cook for them meat loaf, tater tots, pork chops with applesauce. Their lack of a childhood has given them an unreasonable attachment to childhood, and you should pity them and pray for them now before they are too old to feel sorry for.

Janet will be awake by now. She will come downstairs to make breakfast and a lunch for your dad to take to work-- leftover pasta salad, maybe. An apple, an orange, a ginger spice cookie

baked with Micah's eager and Cedar's grudging help the Friday before. Some Hoffman's hard salami in a little bag, rolled up with mustard. Your dad likes salami and he doesn't like to ruin it with bread. "Why suffocate the salami?" he'll say. "Why do that to the best lunch meat ever invented?" Maybe when he comes downstairs he will check to make sure she hasn't desecrated his salami, and when he sees that she has done the right thing he will kiss her on the cheek and on the tip of her wide nose. "That's my girl," he'll say. She will see him off with the same half-tilted tenderness, tipping her head to be kissed, and he will peck her cheek with the same good cheer as on every other morning until now, and they will be far apart when they realize you're gone.

But there isn't any point in thinking about that, any more than in wondering what people will do when you're dead, as if you were so important that nothing could go on without you. You already know the answer because you've seen the answer. If you never came back, there would be fliers for a while with your last Christmas picture on them and maybe the news would do a Where is She Now special on your troubled childhood. Soon they would give up searching, and then they would spend a few months in deliberate grief, and their lives would close over the place you had been as seamlessly as water around a drowning man. Soon no one who wasn't around to see it will know that you were there at all. It's the same way for everyone, because it has to be.

The French toast comes with two sausage patties and a paper cup of cold butter at six-thirty-one. You open the letter and pretend to be engrossed, but the green writing is too conspicuous and you don't know what you should be looking for, what it should mean. Then you eat as slowly as you can, sponging the sausage around in the syrup, rolling the gristle apart with your tongue. At eight exactly you leave twenty dollars of your dad's money on the table and walk back up the hill to the bus station. A woman in a red flour-clouded apron is pushing a rack of dough through the door of Marietta's, shouting into the phone that the dough is like ice, like literally a solid block of ice. A truck rattles too fast down the pitted road. All around you, birds you can't see are singing.

The yellow lights inside the bus station are dull in the sun, and the plywood strips cast

thin shadows. The loiterers have gone except one, the spitter whose words you walked away from. He flutters his eyelids together and pushes his toes into the floor. From time to time he walks to the vending machine and back to the travel safety brochures, his coughing dense and intent. By the vending machines two teenage boys are laughing. Their talk has reached the point at which everything is funny, when every sound points back to the source of the laughter, and they are doubled over, hands pressed against the glass to steady themselves, their long chests showing through the sleeves of their long loose shirts. On the other side of the ticket window the names of cities are half-formed in white letters: Chi go, Ind a p , Detr , T l d. "Do you go to Ann Arbor?" you ask. The man behind the glass taps the window, taps his ear. His glasses are like prison glasses, with broad plastic frames. Maybe they let you keep the glasses when you leave prison, and that's where he got them. Janet would hate that. You break the law and get free glasses as a reward? she would say. What kind of punishment is that?

"Do you go to Ann Arbor?" you ask again, louder and closer to the window.

"Not if I can help it," he says. You can tell by his expectant face that he has told the same joke many times. He has a thin mustache and a yellow rubber thimble on his thumb that he keeps squashing with his fingers. The boys' laughter fills the space meant for yours. "Nine thirty AM and seven PM."

"Could I go at nine-thirty today?"

"In a hurry," he says, and tilts his head as if he had asked you a question. You start to repeat the question but he interrupts you. "Any luggage?"

You show him the zebra bookbag. He turns away and types at a yellowing machine.

"Forty-five seventy nine," he says.

"I'm sorry?"

"Forty-five dollars. And seventy-nine cents." He smiles the way people do sometimes at the slightly ridiculous, the way Janet smiles at obviously inaccurate interpretations of Corinthians. "Where are you from?"

“The future,” you say.

“Hm?” He tilts his head at the microphone. You don't answer and he goes back to typing, the yellow keys clicking under his fingers, chuckling a little to himself at your lack of a sense of humor.

Somewhere under the desk a printer makes a shrill whirring sound and delivers a ticket, which he tucks into a glossy envelope and slides under the window. “Ann Arbor, nine thirty-five. Don't miss the announcement. It's only going to be one.”

On the glass of the vending machine someone has scrawled another illegible signature in a wisp of blue paint. Is it the same name as on the door? What if everything were a message? It is a sign of craziness to think everything is speaking to you, but there is also God. The loiterer from outside squeaks the thin sole of his shoe against the floor and watches you under his eyelids until he doesn't anymore. You read about special fares and then you read the safety guidelines and the bookmark with tips on what to do if you see someone planting a bomb on the bus.

There is no announcement when the bus comes, only people gathering at the door: a woman with gift bags and a quilted purse, the boys with their ropy arms swinging. You climb the three high steps and sit next to a dusty window and try to look like you are thinking deep thoughts about the concrete shelter and the bright street beyond it. At any moment you might see your dad, running up the street with his forehead all crinkled. Cedar, what were you thinking? What happened to your hair? And Janet, breathless with relief that her prayers have been answered so efficiently: *Cee, you really do have a mind of your own!* But they have no way of knowing where you are, and no one appears in the driveway except a thin young mother pushing a canvas stroller over the curb and down, through the shadow of the shelter and bump onto the sidewalk again. The bus lurches into the light and there is no way now to leave it. It bumps over the pits of the main street and over the St. Joseph River, and soon you are passing under the eyes of Krazy Kaplan, the heavy equipment sales yard with its steam shovels and bulldozers like solemn silent dinosaurs, past the soy fields east into the green and yellow day.

## The Greatest Ecological Disaster in Earth History

It was your mom's idea to stop at the Natural History Museum in Arkansas, on the way to visit Grandma Wizeck. The girls liked dinosaurs, and it would be a learning experience, she thought, to learn about the arguments for evolution and then try to refute them. The sooner they were able to start thinking for themselves about the past, the better. There was something worrying in their handwriting, in the cleanness with which they colored Adam's hair and Aaron's robe one solid mass of the same brown, how carefully they clicked shut and spit out the ends of words as if they were afraid to let them linger. There were lies in the museum, yes, but there were real things, too: true bones, testimonies of God's work in the world.

Her voice was still thin and shaky then from the medicine she had resumed in spite of her doubts, and it made her hands restless, her thin cheeks itchy, but she led you from room to room and asked small questions of the claims she read out loud from the laminated plaques. How did we know these trees were millions of years old? When something is so very long ago, what kinds of things can we do to find out when it comes from? With every question she grew more impatient, trying to squash down the fear she felt as you squirmed and didn't answer. Had *she* made you afraid of giving the wrong answer, opening the wrong doors? "Don't be afraid to say, I don't know," she said. "We're scientists today. It's ok to be scientists about things that are scientific. Or just guess. We're just giving our best guess. Cedar?"

When she was well she would explain anything in her careful low voice, so that you understood not only the thing itself-- right triangle or cicada, how babies are made-- but how grateful you should be for the gift God made of it, every color and shape a sign of Christ's peace. The sadness your dad called sickness covered her sometimes, until everything she said was far away. And sometimes it was not her voice speaking, and strange eyes moved in her face. "What's another way we might have fossils? Lily, do you know?" Your dad raised his hand.

"I know you know," she said. "I'm asking the girls. Just guess, ok? What was an event from the Bible that might have buried a lot of bones in a short time?"

In the museum, among the skeletons and cutaway maps of the earth's crust, she explained how the canyons were made, how the great steaming waters of the Flood rushed from the center of the earth and down from the dense mists of outer space. The force of it broke and remade the world, and the bodies of the drowned were turned to rock and fossil, to peat and oil. When the waters receded, the world was nothing like it had been.

Your dad told stories. Inside the museum as in the mall he spoke loudly, hoping to draw an argument from one of the teenage volunteers so that he could be confident and smart in front of you. The dinosaurs lived thousands of years ago, he said, not millions as the museum claimed, and they died in the Flood and the aftermath of the flood. Dinosaurs were pets in those days, gentle plant-eaters more loyal than dogs. In front of the fiberglass sauropod guarding the entrance to the Dinosaur Dig, he told how the water rose around their huge feet, and when they saw their human families drowning, they lifted them on their long necks toward the sky, and held them for days while the waters closed around them. Finally the water reached their mouths and nostrils, or they collapsed and sank. Was it cruel of God to let them die that way? No, it was their choice. They died for the sinners they loved, as Christ would die for us two thousand years later.

“There were dinosaurs on the Ark, though” said Lily. “It said in the book.”

Yes, there were dinosaurs on the Ark, but when they got back on land, they were so sad for their friends that they didn't last very long. All the animals were sad, but the dinosaurs were saddest of all. They didn't have any brains, remember, just a tiny walnut for that whole huge body. They couldn't think things through, like you and me. God had given them a hope and a future, but they couldn't see past what they had lost. Even with our gigantic brains, don't we sometimes make the same mistake? When the millennium came, when God returned to Earth, you might feel sad at first because the Kingdom isn't like the world you're used to. But God gave you the power to understand things that aren't always easy to understand. You'll know to rejoice that you were saved. Not like the dinosaurs.

Lily, spoilsport, said, “That's not in the Bible.”

“Good catch, Lily!” Your mom smiled proudly. “You’re a good scientist today. We always check what we know against the Bible.”

Your dad said, “It’s just a story. We don’t really know a lot about what happened to the dinosaurs, do we?”

Lily shook her head reluctantly.

“I think maybe God chose not to tell us, so that we would learn to have faith,” said your mom. “Some people think after the flood, the weather just got colder and they died out. God doesn’t tell us everything. That’s why we have science.”

“Maybe they just got tired of us,” said your dad. “Who knows?” He made the face of the dinosaur curmudgeon, a droop-eyed frown. “Who do these big-brained Homo sapiens think they are?” he said, in a deep dinosaur voice. “Just because God made them in His image! I like *my* image perfectly well, thank you very much.” He made the duck-mouth of a dinosaur with his hand and moved it back and forth to suggest a bad attitude on the dinosaur’s part. A passing kindergarten laughed. Your dad played it up for them. In his dinosaur voice he ranted that *he* should have been given the gift of eternal life— after all, he was bigger! *He* had never sinned! “I don’t have *time* to sin!” he said, wagging his hand and his head together in a parody of sass. “I have to eat my weight in leaves every day! Do you realize how long that takes?” He mimed being distracted by leaves, made chomping sounds, and the kindergartners laughed and clapped. Even the girl at the admissions desk smiled. Your dad tipped an invisible hat and bowed.

There was no need to doubt how quickly things could change. If the world broke apart, God would make it again. It was sad, those houses that could never be built again, those canyons were soft fields had been, but it was joyful, too, when the waves receded and everything was covered in beads of dew that broke the light into a million rainbows. It wasn’t the world they had left, but it was still the world. Why can’t you see the love of God where God wants to show it to you, in the spreading sky, in those red rocks and little misty hills?

Your dad never wanted a family until he met Tina. In college he didn't trust girls not to laugh at him or himself not to hurt them somehow. But God's plan was revealed to him. The future he had always imagined for himself, the long hours awake and the lonely drives through the mountains of the West, turned thin and flat, like a bad background painting, and beyond it he saw his real future: Tina with a bundled frog-eyed baby in her arms, the children running in the yard, climbing his legs in the living room, and everywhere always Tina, her long limbs around him and her dark pink-scented hair, all the days before him drenched and dark with her.

She wanted kids. He had never thought about wanting kids, never trusted himself not to ruin them. "Would you ever consider it?" she asked him. He said he would consider it on one condition only.

"What condition?" she asked him, expecting the worst.

"If it was with you," he said. "Otherwise, forget it."

"I was so relieved," she used to say. "I can't even tell you. But you know what? I would probably have married him anyway." And when she said this he would lift her hand from her chest and place it on his own, the same gesture every time.

*How did you know?* He loved for you to ask again and again so he could tell the answer. Even when Tina was in the hospital he told it, taking up both parts in her absence, with his head tilted and a clumsy imitation of her crooked smile, even scolding himself when he went too far in praising her long-ago beauty, the light on her body as she swam in the community pool of the condo in Irving. "Oh, stop it. I was not." She was, she was stunning. God's perfect gift.

"God doesn't hide His will from you, you know," he'd say. "When you meet the right person, He always shows you the way."

If he had never loved anyone, he might have been happier. But that was not his choice, and it is not your place to wish he had made a different one. He chose the life he thought he wanted, and when it fell apart beneath him, he chose it again.



## The Pay Phone Doesn't Work

The bus is filling up with boys in headphones and old women with hats and shopping bags. “Ann Arbor,” says the bus driver. The light is low and bright, an afternoon, and through the windows you can see concrete pillars, cars with tiny people and trees reflected in them, girls in tight dark jeans and bright tunics, boys in big shoes whose dark hair falls over their eyes. “Ann Arbor,” he says again, and it is you he means, you who have to leave the bus for the station though there is nowhere for you to go.

All the light is still and hard and there is nothing here you recognize. The vending machines are the same inside the bus station and slouching boys frown at their phones in the same way in cold air pouring down from somewhere in the ceiling. You are all wrong, but that it normal, and it is normal to be nervous when you are doing something wrong. God gave you nervousness specifically so that you wouldn't be here, and God cannot be held responsible for the total disregard of His gifts. There are patches of black snow still on the ground beside the fire hydrants and curled up at the far curb of the liquor store across the street, but some girls are wearing shorts anyway, and heavy featureless booths, and with each step their bare legs ripple. Aren't you glad you respect yourself more than that? There is nothing the Maidens like better than to pity those bare-legged girls. Aren't you glad you don't need to walk around naked just for attention? What kind of message does that send? The Maidens think they know, and Janet has explained the message for you a hundred times in loud wet whispers at Meijer. Your reflex is the same: anxious pity and averted eyes. But these are only guesses. Here everything about you is wrong: your broken shoes and your old-man sweater, your zebra bookbag with its dangling zipper tassels. Even your jeans are the wrong color, and sag at your ankles where they should taper. Even your face is stone-frozen into the same wrong expression the Maidens cultivate in little cameras attached to their monitors: a stiff smugness about nothing in particular.

The city goes on for miles and you can barely see it. Half-puffed lilacs and snow patches, slick streets and trash struggling free of the mud, yes, and even some old men who bump your

shoulder without malice as they cross the street, and the dogs who turn their heads at everyone: you understand these things. But the girls you should pity, the boys who want one thing— there are too many of them, and nowhere to go that is not teeming with them. Poor girls and boys, poor lost souls. There is the Student Union where Sarah has her Campus Crusade meetings, but now that you are really here it would be impossible for you to find her and impossible that she would be glad to see you. When she said you should come visit sometime, she did not mean that you should show up out of nowhere, abrupt and clumsy, in the middle of her life which is nothing like you. She did not even mean that you should really come visit.

You will have to call your dad and say, I'm sorry. I was wrong. He will ask you what you were thinking and you will be unable to say. Travel, *freedom*, those words he used when he bought the camper from the Mcleods, not knowing he would park it in the yard at Vinelands Fellowship, not realizing that the only journey he would take would end with Tina in the hospital and Pastor Mcleod in serious doubt of his commitment to Biblical truth. Maybe it is genetic and maybe it is the fault of the junkies who gave blood in exchange for drug money, the main source of blood donations according to Janet sand the reason she would never personally agree to a blood transfusion. Maybe science will never prove it, but she has heard stories, and there are things that science can't explain. Something in the blood still craves, still wants to stand under streetlights in the dark and shift from one foot to the other. Just admit that you don't know. Admit that you are prone to wander, that you are as crowded with demons as the green park beyond the pay phone with lost souls.

The man using the pay phone twists his yellow-white tshirt back and forth as he hangs on the black receiver, squashes his nose with a quick circular sweep of his hand, an involuntary movement repeated. *Haldol*, you think. The medicine your mom took after she came home from the hospital in Arkansas, the medicine that made her hands shake and winked her eyes shut for her. But there are hundreds of things that might have the same effect, maybe thousands. Maybe his nose itches. You cross the street to a bench that no one is sitting on and unfold the letter with

Grandma Wizeck's phone number in it. There is nothing else to do. Your home number is something different now; your dad has changed it four times to avoid news people and prank calls. He writes the new number on the first page of Janet's Cottages of Light address book, with its painted stone cottages and oily circles of gaslight, but there was no reason for you to learn it. You haven't been out of their sight for more than half an hour since the time you broke your ankle failing a trust-building exercise at the Lake Michigan Youth Conference (blindfolded, set upon by eighth graders pretending to be demons) and your dad said no more youth groups forever.

When Janet has to call your dad at work, she uses the speed-dial number 3, which is no help to you at all. If you pressed 3 on the pay phone it would probably take you to a pornographic chat line or a phone psychic who would charge you \$8 a minute to hear that your future was a black stairwell with snakes in it. Maybe Grandma Wizeck can call your dad and he will drive out to pick you up, angry and fearful and then— what? You can't picture him here, even in the van with the windows rolled down.

Or you could stay here. But what would that be like? It would be worse than a room with no door, because there would be no room, only public places. Who would give you a job, with your fake resume that Janet made to prove how productive you were (Manager of Household Education, Accountant: Blake Creations, Inc, Social Coordinator for Toddlers and Ladies' Bible Studies). Who would give you money if you asked for it? *Hello, I ran away, but I don't have a good plan, can you buy me a room?* They would think you were the worst prostitute in the world, or a high school kid trying to trick people. All you know about the world comes from the Maidens, who are as ignorant as you, and from following your dad and Janet through the Meijer while pretending not to be with them.

Someone is drumming an orange traffic barrel, a frantic sound stretched out and gathering as if the world were about to rise around you in song. If you had learned an instrument like Janet wanted you to, you could stand on the corner playing music, and people would drop

coins into the case at your feet. When the man in the tshirt leaves the phone, you follow a crowd across the street and try to read the instructions for local and non-local calls. Then your quarters fall through without catching as students pass with or without turning to watch you, three quarters, then four, then one catches but the next falls through. You try to dial the number for collect calls but it is wrong or you have fumbled one of the buttons because what answers is a high-pitched drone, and when you hang up, the dial tone has gone. A girl with a lace dress for a shirt has stopped on the grass beside the pay phone, staring at you through thick pinkish glasses. You look away. "Do you need to call someone?" she asks. "You can use my phone if you want."

She hands it to you, thick and zebra striped like your bag and you look at it stupidly. There are no numbers, only a wide blank screen. "Oh, here," she says, and takes it from you. "Do you know the number?"

She dials and listens, eyes and mouth half-open in her round face, and hands it back to you, watching you listen. A phone rings somewhere in the world. Halfway through the fourth ring it picks up.

"Hello?"

You have no memory of Grandma Wizeck's voice. Nothing about it is familiar, not its rasp or its wavering girlishness. "Hello, who is this?"

You breathe in. The light has turned to green and the cars are falling past. The words scramble out. "I'm sorry to call out of nowhere--"

"Tina?" The voice cracks. "Where are you calling from?"

"No," you say. "No, I'm sorry."

"Tina?" says the voice again. "What's going on?"

"It's Cedar," you say. "Cedar Blake."

"Cedar."

"Your granddaughter?"

The silence is so complete she must have hung up. In a moment the voice will say wrong

number, or disappear and not answer when you call again. Is it worse if it is or isn't Grandma Wizeck on the other side? "Hello?" you say.

"Cedar."

"Yes."

"Oh my goodness babe. You sound just like your mother. I'm sorry." You don't say anything. "Where are you calling from?"

"It's not my phone."

"Is everything all right?"

Yes. No. What kind of question is that?

"I'm sorry to call," you say. "I might need some help."

"What? You've got terrible reception, babe. Where are you?"

"I'm fine. I might need some help."

There is a long crackle that might have been speech, a pause. Two students pass in tall boots and colored leggings. Their voices catch in the wind and flutter and vanish. "Cedar? Is something wrong?"

"Maybe." What could be wrong? Under what circumstances could God's world be wrong? But it is a fallen world and so the answer is "everything." What *isn't* wrong? The question is meaningless.

"Listen, you are one hundred percent safe with me, ok? I have no problem keeping secrets if you need me to, ok?" She is too eager for something to save you from and everything you know says *hang up now*. But there isn't anywhere else for you to go.

"Ok," you say.

"Listen, where are you right now? Do you need a ride? You're not driving already, are you?"

You start to shake your head before you remember she can't see it. "I'm in Ann Arbor."

"Are you serious? That is so close. Tell me where you're at and I'll pick you up in an

hour. We'll get this thing taken care of no problem. Promise. You don't have to worry. I've missed you, babe.”

You are probably supposed to say 'me too” but there is no way of knowing if it's true or not. “Go inside Amer’s and sit down,” she says. “Don’t sit around outside.”

Then you give the phone back to the girl and thank her in your thick voice. “Is everything ok?” she asks. That question again.

“Yes.” Your dad was right to worry about your voice, thick and blunt where it should be quick and hazy. But the girl seems happy enough and walks fast down the sidewalk into the park.

The last time you saw Grandma Wizeck was at the memorial service, when she was BANNED FROM GRANDCHILDREN’S FUNERAL according to the *Enquirer*; after the security staff at Heartfire Christian Assembly had to escort her out of the church lobby following an argument you either didn’t see or don’t remember. You only saw your dad fall against the folding table with the programs and the fading flowers, and the words you’ll burn in hell, Jim. Then your aunt picked you up and carried you to the car before you heard anything else or saw your dad’s face change. In the parking lot, surrounded by security guards with her hand clamped on the side of her face like a claw, she saw you and said, Cedar. You didn’t know if you were supposed to recognize her or not. Aunt Angie lifted you into the back seat and clicked the seatbelt around you and you looked straight ahead in order not to see her.

There might have been a stone goose on her porch the one time you went to visit in the camper, with a goose-sized motorcycle helmet and jacket, and she might have taken you and your sisters to a movie— a wide flash of eye and sword— but that was long ago and nothing is certain except that it ended with a fight, your dad trying to calm your mom, and something terrible your grandma had done that you didn’t understand. “We are going to pray for Grandma Wizeck,” she said, as you passed under streetlamp and overpass. “She is very lost, and struggling with a lot of things in her life, and we still love her, but she is very, very lost and he needs our prayers more than she needs anything else we can give her right now.”

The coffeehouse across the street has iron frogs for door handles and a long line inside. Everything is wooden and wrought-iron and dark, except for the four tables by the window which are all taken up with laptops and huge textbooks stuffed with paper. Still, it feels safe to be inside, even if you have to sit at a middle table where you will be conspicuous and people will bump into you with their orange trays of food from the deli counter. You order a French vanilla cappuccino and wash your hands in the bathroom. Behind the rust-edged toilet someone has drawn stick-Christ crucified, balloon hands dripping blue blood, and in the same blue ink, the words For God So Loved the World. . . You are angry for a moment at the graffiti and think about writing Real Christians Don't Vandalize on the wall next to it, but that would make you a hypocrite and you realize you don't actually know if it's true. What Bible verses have anything to say about it? Maybe if you went to Rome someday you would see ancient graffiti, the name of Christ fish-symbolized on coliseum walls. Possibly God is working through that person and all your response would do is cast doubt where faith had been sown. You should write something encouraging instead, some testimony. That was a question in Janet's Bible study: Is it wrong to lie in your testimony if it brings people to Christ? Janine and Caroline said yes, the others that it depended on the lie. Probably you should just leave it alone. And you remember the way Doug McLeod liked to put people names into Bible verses, saying, For God so loved *Cedar* that he gave his only begotten son that *Cedar* would not perish but have eternal life. This was supposed to be encouraging, but it was also a warning: world or no world, it was your fault really.

You pick up a book to read while you are waiting: *The Long Winter*, a book by Laura Ingalls Wilder before her feminist daughter took over, and your cappuccino is waiting for you on the counter, the milk foam shaped like a wide white heart with a thin tail. This cappuccino is bitterer than the greasy-sweet ones at Denny's where your dad sometimes takes you for your birthday, but you will drink it anyway because it is your excuse for being here.

In *The Long Winter*, the pioneer family makes hay and then huddles in its tarpaper shack in one of the wind-blown places your dad always said he wanted to live but didn't. You always skipped the part at the end where the trains made it through the snow and the winter ended, because you preferred the almost-end, where the family split the last of the potatoes among themselves and face starvation. It happened more than a hundred years ago to real family in the real West, with a blind sister and a dad who played the fiddle, and the wind had whirled around them, and the world had not ended, even for them.

You try to remember Grandma Wizeck and her house but all you can think of is the inside of the camper on its only journey as camper, swaying north along the US highways as your dad explained what an adventure it was, and the telephone poles your mother said were crosses. Thank Jesus when you see the cross, she said. All crosses had been trees once, and none of them had wanted to do the job that had to be done. But one tree bowed his head and said, Thy will be done. And so you leap up in your seats and press your hands to the window and thank the telephone poles as they pass-- "In your *heart*," your dad added, "*quietly*, in your heart."

When your dad bought the camper from the Mcleods, he washed it in layers of bleach and lemon Pine-Sol and white vinegar and baking soda, but the burnt tire and gasoline smell hung on beneath it all. Maybe it was even made stronger by the new smells, the way fire feeds and grows on what you throw in it. The old smell colored the taste of toothpaste, the up-close smell of water in the bucket shower, every peanut butter and jelly sandwich on Stacy Mcleod's homemade oatmeal wheat bread. Your dad hung a painting of Jesus over the mini fridge. He was huge and held his white robe over the scattered Dallas skyline. Would it be like that when he came back, or would he be human-sized? Your dad didn't know. But he promised you would not be afraid, whatever size he was, if you were good, if, for example, you stopped poking your sister and sat still and ate your oatmeal, which also tasted like the road.

One day soon, when your dad had finished overhauling the Project Nathan website and Pastor Mcleod was satisfied with his spiritual maturity, you were going to take off down FM 4312



and along the shining river of I-35, carrying the songs of the Lord and the news of His love with you to every town in North America. For months and then years you believed that it was about to come true, so much that you could feel the road running beneath you as you slept, but it never did. The closest you ever got was the visit to Grandma Wizeck in Michigan and that ended so badly that no one wanted to talk about it when you got back, or even to develop the pictures that stayed rolled up in their yellow canisters for two years until Randy left them to be thrown out with everything else in the Bent Lake house. Your dad had never learned to change a tire. He was afraid of bugs and spiders and scratched relentlessly at mosquito bites, branding them with a deep red X and muttering to himself. But in the future he slept under the stars of the Arizona desert; he washed his face in cold water by the low flat rivers of the West. In the future he knew the names of plants and birds and how to follow an animal by listening to the ground. Eventually his children would have the kind of childhood he had always wanted and was afraid of, more comfortable and less rowdy versions of the Cub Scout camping trips he was sent home early from, picked up at the ranger station by his grim small-faced father in the station wagon and never allowed again. He would not be afraid in the future of uncertainty, and would be the pioneer he was in songs and daydreams.

Grandma Wizeck crosses the wide front window and opens the door, garish and purposeful in her pink fleece jacket and corduroy pants, her small feet in stubbed red tennis shoes. The face and hands are nothing you recognize, but there is a family resemblance in the nervous way she turns her head, in her quick steps and the way she is obviously looking for someone, for you. For God so loved *Cedar*, who could have stopped him but didn't, for God so loved *Cedar* that He sent his only son to die. If you hadn't needed saving, if you had never been lost, if you could do the simple things that would make you good. What would we get if life were fair, Lily? What would we get if we got what we deserved? I know you can tell me. For there is none righteous, not one. Do you remember what that means?

She looks nothing like your mother. Maybe she looks like Lily, if Lily had been old:

skinny and pale with restless hands and feet, though it has been a long time since you opened the wooden box in the basement where their pictures are, and studies reported in the GED Workbook have shown all memories, even and especially the most vivid, to be unreliable. She has a pale thin mouth like Lily's and faint flyaway hair, a squarish jaw, a thin nose pink at the nostrils, and she is carrying a tall styrofoam cup with a straw in it and the faded logo of 7-Eleven. She recognizes you right away because there is no one else you could be. Unmistakably Tina's girl, fat face and weak Blake chin notwithstanding, startled by eye contact as Tina by the flash in school photos. "Cedar?" she says. You try to look like you are too involved in the plot of *The Long Winter* to notice that she came in at all, and to look up as if startled by your name.

You imagine her telling her friends, maybe at a bowling alley somewhere, "My granddaughter, Cedar, is a voracious reader." But you aren't. You just swim in books, like your dad. Lily was the reader. Sharon was the helper. You are a poor substitute for both, with your head full of stray sounds and old sermons, and you've never seen the inside of a bowling alley except in the *National Geographic*. Maybe she will take you. Without waiting for you to answer she pulls out the chair across from you, sits down, and grabs both your hands in her small chapped hands. "Hey. Do you remember me?"

Her voice used to be scratchier, her face more weathered— memory making her a parody of herself. The smell of cigarettes hangs in the air around her. Her ears are large and bare, her fingers full of evil-looking rings: a pewter dragon with red stones for eyes, a circlet of turquoise ovals, a pink stone shaped like a star. On her left thumb, a small silver spoon flattened and coiled. "I remember *you*, for sure." She laughs. "How are you? Oh, I don't know. Give me a hug." She wraps her pink arms around you and squeezes hard, pressing her knuckles and her black phone against your back. In the sudden pressure you forget what you were going to say, some clever thing that would turn out later not to be clever at all, and you squirm free. She barely notices. "Babe, I can't believe you look so grown up. Did you have lunch?" She taps the table with two fingers, turns toward the glass cabinet full of pastries, searching the room for something she can

give you.

“I’m ok.” You tip the coffee cup to demonstrate that you could drink it if you wanted to.

“Did you call my dad?”

“Not unless you want me to, babe. I know how he can be.”

“Ok.”

“You let me know if you want to talk to him, ok?”

“Ok.”

She pulls from her huge denim purse a key ring full of keys and dangling things-- a disembodied rubber nose, a length of multicolored yarn. Her teeth are a little like yours-- long and thin, leaning against each other. Tina's were straight and bright from years of braces that cut her tongue and gave her a lisp, all so that she could be acceptable to the world. Grandma Wizeck had picked the wrong thing to cultivate, like all worldly parents. Why do we cultivate our children's teeth, but not their characters? We put them through hours of pain and suffering in dentist's offices, yet when it comes to moral character we are afraid even of hurting their feelings. Is it any wonder we have become a nation of idlers, a nation of confused, rebellious children and helpless parents? In this spirit of separation from the world you were spared braces even as your teeth began to come in wrong, the front two overlapping, the left eyetooth twisted forward. Skittish Cedar who could barely tolerate being touched was not going to sit in a dentist's chair any longer than absolutely necessary anyway. Why put her through it? You can make that decision when you're older. She stands and sucks noisily at the straw in her cup, and jangles the keys at you, and what can you do but go with her? You push the book into its place on the shelf and follow her quick loping walk out the door into the air that has grown dim and blustery.

“It'll rain tonight for sure,” she says. “Can you smell it?” And she pulls out her black phone, taps at it distractedly as she walks. “Sixty percent chance,” she says, and shows you the picture of clouds and cartoon lightning. She pulls her thin lips over her crooked teeth and looks at you as into a clear glass she hopes will be a mirror. She wants you to have noticed the smell, to

nod at the weather report in your hand. But you close your eyes.

“Tired,” she says. “I know. Me too.”

Without you, Janet will forget to weed the tomatoes, forget to thaw the meat for dinner. She will remember all the wrong things, leave the canned green beans open on the counter, turn the heat to eighty. She will leave the toxic marker on the kitchen table. Grandma Wizeck's car is a yellow sedan, pale as banana taffy and dented in two places. She opens the passenger door and mock-bows at you. A red plastic rosary dangles from the rearview with a cardboard medallion, an air freshener maybe: SEX WAX. “So what's going on,” she says. “Mint?” She hands you a tin of Altoids from the cup holder sticky with dried soda. You put one in your mouth and the sharp taste spreads over your tongue. The answer to the first question is simple, but you don't think you can say it. As soon as she starts the engine, the radio blasts the air with solid sound. “Sorry,” she says, and turns it down, but not enough.

“Are we going to your house?”

“That's probably the best thing right now, don't you think?”

You pull the mint out of your mouth and suck it back in.

“I'm not going to interrogate you, ok,” she says. “You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to.”

She looks at you expectantly. A stuffed cat clings with suction-cup paws to the back window. Beneath it are boxes and piles of clothes, some with the hangers still in them, and hangers by themselves in a heap, the wire dry-cleaner kind in their paper sleeves. They whisper when the car turns and they fall against each other.

“Can you take me home, to my house,” you say.

“Sure,” she says. “Ok. Right now?”

It's a strange question, suggesting that there is some other time you could go home, such as the past, or possibly that she would let you stay with her. Maybe it would be better if you did. If you went to Grandma Wizeck's house for a visit, maybe what you have done will look normal,

like something you read about on Maidens Set Apart-- *One of the most encouraging things I have experienced is going to visit and learning from older women, as in Proverbs 31!* It could be an accident that you didn't tell your dad. It could even be something that Janet was supposed to remember to tell him but didn't, or a surprise planned between you that slipped her mind. Janet could easily have forgotten that Grandma Wizeck was a negative influence and who knows what goes on in your head?

"I know my car's a mess," she says. Outside the window a brown dog leaps in circles in the lawn of a row of brick apartment buildings. Two boys ride past on bicycles, grocery bags clutched to handlebars, with their jackets hunched over their heads as they glide through the water. "Nothing is your fault," she says. "Ok?" But it doesn't mean anything. It's something she got out of a book, probably, a CPS book on how to manipulate children. You will have to be on your guard because even though you are not a child anymore, you have not been warned as well as you used to think. Not everything is obvious even to the discerning, and you never had the gift of discernment anyway. Like Randy, you got everything wrong, and there is no possible way for her to know what is your fault and what isn't. And if we all got what we deserved, we would be dead and burning, Lily.

## Things She Didn't Throw Away

When the car turns up Orchard Hills Drive you don't know if you remember everything or if your brain is just filling in the empty spaces with what you see: the road's dirt shoulders, the small muddy lawns and metal awnings striped with green and white and bordered with metal lace. Here is the stone goose, now with a small raincoat and fisherman's hat. Here is the remnant orchard the Orchard Hills development was named for, three scrawny trees just now beginning to bud. She parks in the driveway and leads you with brisk wide steps through the lawn and over the concrete slab that stands for a porch, where one potted plant wilts from the hook in the awning and another spreads its thin leaves across the concrete and a Folger's Coffee can full of spare hooks and rainwater. A welcome mat, its yellow frowning face nearly worn away: NOT YOU AGAIN. The storm door shudders when she shoves it open, the plastic Christmas wreath slapping the door. "It's a mess, I forgot to say," she says. She lets you step past her into the dining room and watches you stare at the stacks of magazines and newspapers, the piles of clothes as high as the furniture, a baby's blue sleeper draped over the side of a fish tank full of dishes. In the kitchen, clouds of fruit flies are startled into swarming by her hand on the light switch.

"They don't hurt anything," she says of the flies. "You want some zucchini bread?"

She pulls the gum from her mouth and mashes it into a pale pink ashtray on the counter that is shaped like a bare bottom, tattooed BUTTS. She opens the fridge and pulls out a bag of heavy bread and a dish of butter. The flies swirl around it. "I make excellent zucchini bread," she says. "I don't mind bragging."

A small gray cat slides against your legs. "Hello," you say. It mews at your stretched hand and shrinks back with a hiss.

"That's China," says Grandma Wizeck without looking. "Be nice, China. That's your niece. You're an aunt, China, how about that?" She scrapes cold butter over the cold bread and hands it to you on a plastic plate. "Want some tea? Go on, have a seat." She motions toward the living room, whose chairs all cradle stacks of books or magazines, opens a cupboard and pulls

down boxes and bags of tea, reading their names. “Green tea, raspberry, Chamomile, Earl Grey, this one is vanilla peach white tea, maybe that sounds good? Rooibos, vanilla chai, cocoa chai, Irish Breakfast, regular Lipton, what kind of tea do you like?”

On the fridge are plastic magnets in the shape of letters, some clustered to say LVE STRG and DIAN. Square forced grins of faded children who might be your mother's brothers in frames made of construction paper and frames dotted with flat plastic beads, and a girl with crimped hair and braces who must have been Tina. Her long mouth is drawn in an exaggerated laughing frown, like the face she made when she was your mother and you or Lily suggested doing something gross or dangerous, meaning something was so appalling that it could only be laughed at, so funny the only response was the deepest possible frown. Grandma Wizeck rinses two mugs from the sink and dries them with a pink blouse slung in the handle of the fridge.

“Pick your tea,” she says.

You don't want tea, but you pick up a box with berries on it and hand it to her.

“Those are your uncle Zack and your uncle Mike,” she says. “Zack's in Georgia and Mike's in California. That was 1981, I think. Or 82?” She picks up the photo of Mike, straw-blond like Grandma Wizeck, and turns it over. There's no date, just the name MIKE written diagonally in thin black pen. “1983, maybe,” she says. “Look at this. I don't know if--”

But she doesn't say what it is she doesn't know. She fills the kettle and sets it on the stove and then cuts herself a slice of zucchini bread. “This” is the last ever Christmas card sent by Tina and Randy Blake and Family, in a frame of glued-together Popsicle sticks on the freezer door. “I'm pretty sure you made that frame for me,” she says. “Do you remember if you made that frame? It doesn't have a name on it.”

You shouldn't look at the picture, but you already have. What was the point of showing it to you, when it didn't matter who made the frame? It wasn't a lost work of famous art you had to claim as an Original Cedar so she could get twenty million dollars for it from a rare art dealer. You could peel all the Popsicle sticks off right now, pick of the dollops of glitter glue, and then it

would be nothing at all. In the picture your lace collar is buttoned too tight around your throat because Tina and Randy have just had an argument about whether unbuttoning the first button of a dress is always provocative or sometimes justified if the person in question is seven and has grown significantly. Lily is alive and pulling on your sleeve and she has just turned her serious face to you, glaring at some remark of the photographer who thought it was funny to mix up your names and pretend he had lost count. Your dad's face is set to cheery bafflement as in all photos and Tina is smiling hard. Newborn Aimee's eyes are still jellybean black and the velvet headband distorts her head, and Roo and Sharon are alive and laughing and red. The cards were late because Tina had gone into the hospital only a few days after they were taken and when they arrived she was still there. Randy brought them to her to fill out, but she could only sign them slowly, maybe two every day he came. When she came home, they were waiting for her in a stack on the new kitchen table, some already fingerprinted and bent. Something had changed in her handwriting. The medicine changed it, she said. The lines were shivery. You sat with your chin on the kitchen table and watched her write the same greeting (Blessings from Randy, Tina, Cedar, Lily, Sharon, Jerusalem, and Aimee!) and draw the same pinched heart beside her name.

Grandma Wizeck cracks star-shaped ice cubes from a yellow tray and drops them into a Mobil glass. On the shelf full of DVD cases is a photo of Tina in her bride's dress, with the long sleeves she insisted on, the veil pushed back over her hair. It's a posed photo of Tina's mother, younger then, adjusting her daughter's veil. They are supposed to be intent on the task and the solemnity of the moment, but both have turned toward the camera, watching for the flash. Both are laughing, surprised by something beyond them.

"You're quiet, aren't you? What do we do next. That's the question." She puts the glass of ice in the fridge between a pitcher of bright liquid and an open box of baking soda, and carries her plate to the living room and the light of the silent TV. "Move these books off the chair, sit down" she says. "Well, whatever it is, you've got a lot of options, ok?" She picks the bread apart with her fingers and eats it bit by bit. "I guess you want to take a shower and relax, and tomorrow we can



see about going to the doctor?”

“What doctor?”

She shrugs, mouth full of the zucchini bread she stuffed into it immediately after speaking. “It's always a good idea to see a doctor,” she says, holding her knotted hand over her mouth to hide that it is still full. “*I* think so. Does your dad take you to the doctor, or is that one of his things?” She is taken aback, wrong about some guess, and she probably hates your dad enough that if you do not supply a reason for leaving, she will invent her own out of thin air. Does she think you've been beaten or deprived of something that would make you sick?

“What things?”

“Didn't he have some thing against vaccines?”

“I'm fine.”

The teakettle whistles and screams. Grandma Wizeck spreads herself slowly upward, stretching legs and balancing the plate on one arm of the orange chair. Grey China steps forward to sniff and eat it. You lean forward to rescue the bread and the cat stares at you contemptuously.

“Sugar in your tea, babe?”

You shake your head but she keeps staring at you with the spoon held over your cup until you say, “No, thank you.”

“So tell me what happened,” she says. “As much as you want to tell, ok?”

“What do you mean,” you say. “What happened.”

“I'm serious, babe. I mean it. You call me up out of nowhere about how you're suddenly in Ann Arbor by yourself, something had to *happen*. If you don't want to talk about it you can just say-- but you know, I can't help you if I don't know what I'm doing.” She hands you the mug, red teabag floating on red tea.

“I just wanted to see Ann Arbor.” It is the truth in some ways. There *was* no good reason for leaving, only bad ones. But why should the truth sound false? “I didn't realize it was so far.”

“How did you get my phone number?”

“I just found it, in--” The truer things are, the worse they sound. “I just wanted to get out of the house and I thought it was a good place. I didn't think.” The explanation you planned has vanished, none of it true anyway. They were all lines for a movie, not things you could say to a person, like the soul-winning scripts you practiced for a whole hour once at Hammond Christian Assembly Youth Leadership: *Do you feel sad about the lack of guidance in your life? I used to be like you. Confused. Ashamed.* “But now I have to get back. That's all.”

“Babe, I don't understand what you're talking about.”

You lift your bag onto your lap and find the letter.

“I got this,” you say. She unfolds it, expressionless.

“Your mom said to call me?”

“I couldn't keep it in the house,” you say. “What is that, where every letter is thick--” you reach toward it. “Is it some kind of code?”

“The K? She just does that. She's got some trouble with the letter K, because of some words it starts. She just doesn't like to write it. Did she mention that?”

You shake your head.

“I don't know what she mentioned. I didn't read it all.”

Grandma Wizeck gulps her tea, mops up crumbs of zucchini bread with one finger pressed flat against the plate and scraping them against her teeth. “You just came here?”

“Yes.”

Press, press, press, scrape. She leans forward.

“So why didn't you just call me? Why would you go all the way to Ann Arbor by yourself?”

You don't know how to answer.

“Well, never mind.” Grandma Wizeck rubs finger and thumb together, showering the carpet with tiny crumbs. “How old are you?” You start to answer, but she interrupts. “Sixteen,” she says. “November 27. I know all your birthdays.”

You could correct her, but it doesn't matter. She shakes the remaining crumbs from her plate onto the carpet, then folds the letter back into its envelope around in her hands and gives it to you. "You could have asked your dad about it," she says. "He would be the one to ask. I think she still hears from him sometimes."

"He doesn't like to talk about it."

She is twisting the spoon ring around on her thumb, twisting it back and forth, then holding it still, then twisting it again in slow jumpy circles. "Don't you like your zucchini bread?" She heaves herself out of the chair, rinses her mug and plate, and leaves them in the sink.

"I'm not hungry," you say.

She winds a new piece of Saran Wrap around the bread and tucks it into the fridge.

There is nowhere in the house that is not crowded with things. There are piles of clothes in every room, but the clothes are only the most numerous of all her objects. Was it the same when you came to visit? You remember a dark mildew smell and hamburgers in a white bag, but not the inside of the house. Upstairs the hall is full of old film and slide projectors in scratched silver boxes with handles. Some of them have labels, Grant Elementary School in raised letters. "The school was going to throw them out," she said, "I said, give them to me, I can still use them. I have boxes and boxes of slides." She owns four turntables, two of them stacked on the landing beside a row of flat cardboard boxes, but no records. One of these days she will buy some records, and set up a sound system like the one she had in her apartment on Cass St., downtown Detroit, a hundred years ago.

In the corner of the guest bedroom is a little pine cabinet with sixteen small drawers, each the width of a hand-- a card catalog she salvaged from the Westland library, with all the cards still inside. "Can you believe it took the public library till--" she counts on the air-- "five years ago-- four years? --to get rid of their card catalog?"

"Maybe they liked it."

“No one likes card catalogs. They're a waste of space. You know what they put in place of the card catalogs?”

“Computers.”

“They *had* computers. They put in a Five thousand dollar sculpture that no one ever looks at unless they spill something on it. Five thousand dollars, and that's how they use the space. Anyway, I went in and I said, where are the card catalogs? And of course they think, oh, shit, who is this old lady asking about card catalogs, so they start explaining the computer system, all slow like I don't come to this library every *week*, come *on*, you know, and I say, no, *where are they*, as in did you throw them away, because I want to buy them. Well, they still thought I was a crazy old lady. But I have all ten card catalogs, with all the cards inside. Guess who's getting a call if the library burns down?”

On the bed, a girl's white headboard with pale yellow flowers, a girl's unicorn bedspread: the bright blue cover worn through to white cotton, the unicorn obviously disdainful. The shelf above the headboard is crowded with dolls, dust in their hair and in the stiff folds of their skirts. There are other things, other rooms and boxes out of sight. There is a row of Tina's gold-painted softball trophies, her swimming medals slung over the doorknob, her name misspelled (S instead of Z, Christ instead of T), the textbooks for her college classes: Psychology with yellow tape on the spine, Sociology with its collage of glass buildings and pedestrian legs, *Teaching Science for Comprehension*. Grandma Wizeck had kept it all: the grade-school paintings, the high-school papers, the notes from friends she found when she searched Tina's backpack as she slept, the report cards that never seemed to agree, even with themselves, whether Tina was a joy to have in class or a nuisance, the Glamour Shot Tina had taken when she was twenty-four. She had kept whatever she had of you when you had sisters, and of your sisters, jumbled together in boxes and bags from extinct department stores. She kept it with the dot-matrix printer paper she couldn't use anymore, and the printer that hadn't worked since 1989, and the color booklets from Wayne County Child Welfare saying DO NOT LEAVE YOUR CHILD UNATTENDED, showing a baby

perched on the edge of a stove, NO, a baby tugging plaintively on a dog's ear, NO, a baby locked in a featureless blue car, blank-faced with arms slumped forward, NO, NO.

She shows you the shower and which towels are clean, and she props up an extra toothbrush next to the sink for you. The shower is full of empty bottles of shampoo and lotion, tubes of conditioner sucked dry and sunk like stomachs, slivers of soap mashed together and fingerprinted, razors rusting on shelves covered in rust. If you could, you would never take off your clothes, but it is better that you have to, so that you won't forget you are ugly. God is looking out for you. If you were pretty, or even acceptable-looking, you would be in constant danger of temptation. But God in His wisdom made you so froggish and unappealing that even the lurking men in the woods let you pass untouched through the middle of the night.

“Oh, no, no babe,” says Grandma Wizeck when you come downstairs. “You're still in your dirty clothes. Let me get you some clean ones.” The TV is playing the evening news. A missing child-- not you-- fills the screen and recedes. In another town, a flood drowns the roads in brown water. A man tells the camera, “I just thank God I drive an SUV.”

She is picking through the piles of clothes on the floor as if they had been prepared for you, if she had piled them up not knowing if you would be a boy or a girl, thin or fat, a baby or grown, dropping stockings and flannel coats, nightshirts and ties, heavy bright red boots, ribbed tank tops in a rainbow of colors. “What are you, a twelve?” She lobs a pair of ugly patchwork pants at you. “Try these on. Wait!” In another moment she has shaken the grains of cat litter from a thin gray sweater, and turned the pile inside out. “This too.” She flings a pair of too-small yellow briefs. “The only good advice my mother gave me was to always wear clean underwear. Everything else she said was a complete lie, but clean underwear is not a lie. Go on, babe, see how it fits.” Everything she gives you is too small and she will not hand you anything larger, as if she believes it would insult you to give you clothes that fit, so you find your own skirts and shirts among the discards which she rips from your hands in indignation. Your mother was thin and you

look just like your mother, therefore you must be thin. That is her logic. She insists the black lace skirt is too big for you even after she sees it on. She tugs at the hem of the gray shirt and ripples it like the Parachute of Cooperation at Bible day camp and wrinkles her nose at you when you pull away. “Though that is a great look on you, babe, even if it is three sizes too big,” she says. “I wish I had some shoes to go with it, but I don't think I do.”

You say, “I have shoes.”

Your loafers have worn bright at the corner and the left sole is peeling off, but they fit. In the imaginary world where you live they are “so stylish” and Janet is proud to have picked them out of a bin at the Birch Run Outlet Mall, but everywhere else they are just broken and ugly.

“No,” says Grandma Wizeck. “You absolutely do not.”

For some reason this makes you laugh. You have already hurt your dad and Janet badly enough that it doesn't matter anymore if you don't like the shoes she bought you. You try to summon how they would look if you hadn't left, if you were there now in your normal clothes and your hair, but all you can see is now. You think a prayer for them, as if praying will restore you to them, obedient and understanding as you should have been all along and never were.

Later in the evening Grandma Wizeck cuts your hair with long barber scissors rusted at the tips. She thinks it will look more natural if it is the same length on both sides. “Pull your head straight, babe,” she says. She has wrapped a towel around your neck with a cat's worn face on it and the cat's green eyes stare forward as she snips and strokes your head and tells you about all the things that are not and will never be your fault.

“I'm not surprised by anything Jim Blake does, honestly,” she says. “I don't blame you if you want to get out of the house. Has he ever even taken you down to see your sisters?”

“I don't want to see gravestones,” you say.

“So what?” She brushes the hair from your back a rapid whisk of her hands. “I mean, did he ever *ask* you if you wanted to see gravestones? The point is-- this is the stupidest commercial,

babe, look--” On the TV, a child dressed as a box of fries teeters around a soccer field, bumping into goalposts as the fries wobble. “This commercial is literally *anti-eating*. Do you believe that? They want you to feed your kid energy drinks instead of food. Look at that.” Her arm jumps in the air, the rusty scissors pointed at the screen. “They want you to feel *bad* for giving food to your kids. Is that not bullshit? Hold still, babe, keep your head forward. I don't want to jab you, ok?”

“Your dad's going to hate it,” she says of your hair. “Am I right? He wants you to have long hair, right?” There is no point in trying to explain that you are not the person she imagines, not herself transplanted into another life expressly to annoy James Randall Blake, Jr. There is no point in mentioning that you already miss your only non-disfigurement-related distinguishing feature. At least other people stared at your long hair and not the rest of you. Now the back of your neck is bare, your ears already cold, the sides of your face exposed as rash-red and downy.

She's made popcorn on the stove and now she eats it carelessly, licking the salt from her fingers, fishing the stray hairs out of her mouth, shaking them into the air and wiping with a paper napkin dabbed in the last of her tea. The hair falls on your neck and under your shirt, on your lips and nose. You try not to breathe as she blows it away. Popcorn kernels drop between her fingers to the carpet. “You will not even recognize yourself,” she says, and wipes her hand on the pink corduroy pants. On the TV, a woman walks among her children in winter, unable to touch or speak to them, and they clamber and shriek without seeing her. The woman is blue-gray and seethrough, and the snow falls through her. She drinks a cup of Theraflu Cold and Flu Solution, and the warm syrup seeps color through her body. Now everyone can see her. The children run to her with mittens out. Theraflu. “Turn your head, babe,” says Grandma Wizeck, turning it for you. She pushes a cluster of popcorn into her mouth with the tips of her fingers as she talks. “You are going to look so cute,” she says. When she's done she holds a mirror in front of you and watches for the change in your face. But your hair is just the same as it was before, only choppiest, and your face is the same face in a more unflattering light. She wipes her hands on the towel cat's faded face and goes back to telling the commercials they are liars.

## Grandma Wizeck Tries to Get to Know You

In the morning she is already downstairs cooking eggs in her long black tshirt with an empty ribcage on it. Her dry hair is clipped all around her head with plastic barrettes and the loose ends fan out in static tufts. On the TV, thin women lean forward to interrupt each other. Their skirts are barely skirts and their long feet are spiny with veins and bones. “Listen,” she says “Have some bacon, babe. Sit down.” The thinnest of the women turns to frown at you behind strands of hair pointed and pale as quill pens, a corrugate of shadows on her burned bare chest. Then the screen flashes pink and white, and then commercials.

She hands you a plate with eggs and bacon and Ezekiel toast with the nubs of sprouted grain. She has already started eating from her plate on the counter, no morning blessing. You sit with your back to the TV, facing the dining room and its boxes, and the clothes that were scattered. At first you try to mouth a prayer in silence so that Grandma Wizeck will not ask you about it, but that is cowardly, so you say the rest out loud, except for the parts that are silent every day. Grandma Wizeck leans against the counter and waits for you to finish with her mouth made small.

“How did you sleep?” she says.

“Ok.”

“Good,” she says. “You need your sleep.” She runs cold water over the pan and steam rises. The ashy meat crumbles in your mouth.

She carries her plate from the kitchen and sinks to the ground, the way grownups sink to talk to children, holding her plate on her knees. Her nails are bitten like yours, red creases where the cuticles were peeled, your poor hands, Cee! She twists her silver ring up and down. “Don’t you want your eggs?” she says. She folds a forkful into her own mouth to demonstrate how to eat them, as if you’ve never had eggs in your life. The TV women are back, shouting about someone else’s childhood. He may have lied, but it was an inspiring story. He lied about what happened, but not about what happened *in his heart*. Their glossy voices tangle and stumble. God didn’t give



us ladies a voice for preaching, did he? Lord deliver us, like nails on a chalkboard, am I right? Do you think it's an accident that women politicians drive us nuts? God doesn't make accidents. He made us what we are for a reason! You feel sorry for them, shrill and unaware of their shrillness. They are lost and they are foolish and you can pity them, chirping like children with their long nails and their clumsy half-moon breasts, so bare and in such unforgiving light.

She dials your address into the phone and shows it to you. "Is this right?" She sets it in the cup holder and a halting false voice says: Turn right on Orchard Hills Drive, then turn right. "I know that part," says Grandma Wizeck. The car backs out of the driveway, gray cat straight-backed at the picture window, welcome mat frowning. The tires squeal needlessly on the road and the muddy lawns roll away. Every day will recede until you no longer need to wonder how you have left them, any more than anyone living is amazed that centuries of dead people aren't still cooking dinner in their kitchens and giving outdated advice about nylons. At the freeway exit, she picks up the phone and pokes it with her thumb, glancing back and forth between road and rolling map. When she enters the westbound freeway, the phone assures her that her destination will be on the right in one hundred and seventy miles. She draws a breath through her crooked teeth and turns on the radio, wagging her head to scraps of sound and moving on. The songs she likes are hardly songs: high wails and guitars like dirty swinging chains. She sings along even with the swear words, and drums the steering wheel and yells at the phone when it interrupts. This is the kind of music that can open doors for the Enemy, warp cracks in your heart and swell them open for the wrong water to come rushing in. You are used to closing your ears at Meijer or Carousel Frozen Custard where mopey or snarling voices are always drifting, but here it is like a wall.

"Could we listen to something else?" you say.

She laughs as if she was waiting for you to say something. "I guess this isn't your dad's kind of music," she says.

"No."

“Or yours?”

“It's a little loud.”

“It's Zeppelin, babe,” she says. “It's supposed to be loud.”

“Is this what you listened to when you were my age?”

“I wish,” she said. “It didn't exist when I was your age. I had to be all about jazz. I mean, I didn't *like* jazz, but I wanted to be the kind of person who liked jazz. Actually I was just listening to the Shirelles the whole time. There, I told you my dark secret. How about you? What do you like? Jesus rock?”

You make a face.

“I like Beethoven,” you say.

“Led Zeppelin,” she says, tapping the volume down as the radio announcer explains the station policy of more rock, less talk, “is the Beethoven of rock and roll.”

“Ok.”

“Pick a CD,” she says. She pops open the armrest where CDs are scattered in smudged plastic sleeves. “Whatever you want to listen to.”

You don't recognize the names on any of the CDs, except The Beatles Anthology. Your mom used to sing Octopus' Garden before you went to bed, and then you heard in in a Hallmark store one day and realized she hadn't made it up. So you flip through the radio stations, passing nasal praise and accordions, glossy saxophones, deep machine bass, men shouting about cars, men shouting and thumping the microphone, reeling female voices. She lets you reach the end and keep going until you settle in a swamp of weak violins.

Past Ann Arbor the buildings get further apart, and thin grass grows by the roadside. As the highway narrows Grandma Wizeck lights a cigarette and smokes it with the window down, and turns up the radio to rise above the noise of the road. The miles fly under you too fast, but you don't know how to say slow down without being insulting. She asks you questions that sound like they were copied out of a book: *How to Talk To Your Estranged Family Members*. When

Aunt Angie bought *Talking to Kids about Death*, she kept it hidden in the nightstand drawer under the study Bible, as if the phrases and activities would lose their power to comfort you if you saw them in print. If you could live anywhere, where? If you were an animal, what kind? They are like the Maidens' "conversation starters" for Getting to Know You Fridays: close-ups of an eye, a nostril, the creased crook of a finger, narrow and meaningless things to know. What would it cost you? "Ok," she says. "It's ten years from now. Where do you want to be?" But ten years is too far away, and now is too close to answer, and you have to say again, I don't know.

"It's just a question," she says. She flicks ash into the wind, brushes it from her hand where it has blown back toward her. "This is what I mean about having a conversation." She turns down the radio which has erupted into laughing voices. "It doesn't have to be all profound and meaningful, because I don't actually care whether you impress me or not. I'm not asking you to write an *essay*. You can just answer. In ten years, I want to be exactly the same as I am now, only rich. Or maybe, in ten years, I want to be in New York. It's not a test. I'm not testing you."

"Ok," you say.

"This is the problem with homeschooling, no offense," she says. She waves a hand in your direction as if you were a hologram of yourself for demonstration purposes. "You don't learn to talk to people. I have *said this*. I have *seen* it happen. Jim Blake thinks he *invented* homeschooling, but he did not. I told him, you need to be aware that your kids are going to have *zero* social skills because that is what happens. Don't think it's not going to happen just because you're church hippies instead of regular hippies. But you know what? We don't have to talk at all if you don't want to. I am fine with that. Did *I* want to sit around and talk to my grandma when I was your age? I sure as hell did not."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" She picks up her phone, glances at it, presses the screen to make it light up, and sets it flat against her thigh so that she will feel it if it rings. "I just said it was fine, babe."

"Ok."

“I’m just saying, you *can* if you want to. You can *say* things. I know your dad probably thinks little girls should be seen and not heard or something, but in the real world, there are people who might actually care what you have to say.”

“Ok,” you say.

“Ok,” says Grandma Wizeck, sucking hard at her cigarette. “O-k.”

“My dad didn’t do anything wrong,” you say.

Of course it’s a lie. Your dad has done many things wrong because there is none righteous, and if this were Grapevine Mills Mall and Pastor Mcleod were with you he would jump on that statement and tear it to pieces. *Really?* Nothing wrong? Has he ever lied, even once? Has he taken the name of the Lord in vain? Has he really obeyed all of the Ten Commandments and lived without malice and walked in the light of the Lord’s countenance in every second of his life? There is only one man who has done all that and that was the Lord Jesus, and as far as people on earth who are making an honest effort, Pastor Mcleod can name exactly seven, all of them in his immediate family, and beyond that only a spine-twisting shrug. But Grandma Wizeck does not attack the obvious flaw in your argument. She laughs— a mean, cramped, silent laugh that jerks her narrow ribcage forward and back, and tries to change the subject.

“What,” you say. “What did he do?”

“Babe,” she says. “I don’t know, ok? I wasn’t there, so I can’t say, so I am just not going to say anything else about it right now. All I know is, your mom was the literal smartest person I ever met until she met your dad. And then nothing she did after that made any damn sense at all.”

“Ok,” you say. But she is not finished talking. She will tell you all about it if you let her. She is swollen with it like a cyst. Tina was college softball champion. Tina won an award in her first year of teaching. Tina was valedictorian of her high school. These are things you should be told, things no one remembers because no one cares about the truth. “I can still remember to this day the speech she made,” says Grandma Wizeck. “It was really beautiful, not just because it was *hers*, you know, because she was that smart. Everything-- something where the road is ahead of

us, but it's dark, but the sun rises and we see where we're going and where we've just been. She wrote that speech herself. And I swear I just looked at her and thought, Whose daughter are you? A re you mine? I mean, where did you come from?" She looks at you as if you could answer her.

She was a good teacher. Everyone said so. Not like the teachers in Pastor Doug's sermons, who were always making stupid mistakes on the subject of carbon dating or blowing up with anger when the one Christian in the room pointed out how wrong they were. On her first day of student teaching she stood up in front of those twenty-eight high school freshmen and felt, she said, like she'd walked into the Last Judgment. All at once she saw them whole, as God must see everyone, and she saw that they were her. She saw how she and her classmates must have looked to Mrs. Thandier in homeroom on that first day, and she saw the same nervous, contemptuous smiles play over the faces that had looked so worn and sophisticated when she was one of them. She saw, too, the half-literate and rapid-cut fictions, full of clever comebacks and cinnamon-scented longing and secret future acts of bravery, that they called their true selves and hid from each other. They were the same people she had been, all of them, wounded and confused and not-wounded and pretending to understand too well what they did not understand. They would push the things away she tried to teach them; they would build walls of boredom and incomprehension against her, against the word's vastness and the world's complexity, against understanding, and they would not know why, but she would know. They were afraid. She had been afraid. The faces of her own schoolmates returned to her in all their detail, their beautiful makeup now orange and crumbling, their voices reedy with youth. The lipstick was a different color and the hair high and fussy where it had been iron-flat, but she saw at once they were the same people-- children, she understood at last, blind to and fearful of all that was in them.

"I know it's hard to think about probably," says Grandma Wizeck. "You've got every right not to want to. But if you do, I mean-- " Her cracked hands grab at the empty air and fall back onto the steering wheel. "I don't think your dad had the first clue who she was. I think he just made up this person in his head and called it Tina."

It won't do any good to point out that she has done the same. When she says *your dad* her face pinches shut. The person Grandma Wizeck calls your dad is made of TV interviews and newspaper columns and misremembered movies. He is out-of-context quotes about diapers and a nervous smile he can't shake, and probably about a dozen other men she knew once or saw on the street and decided were the wrong kind. In the story she tells herself about how he ruined Tina's and consequently her own life, he is a cloud that fell over her daughter, a sad sleep seeping through her veins.

“But you don't want to talk about that,” she says. “Why would you want to talk about that? What do you want to talk about?”

If you let her she will talk for hours. If you don't talk to her about other things, she will eddy back into the past and sweep you into it. So you make up a story about where you want to be in five years (college, apartment, big black dog) and then you call up questions from past Getting to Know You Fridays about the inanimate objects that make up her personality. If she were a household appliance, she would be a microwave-- no, a teakettle, the electric kind. If she were a song, she would be Nights in White Satin by the Moody Blues. If she were a plague, she would be hailstones, if a color, polished chrome.

## Your Mistrust of the Global Positioning System

In a few miles you will reach the exit for Maris, and the wide Meijer parking lot with its black snow, and Krazy Kaplan with his fireworks. After that it is only a little way to the lake and Indiana. If you accidentally missed the exit because you were talking about you could stop at the beach and listen to the waves. It would be quiet now, not yet warm enough for swimmers.

“I’m glad we got a chance to talk,” she says. “Maybe you can visit me for real sometime.”

“Maybe,” you say. Once you are back at your dad’s house you will not be going anywhere. He will know better than to trust you and he will tell you carefully and often how much better he knows. Then it won’t matter what else you do, if you pass the GED or win the Grand River Right to Life essay scholarship or single-handedly disprove evolution by figuring something out about the fossil record that everyone else in the world missed. You will be graduating from the University of Free Babysitting with a degree in Writing Things with The Glitter Marker, and you will be old and hopelessly far from everything by the time God decides you are fit for anything else.

“Tell me about Led Zeppelin,” you say. “Is that your favorite band?”

“I don’t know about favorite,” she says. “I didn’t get into them till I was in my thirties.” She starts to tell a story about a boyfriend, an apartment infested with ants, a concert she took Tina and her brothers to when they were small. But she is still scanning the edge of the freeway

“Approaching exit,” says the phone voice. “Exit two point four miles, then turn left.”

“Don’t do that,” you say. “It’s wrong.”

She picks up the phone and touches the map, touches the floating arrow over your house. “Are you sure?”

Your chest feels like you are going to stop breathing. “It’s still up ahead.”

The exit falls behind.

“Recalculating,” says the phone. There is the wistful marine air of Lake Michigan and the small vacation houses bordered with white pebbles. The phone-voice has remained calm but

Grandma Wizeck scratches her cheek and glances dangerously between the phone and the road, and back to the phone whose estimated time of arrival is now rising mile by mile.

“What other bands do you like?” you ask.

“I don't know, babe. Are you sure it wasn't back there?”

“It's further,” you say. “It's not literally Maris. We just say it is.”

An overpass looms ahead of you, the white roads branching and looping away from the Indiana border. “What is the name of the town,” she says.

“It doesn't have a name.”

“It says Maris on your mailing address,” she says. “I know, I checked. Unless you moved in the last year.”

“No. We could have.”

“Exit one point four miles,” says the phone.

“It's not past Benton Harbor,” says Grandma Wizeck. “It's way back. We need to turn around and go south.”

“No, we don't.”

Grandma Wizeck lets her cigarette fly into the wind. The estimated time of arrival on her phone has risen to thirty-five minutes, now thirty-seven, now forty, and the voice has begun to grow anxious. “I hate to say this, babe, but I think you're lying to me.”

Just over the Indiana border, the Krazy Kaplan billboards multiply, his black-mouthed face repeating from all angles. “Exit one point three miles,” the phone insists. In one his straitjacket is painted with red and white stripes, like an American flag, and the firecracker in his hand spits flat white stars. Sometimes he wears a jester's cap, sometimes a crown. *Exit 2 Miles*, he says, and finally *Where are you going? Exit Now!* The warehouse holding Indiana's largest selection of top-quality brand-name fireworks passes in and out of view, a white barn the size of Meijer Superstore, ringed by fluttering tiny flags.

*It's Not Too Late!* says Krazy Kaplan.



Grandma Wizeck pulls into a rest stop where a woman in track pants is carrying a mop-shaped dog between the parked cars, where the music that had seemed a part of the movement of the car is suddenly out of place and too loud. She lets the car hit the concrete bump at the end of the parking space and cuts off the engine and the music with it. The sudden silence is like being underwater. People pass with voices like bubbles, cells of sound that split and split.

“You'd better write down your address,” she says evenly. “According to the GPS we're nowhere near Maris anymore and I don't know this part of the world at all.”

She tries to hand you a pen and paper and when you don't turn or take it from her she drops it in your lap. The pen rolls into the footwell among the square wax candy wrappers and the balls of lint.

“Maybe you should tell me what the hell is going on,” she says.

On I-94, cars keep tearing past. If Pastor Mcleod was with you he would call your attention to the cars and their passengers, the way he always did when you were near a freeway. All those cars on I-35, he would say, full of groceries and children. All of those cars are rushing toward death. He saw them all: little sports cars, little station wagons, big-shouldered SUVs, huge rattling trucks, he saw the souls who thought they were safe, fighting, talking on the phone, pushing each other, playing little games or singing along with private music. He wanted to hold out his hand into that stream of souls and turn them all toward God. Don't they know time only goes one way? All those green signs say the same thing: Death in four miles, Death, 2.5 miles, half a mile to Death, Death, next exit! And if you knew something that could save them, wouldn't you want to share it with them? Wouldn't sharing it with them be more important than anything else in the world? Tough guy biker, drugged-up trucker, lazy worldly mother driving her ruined children from sin to sin, there is only one way off this road, and it is not the way you're going.

“I don't know the exit,” you say.

“Is that why you told me it was wrong?”

Eventually your dad will find you. There were people you could hire just for that purpose, to track you down by smell or sight, people whose whole life was making sure that no one could disappear who wanted to.

“I need to use the restroom,” you say.

“You do that,” she says. “I’m not going to drive off. I could, but I’m not going to. You know why?”

You swing the long door open against the cold morning.

“It’s because I give a damn about what happens to you,” she says. “Even after you lied to me, actually, which I am aware that you did.” She slams the door and the door you have left open, and she walks after you, first with quick breathless strides, then falling back as if she were following you by stealth.

Someone has stuck a piece of pale blue gum on the map of Indiana, close to Bloomington. You are barely past the border and the Lake Michigan breeze is still drifting around in the grass and the new leaves of trees. Grandma Wizeck enters through the front doors of the rest stop after you, pretending to examine the vending machines for coffee and candy, but watching all the time to make sure you go in through the restroom doors and not out the other side, since you have revealed yourself to be capable of sneaking and lying actions, full of the blood of some junkie donor and addicted to deceit.

Was that it? There are things we don’t know about, things science can’t touch. You could blame them if you wanted to.

But where are you going to go? You can’t stay here until your money runs out at the vending machines, and no one will give you money. There are probably janitors who will chase you off the slick brown benches along the walls of the visitor’s center, and after a while no one will believe that you need money for the bus. Probably there *is* no bus. For the *drug* bus, you mean, they would say. *Heroin* fare. They would point to your pimples and your bad haircut as proof of your junkie status. You see what happens when you don’t take care of your skin? It

doesn't matter that you aren't skinny. Clearly you are the fat kind of junkie, the kind that gets extreme cravings and sneaks boxes of donuts from the 7-Eleven at four in the morning and eats them behind dumpsters in muffled frenzy. You are not sure if that is a real category of drug addict, but it doesn't matter. People will instantly invent it the minute you ask them for money. "You're just going to spend it on Hostess fruit pies," they'll say. Maybe after a few years you will run into your dad for some reason and tell him the whole story of what happened and how sorry you are, and he will smirk forlornly as he always does at parking lot stories. Very good, he'll say. Almost worth a quarter. And he will walk away without giving you anything while Janet complains about how susceptible she is to compassion. He tries to be a kind man, he will tell her, but kindness has limits.

You wash your hands in the cold water and dry them on your shirt rather than use the dryers which Janet claims are full of diseases. Grandma Wizeck is sitting on one of the benches, pink fleece jacket zipped over cartoon ribcage, tapping intently at the face of her phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Nobody," she says. "Sit down. Don't just loom like that. Have a seat."

It would be better to call your dad now and tell him where you are. That would save him worry and guarantee that you would be taken home, whatever that would mean now that you have left. Probably he wouldn't send you to the garbage bag ministry, the kidnapers of wayward girls. Probably he would like to but is too afraid you might panic embarrassingly like when Living Water Christian Assembly had a surprise screening of *The Passion of the Christ*, and he would have to drive out and apologize for twenty minutes for your lack of self-control and stubborn reluctance to be uplifted. But maybe Janet would convince him. He can't have forgotten the importance of accountability, and he will feel the sting of conscience as he realizes he is still accountable for your actions. Maybe the garbage bag counselors will remind him, in the spirit of loving rebuke, of Tina Blake and the electro-convulsive therapy he had the opportunity to approve but didn't and all the drastic measures he was unwilling to take that might have saved her

and you and everyone. They would remind him how wrong his instincts had always been, how little he knew any of the people he imagined that he knew. They would remind him of his bad experiences with Amway and WebZilla Affiliate Services and the distance education course in theology that had turned out to be just a guy in Wyoming who didn't even believe in God. Above all they would stress his responsibility to you and the future of your soul which through his negligence he had rendered even more imperiled than before. Finally he would sign the release and arrange to be at work when the kidnappers came with their black masks and their van and their human-sized garbage bag. Maybe you would even be grateful for it later, the way the girls on their websites are always grateful, after they had turned you into the sort of person who could say "God used this experience to change my heart" and mean it. What would that be like? It might be worth it. It might be exactly what you've been missing all this time.

"What do you want to do?" she says.

"I don't know."

"Yes you do. I'm not asking what you think you *should* do." Her phone buzzes and lights up yellow and she silences it with a brush of her thumb and a click and glances at it again. "I'm saying, what do *you want*."

The best thing is to go home without asking first. *Anticipate the needs of others* is a fundamental principle of good behavior and good practice for the marriage you will never have. Anticipate what your dad will tell you and learn not to ask, the way the Maidens learn that after four their dad will want a cup of tea, that they like the Wall Street Times folded over the arm of their favorite chair, that what they are really hoping for is an easy question about salvation that they can answer out of a book they read once and have been waiting for the chance to share with you. You should anticipate that Grandma Wizeck and your dad and Janet all want you to go home. It will even give Grandma Wizeck the chance to yell at your dad if that's what she wants.

"I should go home."

"Fine. Great. Where do you live?"

You have pulled the sleeves of your black sweater down over your hands. The creases between your finger-joints are dark and dry.

“Do you have any lotion,” you ask.

“That's fine,” she says. “Perfect. We can sit here all afternoon and talk about lotion.”

She lifts her heavy denim purse into her lap and digs in it. “I have lip balm,” she says.

“I'm sorry.”

“Bullshit,” she says. “Don't be sorry for something stupid. Save it for when you do something actually wrong.”

“I shouldn't have run away,” you say.

“But you did, babe. And what I'm wondering right now is-- Here. Lotion.” She hands you a finger-thick white tube. “Problem solved. What was I saying?”

A little boy walks by, two steps behind his family, trailing a cloud of muffled music.

“Do you know where my mom is,” you say.

Grandma Wizeck leans back against the cinderblock wall of the visitor's center and knocks her head backward on the wall. “Babe,” she says. “Your dad needs to talk to you about this. That is his job.”

“Ok.”

“She's in a place in Texas,” she says. “Summerview Special Care Something. It's a nice place. They moved her there— last year sometime. You didn't know that?”

“Can we go there?”

She closes her eyes and rolls her head against the yellow cinderblock.

“That's really dirty,” you say.

“Ok. Let me ask you something, ok?”

She's waiting for you to answer, but the hum from the machines is filling your head.

Through the back door of the visitor's center, the trees' young leaves are moving.

“Can we go outside?”

“Sure. Fine. But listen, maybe your mom isn't going to be completely ok when you see her. Apparently you don't know anything about it. Is that right? And your dad is definitely going to want to know if you've decided to do this. I think you should call him.”

“You said I didn't have to call him.”

“You are a sneaky bastard, you know that?” says Grandma Wizeck. The tiny cracks have multiplied in her dry skin, a web of wrinkles all over her pale angular face. “Babe. I thought you were pregnant.”

“How could I be pregnant?”

She says, “Texas is a long way, babe.”

The park behind the visitor's center is full of tall trees with old and new names carved in them. The oldest names are high on the trunk: Les and Lisa, 1977, Connie and Jose, 1982. In 1982, your dad was graduating from high school in his big glasses with a plastic bridge. Tina was making her valedictorian speech with shaking hands, her hair badly crimped for the occasion, her eyeshadow streaked too high. They had friends then and plans for college, and your dad's father was still alive though weak and grimacing, and Grandma Blake had a halo of curled honey-colored hair around her small head. There is one from 1993, LM and ST in a jagged heart, gouged deep in ragged lines, the two ends of the heart not quite intersecting at the bottom-- grown apart, maybe, as the tree grew thicker. The later years are closer to eye and arm level. DD and AZ might still be together, maybe with a child who is walking now with small insistent steps from chair to chair to table.

“Don't you hate it when people wreck a tree like that?” says Grandma Wizeck.

There are dogs in the distance, trotting through the tall grass by the fence that marks the border between rest stop and warehouse parking lot. When you first moved to Michigan, your dad promised you a dog and got one, a brown lab called Delilah who was always happy about something, always pressing her paws and her weight on your chest. But Delilah made Janet nervous, and when Micah was born she could not keep her nose out from between the slats of the

crib, or from snuffling the baby all over, and one day while you were at youth group someone took Delilah away. Your dad said she had run away and they were looking for her, but there were no lost dog fliers and no one called to say she had been found. After that there was never a dog in the house. You made it worse, by acting the way you did. Maybe someday you can have a dog, when Micah and Amos are old enough and you are more mature. When they have moved away and you are still at home, watching other people's word games and other people's indignation and chopping onions for Janet all the days of your life.

"I don't want to go back yet," you say.

"Ok, babe. All you have to do is say. But listen. It's normal to want to see your mom, I get that, but you need to know it's not going to be like a movie."

"I don't watch movies."

Her face shrinks into a peeved squint and she twists the turquoise ring on her finger.

"Does that have anything to do with what I'm saying? Jesus. I mean, listen to me for a minute."

The dog turns at the edge of the fence and runs back, flying over the tall weeds with tongue out.

"Don't *expect* things. That's all. Don't think like we're going to spring your mom from the special care facility and go running through the fields or something."

"That's not what I think," you say. But Grandma Wizeck waves your words away.

"All frolicking in the fields with guitars playing or something," she says. "I know you think that, because *I* think that," she says. "Like every time I talk to the doctor and he says, 'Tina's stable now.' You know it's stupid, but you just keep thinking it. We didn't even get along, you know, when she was ok. She was always like, you don't understand me. And she was right. I did not."

"I don't know how to get there myself."

"First of all," she says, "you are not going anywhere by yourself. Second--"

"It's ok," you say. "That's fine. If you don't want to go. That's ok."

As soon as you say it you realize you don't need her. You want to feel safe but feeling and being are not the same, and why should you feel safe when you *aren't*? You could walk along the southbound freeways until you found your way to Texas. You could sleep in places like this, and if you were killed, so what? If you were dragged into the woods by the men who wait there, what difference did it make? You were already half someone else, half-drifter, all the cells of your body fed by junkie blood.

But she looks at you like you have just told her you are going to fly to Texas using your clothes as wings. She pulls her jumbled keychain from her purse. "You want to go somewhere, we can go somewhere. What do you want?"

That question again.

"Can we go today?"

She sets her mouth at you. "I need to call my friend and see if he can take care of China," she says.

On one of the empty picnic tables, someone has written the word *fuck* with a black marker. Just the word, a command-- a word that means to do to someone, a girl, what parking structure lurkers do and the men waiting in the woods by your house, if they find you walking past, luck and ugliness notwithstanding. There is no object, only the word, and next to it a cartoon dog with goggle eyes and long tongue. You have seen it before, written like that. Maybe the word is code, and this table is where you sit to offer yourself to those people. There is no one in the park you can see but the woman with the gray dog and a family with small children, but you stand up anyway and walk back toward Grandma Wizeck who is shouting into her phone as if the additional distance she has traveled requires that she speak up. "Just call me or text me, ok, I just need to do a thing. I'll tell you later." If you see the word again on a rest stop table, you will know it is a sign.

Back in the car, the engine wheezes and shakes. A thin boy-voice sings, *My life is brilliant. My love is pure.* Grandma Wizeck lets the music run between you and smokes one



cigarette after another. From time to time she glances at her phone, and holds it between her face and the windshield to tap at it.

“Why do you keep looking at it?”

“You know,” she says, “when I was your age. . .” She looks up at you. “That's a lie. We didn't treat our elders with respect *at all*.” Click, click, click. “That doesn't mean *you* shouldn't.”

“Tell me about when you were my age.”

“It sucked,” she says. “What do you want to know? I went to Catholic school my freshman year. We wore uniforms. I got kicked out of Catholic school for being a bitch to the nuns, and then I went to West High School for three years. What do you want to know?”

“Did you have a boyfriend?”

“Everyone had a boyfriend back then,” she says. “That doesn't mean it was a good idea.”

Before the cross was a cross, it was a tree, and like all trees it wanted more than anything to be helpful, just like you want to help around the house. All trees pray that they can be made into good things, like cradles and toys and houses for good families, and that no one will make them into something sad, like a prison or a weapon. So you can imagine how afraid the tree was when it found out that God Himself had come to earth to suffer and die, and that it was to be that wooden cross His hands were nailed to. And the tree prayed, God of all trees, please don't make me an instrument of death.

And God said, how can you understand My plans for you? What you call an instrument of death will make you a symbol of hope for all mankind. Men and women and children will wear your image in gold and kneel before you. For thousands of years to come you will mean nothing but God's love of the world. And the tree was still afraid, but it let itself be cut. It was a tree and there was not much it could do.

Tina told that story on the drive up to Michigan to see Grandma Wizeck, twisting in the front seat to face you. In a few years, your dad says, all the telephone poles will be gone. There are cells in the air instead, and the old wires will be tangled up and hauled away, the poles pulled

up and shipped off to be burned or pulped somewhere, and another reminder of Christ' sacrifice will be taken from the world.

The road has swollen and split into three. The roads bend backward, turn and trail away wide and white. Here are the huge yellow steamrollers, and the burning smell of hot blacktop and tar and the long-necked digger nudging the earth with its small head, a dinosaur confused by the loneliness and damp on the world after the Flood. God, who could have killed everyone painlessly and remade the world, sent the flood to make everyone afraid, to make the earth strange for the few who survived. What was the point of them being afraid, if they were just going to drown? It was wrong to be angry with God, because He was doing His best against the sin that *you* brought into the world, don't forget, and He was God, and that meant what he did as right. He had to give them the chance to get on the ark or to laugh at the ark, even though there wasn't much room for them in the first place; he had to give them free will or it wouldn't be fair to them, would it? They had to choose for themselves, or it would all be meaningless.

In *Noah's Wonderful Ark* there are realistic pictures of the huge wave looming over the land, the children chasing each other in its shadow. Even when they saw the waters coming, the people did not repent. There had been rain before and floods, they thought, and the world had gone on as before. And the world went on, only none of them were in it. In the book they are playing soccer with a red ball, then flailing in water, then drowning. The dinosaurs twist their long necks above the water, watch the sky for signs of the flood's ending as it swallows them. The birds fly exhausted, mist-blind and rain-heavy, and even the fish in the sea are sickened. The book has a map of the continents and how they broke apart and drifted from the force of the water, how they collided again, how the shape of the world was changed. It showed how the bodies of animals sank and buried on another, becoming fossils in the silt and hills of earth in the sun. It showed the waters receding and new flowers growing in the corpses, and all of this was the goodness of God.

Micah isn't like you. He doesn't have your genes or your invader blood. Nothing about

the story of Noah is scary to him, because he is here, after all. He is the descendant of someone who survived. He laughs when he sees the shadow of the wave on the village, laughs at the faces of the drowned clawing the blank walls of the ark. He sees God's mercy where you see nothing. Like the cards with blots and lines-- which vase, which duck-- you never knew the answer. So you pretended you knew but didn't say-- there was always a secret meaning, obvious to others but hidden to you. If you had faith, you would say, I don't understand it, but I know it's good. But you can't say that. It would be like lying to God.

A few miles past the interchange the traffic thins and you are flying again down the wide white road. A church sign calls across the road: For All You Do, His Blood's For You! The word blood stings in your mouth, but it is already a mile behind you, and everything by the road is already past. The billboards warn against the dangers of methamphetamines, promise a family-centered worship community, promise ugly new houses full of laughing dogs and children. The telephone poles pull thank yous from you, like scarves tied together, quietly in your heart.

### III

#### How Things Were Better in the Past

Before you had a past the past was with you, the way God was with you, following in a cloud or a song with the fall of your footsteps. The past walked in the orchard, called you and made you ashamed. In the past, you could have gone to school because school was safe then, the Pledge of Allegiance read every morning, the discipline swift and strict. You would have loved oranges at Christmas and homemade molasses candy as no one now could love anything, except maybe in other countries where there were fewer choices. The roads were all red dirt then and curled away between rows of trees in bloom, and the rivers and lakes were clean.

Pastor Doug knew all about the past. In his prayer talks and his sermons, in person and video, he called up long arguments with Abraham and Joseph and with Jesus Himself, who wanted His followers to know that He was getting pretty sick of their foolishness. “But Jesus, listen, I’m sorry,” he would say, clutching his wide red forehead and working his way into the blustery voice that meant he was arguing on behalf of his fellowship, on behalf of the lost souls in his living room and the lost souls gathered around the VCR at home. “I don’t *get* it, Lord, how can the scriptures *really* mean that it’s wrong to live *our own lives*, Lord, that’s not what *I* was taught. What about my *figure*, Lord?” He put one hand on his thick waist, tipped his head to one side, a mock-mother rejecting the sacred calling of motherhood, and his voice grew high and shrill, and you all laughed without knowing why. “That’s not a very progressive attitude, Lord!” He shook a thick finger girlishly in the air. “You’ve got to get up to date!” Then Jesus, represented by a slow sigh and slump of Pastor Doug’s shoulders, would remind you in his gaunt patient way that it was all still there in the Bible. Times may change, but God’s Word was eternal.

Pastor Doug was a big man, with arms as thick as your body and a heavy slick voice like a side of beef, a raw red laugh. He liked to make fun of you for things you’d never done, like Janet with her jokes about nose rings and boyfriends, as if you were no one in particular, a

stubborn child he'd invented to prove a point. When Jesus reminded him for the thousandth time that there was a Bible right in front of him, he let his arms fall slack against his sides, and shake his head at the polished parlor floor. "There's no escaping the truth, is there," he'd say, in his own voice at last. "The truth is the truth no matter what the world says. Though we live in perilous times, the truth remains the same today as it was two thousand years ago."

There had been a fall. It was always the same fall, and its influence was spreading now faster than ever, the wound deepening in the schools and in the government, on TV and in books, and in your hearts, ladies, as your flesh resists these words, as you think, Not me! Women who would have learned obedience and gratitude are born today to an age of rebellion, and they rebel in conformity to the age and call it independent thinking. The serpent's voice seeps into their ears. Leave your home, it says. Get a job. Abandon your children and the children you might have had. At first there were only a few of these so-called liberated women, but they drew others out in their wake, and made the world unsafe for all women. It was as if the fish in the Dallas World Aquarium had thrown their bodies against the glass and shattered it for the sake of freedom. A fish in a glass tank may feel constrained, but when it breaks the glass it gasps and thrashes, and all the other fish, the innocent ones, are swept out to their deaths. Can we be free without God, ladies? Can we be free without air?

In the past you would have been good because it was impossible to be otherwise. The world would have been ordered for you, your life one furnished room after another with clean clothes in the drawers, a new name, letters on a desk. When your hands strayed and lingered on your body, when your mind wandered from prayer toward some grinding rain-gray song, when you felt the dumb throbbing gravity of toy catalogs at the dentist's or a movie full of blossoming orange flames, you wished for the past to open and receive you. One day, you thought, you would turn a corner and be carried back, away from everything bright and noisy and crude, and you would live out your days making butter and hand-sewing muslin sheets like the smiling woman wearing the wrong watch and glasses at Pioneer Pavilion. You only had to squint away a few

details -- Caleb's glasses and your mom's sneakers, the screen saver's rainbow spiral reflected in the window-- and it would come true. The pickup trucks would vanish from FM 4312 and the roads themselves would be absorbed into the earth.

Grandma Wizeck passes cars narrowly and weaves from lane to lane, and the music flies with her, high singing guitars and wrung voices. Diane, for heaven's sake, call her Diane. She's not *that* old. And if she is, if she is, it doesn't matter.

“What's the speed limit?” you say.

“I know how to drive, babe.”

She reaches in her purse for something and the car swerves, and she plugs a thin player into the stereo. A different song fills the car, like a lonely computer.

Once they stop looking for you, everything will be better: Micah and Amos will laugh and clap their hands at the Flood as they should and nothing will be difficult anymore. The water will close over you smooth and clear as glass, and the sky will stretch down into them unbroken.

When your dad left the fellowship he took away the past. In the new house the present was too close to let you shake it off. The past would never come to the frontage road and that bare house with its cold right angles and fake gas fireplace like an aquarium in the wall. The fireplace was the worst thing of all. It was two fake logs crossed in front of a gas pipe and when your dad pressed the red flame-shaped button on the remote control, four thin bluish flames rose silently between them. “Neat, isn't it?” he said. The new house was so close to the world you could hear the school bus brakes in the morning, creaking in the dark at the end of the block. Every morning, kids you didn't know walked to the end of the block and boarded that bus for public school. Your throat closed up and your stomach twisted to think of them. Sometimes you dreamed that you got up and boarded the bus in your nightgown and pajama pants, and when you tried to get back home the roads had all been changed. That was happening to the children, too, whom you saw sometimes out in their yards, shouting and riding bikes. One had asked you to come over and

watch a movie once, and you had to run into the backyard and close the gate. They were learning Evehood somewhere you couldn't see, somewhere just beyond the freeway, and you couldn't stop them. Even if you burned down all the schools, the government would build more. At night you thought of them cut loose from their parents, from God, drifting in the cold dark of space.

The little square of land behind the wooden fence might have been your father's world, but just beyond it belonged to the Enemy. In the footpath and the fields leading down to the lake, broken glass glittered, and red wires twisted up from the gravel and grass. But your dad insisted on acting as if you loved it, as if you were as relieved to be there as he was. "How do you like living in your own house with your own yard?" he kept saying. He did the same thing with Tina. He showed her all the things he had given her and she nodded with the swarmed look on her face. All the things he was proudest of were signs of her failure: the dishwasher, the central vacuum, the perfect fireplace that would never hurt anyone or need cleaning. Did Stacy Mcleod need a dishwasher to keep her kitchen clean? Did she have to resort to a meaningless glass fire? They were all related to the worst failure, the medicine she had promised in her weakness to take, that would carry her further than ever from God, beyond His reach forever.

There are hills now and a white mist is gathering in front of you. Grandma Wizeck glances between her phone and the road and taps with her silver thumb ring. She holds the phone between her eyes and the windshield and something looms brown and tall in the road before you.

She looks up suddenly and grabs the steering wheel and her phone falls between the seats. A cardboard box stumbles on the wind out of the road. The car grazes it, a hollow sound, and drags a part of it momentarily, and then she swerves again and hits a bump that throws you in the air for a moment and comes down with a terrible pop and a scrape, and sparks bright orange and the grinding of metal.

"Shit," she says. "Shit." The car lurches to a stop on the soft line between the shoulder and the tall grass by the shoulder, the long car leaning forward on one bare metal wheel.

## Tow Truck and Dealership

It is cold outside the car, colder than the morning was, though the light is just beginning to look old when you open the long door and step outside. There is a white mist over everything, and nothing in sight but the trees and the road and the grass where bags and white wrappers have gathered. Grandma Wizeck waves her hand in front of her face, trying to wave away whatever you are afraid of. “It's just a tire,” she says. “It's no big deal. We'll just get a tow truck.”

“I'm sorry.” But that is wrong— she should be sorry. She wasn't looking at the road. You could be dead now. The knowledge falls through you spinning.

“Could be worse,” she says. “Don't worry about it.” She digs her phone from under the driver's seat and sits down with the door open, turning her foot in slow circles as she dials. It's a voice activated line that asks her to shout single words and mishears them. “TOW TRUCK,” she says, and shuts the door against the noise of the freeway. The car leans hard on its bare wheel. The air is mist and the cars tear through it, heavier than anything living, and faster. “This is ridiculous,” she says. The phone asks her to repeat the question.

You sit down on the hood of the car to watch the cars pass. “It's wet,” says Grandma Wizeck. She pulls a book out of her denim purse, *The Cat Who Cried Wolf*. “Sit inside, babe, you're going to get soaked.” But it isn't raining hard enough yet for a lesson on obedience. With a little thought you might be able to justify watering the garden in this weather, and the lesson would be lost. *But Daddy, they'll diiiiie!* You sit in the car and fold the oyster-shaped sunglasses back into the glove compartment. When the plants died, did Jessalyn say I told you so? Or did she say, Thank you, Daddy, for your guidance? How many girls and boys in how many cars on I-35, on any road, are growing up without guidance, with no walls around them-- naked, with the world on all sides?

Some of the unsaved see you jump down from the hood of the car as the rain turns to hail. Some see you duck inside and slam the long door shut, see the little balls of hail hammer the place your feet just left. Still others pass the car lurched low on one bare wheel and say or do not



say a prayer for your safety and warmth as the hail clatters down. You can say a prayer for each of them as they pass, a blink, a twitch of the lip, an exhalation. But what will you pray for them? You don't know God's plan. Thy will be done could be anything.

The tow truck arrives with yellow lights blinking. Grandma Wizeck marks her place with a crushed packet of saltine crackers and stands to meet it, the hail still falling on her head and hands. The truck pulls close to the hood of the car almost touching it, and the engine breathes exhaust into the wet air for a minute before the door swings open and the driver jumps with a splash onto the shoulder, tucking a thick metal clipboard close to his chest to protect it. He's grown a wiry patch of hair on his chin to hide how young he is, but it seems impossible that he is much older than you are. His eyes and mouth are like a toddler's, so much that whenever he doesn't speak you forget he knows how, and when he does his voice is small and loose-jointed. Once he hands the contract and a chewed plastic pen to Grandma Wizeck he puts a piece of red gum in his mouth and looks at the sky, spots of white ice beading his improbable chin hair, pink ears plugged full of music.

"It just needs a new tire," says Grandma Wizeck. "How long is that going to take?"

He twists the tiny speaker free of his left ear and lists his head toward her. The music leaks into the wind. *Though my heart is torn, I will praise You in the storm.*

"You can't buy just one tire, ma'am," he says. "You can get two, but it's recommended you get all four tires replaced at the same time to avoid inconsistent wear." The familiar trembly jangle of praise music guitar floats into the path of the passing cars. *I remember when I stumbled in the wind. You heard my cry.* You could say the whole song to him if you wanted to, because you have heard it literally hundreds of times, maybe thousands, on your dad's stereo.

"I don't want four tires," says Grandma Wizeck. "I have three perfectly good tires."

The tow truck driver blinks and holds one long hand over the clipboard, like an umbrella. "There's no obligation to get four tires, but we have found that inconsistent wear is one of the

leading causes of blowouts like what just happened.”

Grandma Wizeck scribbled hard at the contract and hands it to him. “What if I only want *one* tire?”

“We don't have any way of selling you a single tire, ma'am.” He lets his music dangle as he tears off one page, circles the check box marked Roadside Assistance, tears two more pages, and hands one to her. “If you want to wait inside the truck while I hook this up,” he says. “I'll be just a few minutes.” You look up at him just as he's pushing the song back into his ear.

“That's--”

He blinks, fingers still touching the white wire.

“That's my dad's favorite song,” you say.

“What is?” says Grandma Wizeck, but his small serious face breaks into a grin. “It's a good one,” he says. He stands by the truck bed door for a moment, moving the bud around in his ear. “I hope you know Jesus.”

“We just need a new tire,” says Grandma Wizeck. “That's all.”

But he is watching the drift of your chopped-off hair and he doesn't look at her, and his thin childlike lips waver between concern and curiosity.

“Yes,” you say.

He smiles again and dips his head with a quick exhale like you have just saved him from a difficult task. Probably he has to ask everyone he meets the same question. Grandma Wizeck rolls her eyes and takes the window seat, away from the driver. She sets the denim purse on her lap, turns toward the window and starts composing a text message about her tire to no one in particular so that when the tow truck driver comes back he will think she is busy and not ask her about Jesus. Before there were text messages, the people at Grapevine Mills would pick up their phones and start shouting into them without even bothering to call anyone, or pretend that they recognized someone on the other side of the mall and walk as fast as they could from Doug and Stacy Mcleod and their tote bag full of back issues of *Living In Love Digest*. And some of them,

like you, must have lied.

All the way to the exit ramp and through the fenced and wild-grown town to the dealership, she wonders out loud how it can be possible to have a stock of tires that can only be individually fitted to individual wheels, yet impossible to sell a single tire to someone who only needs one tire. “Ma'am, it remains to be seen,” he says, and you laugh out loud without meaning to. He shifts his narrow weight in the seat and something changes between you, as if you were suddenly more visible, heavier. Theraflu. The white hail falls and scatters in the sidewalks.

“Crazy weather,” he says approvingly. “Where were you headed?”

“South,” says your grandma.

“Texas,” you say.

“I've got some cousins in Waco,” he says. “Where in Texas?”

“When we get there,” says Grandma Wizeck, “I want you to make sure we get only one tire. I don't care about uneven wear. I care about unevenly charging me for two tires when I only need one.”

If you lived in this town you would walk this way every day. You would buy milk and meat at that IGA and walk past fields like this one, past No Trespassing signs like this one, and the thick stalk of weeds like green trees would brush against you.

In the lobby of the dealership a bright new TV is playing over nylon flowers and magazines. The two women at the front desk have turned their backs to the door when you walk in, one pregnant with a round shiny face, one with thin dry arms and willow earrings. They are looking at pictures of a little boy on a phone turned sideways. “Well, hi there!” says the pregnant woman, addressing each new picture as if it were a real child. “Aren't you sweet. Aren't you a sweetheart pumpkin-face.” Grandma Wizeck taps her thumb ring against the counter and they turn in the same slow way, frowning slightly. Somewhere behind them, radio voices are laughing at a joke long lost.

“I need to get one tire,” she says.

“Just have a seat, ma'am,” says the woman with the willow earrings. The pregnant woman brushes her long white-tipped fingernail against the corner of her eye and blinks stickily.

“We'll be right with you,” she says.

Grandma Wizeck tries to give them her receipt and points to the blank where the tow-truck driver has scribbled *tires replaced* and the woman with the willow earrings stands impassive in the stream of her explanation, barely moving her head so that the earrings flash. She pushes the receipt back across the counter, over a diagram depicting an engine and its component parts.

“This is for you to keep, ma'am. Please have a seat.”

Her coworker has opened her bronze purse and is unfolding a white-and-blue wallet the size of *The Cat Who Cried Wolf*. She pulls out a black and white card, an ultrasound photo. The Maidens post them sometimes: Newest Baby Brother Jayden Isaiah, already being formed in the womb. When the other receptionist realizes what it is, their voices rise together in a shriek of delight. The radio voices laugh cruelly at something else. Grandma Wizeck twists her mouth sideways and sits down under the TV, where a woman in a white tank top is explaining the flames that will soon be painted on the side of a squarish black car. “Now we see the key to really awesome detailing,” she says. “They use not just one stencil, but a whole sequence of stencils to create the illusion of depth. These flames are going to pop right off the side of the car for an amazing visual effect.”

“Look how swollen my ankles are,” says the pregnant receptionist. “It's like I don't even *have* ankles anymore.”

“Shut up,” says her coworker. “You are perfectly aware of how hot you are.”

When the tow truck driver comes in, the willow earrings shake the light like water. “Did you see Carla's baby?” she says. She holds the ultrasound photo in front of him. “That's a foot,” she says. “See where the toes are?”

The whole time he is leaning on the diagrams of car parts and tracing the outline of Carla's baby with his thin finger, your diseased brain is floating pictures from the false future to the surface of your skin. It doesn't help that when he stands up to explain the work contract to Grandma Wizeck he keeps looking your way. You shouldn't have said the thing about your dad's favorite song, which apparently makes him think you are friends. Every time he sees you your head squeezes like a vice to keep the thoughts from seeping out. You try to think of all the ways it would be a mistake to say one more word to him.

What if he turned out to be your boyfriend somehow? You would say, I'll just end up hurting you, and he would say no, no, thinking that's what you want. And after a while it would be what you want; you'll get addicted to his faith in you like a child to sugary cereal, his milk-and-marshmallow words soft on your tongue, squashed against your gums. And you will start to believe him, at first just admitting the *possibility* that you might not make him unhappy *all* the time, and from there it is only a step to believing he could be happy with you *sometimes*. Happy enough to make up for the bad times? Is it possible he-- or anyone else-- might take your inevitable betrayals, your creeping crazyvines, your selfishness, the ways unimagined now you will take him for granted, the way you can't help being cold any more than your dad can help smiling at cameras, and say, you were worth it? There is no balance. There is no corresponding weight of happiness. Was anyone happier than your dad in the early days of Project Nathan? If you asked him now if it was worth it, what would he say? Sarcasm does no one any favors, Cedar. Probably he would not believe it was really a question.

But there is no point in thinking like this about someone you are never going to see again.

As soon as he turns to Grandma Wizeck his whole face films over like he has become voluntarily blind. "I'm going to need your signature one more time, ma'am."

"How long is it going to take to take to put the one tire on?" she says.

Another man comes in, and his hair is thin like cotton candy made of smoke, and he calls the tow truck driver over to talk about something. They call her to them and the man with the

shiny face gives her a new estimate of the cost of two new tires, the tow truck, and a free oil change he is throwing in plus a fresh new filter for only ten dollars that he is throwing in at below cost because he cannot stand to see a filter get so dirty. It hurts him. It literally breaks his heart, and it will save gas mileage in addition to being cleaner in general, better air for everyone, which makes everything better, you understand. By the time they have finished arguing, the flames have been painted on both sides of the black TV car and the woman in the white tank top is fake-whispering to the camera that she is about to call in the owner of the car. What will his reaction be? Will he like it? The woman pretends to be worried, but her face anticipates that he will. Now she is pulling a man by the arm with her skinny arms, her white teeth enormous. A blue bandanna is tied around his eyes. The camera zooms in on his face as she unties it, covers his eyes with her hands, kisses him on the tuft of his bleached hair, and uncovers them. He begins to laugh, silent and shaking. "Do you like it?" she asks. He lifts her into the air and she shrieks. "Do you like it?" The flames fill the screen, the camera tracing them first one way and then the other. "Oh my God," says the man's voice. "Wow. I mean wow." Then the cameras are visible, and the people standing behind them come forward to congratulate him and hug the woman, and music starts, engine music with a flurry of drums behind it, and the next episode will be the same, with different people in another town.

The car isn't going to be ready before closing time due to the exceptionally high number of people with urgent problems just as pressing as yours. "You're serious," she says. "You can't stay late and change a tire?" But there are labor issues, and there are issues of not making exceptions, and the manager explains these issues in a soft low voice that rolls right off Grandma Wizeck's shoulders and rises as steam from the air. With her book in her hand Grandma Wizeck asks if she is supposed to stay here all night, with her teenage granddaughter, and if not where is she supposed to go without a car.

"We can give you a ride to the motel, ma'am."

"And I'll be reimbursed for the cost of my room."

“It's not possible for us to do that, ma'am.”

Carla has crept forward, all in stretched black, to switch off the scented plug-in candles and shift the magazines around. She turns off the wide-screen TV, and the faraway sounds of cars being lifted and lowered rise in the new silence. She has gathered up her bronze purse and her canvas tote bag and she edges quickly away from Grandma Wizeck who laughs her bitter fake laugh at the naked discomfort on Carla's face, and you don't know how to apologize to her, a stranger, without accidentally looking amused. She isn't looking at you anyway. She is calling someone who will pick her up outside, and here is the tow truck driver, leaning to one side like a thin new tree and crookedly smiling. His teeth are bad enough that he might love you.

He leads you across the dealership parking lot to his truck. The hail has nearly melted, but clusters of it are gathered still in the cracks of the concrete and in corners. The rain has stopped but the wind is damp and the trees dripping water.

This time, Grandma Wizeck takes the middle seat, setting her denim purse in her lap, and you squash yourself against the door with its cold window and cold steel handle.

“I'm really sorry to hear about this disrupting your travel plans.” He hands you and Grandma Wizeck a card each. “If you're interested, we're having a Bible study tonight at the Denny's at nine o'clock,” he says. “Just drop-in and discussion, come as you are kind of thing. We'd love to have you.”

Grandma Wizeck buries the card in the middle of her book, but you turn yours around in your hands and don't look up. You can feel from his breath how visible you are. Jail pictures, trial pictures running somewhere at the back of his mind, noticed or un-. There's a crazy woman in Texas with your face. He smiles at the line of your hair.

“Everyone's welcome,” he says.

There is only one motel in town, the Motel 6 joined by parking lot to a Hadler's Travel Center, and the Denny's is across a narrow street streaked with gravel. Grandma Wizeck checks you in and tries to negotiate for a smoking room on the second floor, but the only smoking rooms

they have are on the ground. Brochures offer their attractions from a wooden case at right angles to the ice machine. A water park with twisting DNA helix slides, a Living History Village, The Haunted Hollow where water flows uphill. When you're thirty, you can pull them out of your hope chest and tape a note to them about what you did.

It's almost eight o'clock and you have not eaten anything which is fine, which you are ok with, but she is always trying to get you to eat something. She wants to fill up her iced tea at the truck stop and maybe buy a movie to watch in the room. "Or do you want to go to Denny's?" she says. "I think that's the only game in town besides pizza delivery. We can do that if you want. I just don't want to run into some creepy Bible study."

"It doesn't have to be creepy."

She laughs. "I would've thought you'd had enough of Bible studies, babe."

"I like talking about the Bible." The sky is white and the wind is heavy with new moisture. April had always been colder than you might expect. "We don't actually go to a lot of Bible studies," you say.

"What do you do?" she says.

The truck stop store is huge, as big as the grocery section of Meijer There is a dark room with arcade games and a fried-chicken counter with a long line, and there is a whole circular rack of camouflage coats, hunter orange and dark green, and a shelf of ceramic animals: wolves and wolf's heads, an eagle goring a fish with its claws, a bear looking over its shoulder. Grandma Wizeck lifts each one in turn to check the price on the green velvet base and frown, like each price tag was a taste of bad milk.

"We have our own Bible study at home."

"You don't go to the church ones?" She drifts along the shelf, lifts a tiny glass with a black buggy on it, the words AMISH YOU BABY.

"We don't go to church."



“Your Aunt Charlene collects these,” she says. “Zack's wife, you know.” She sets it down and picks up another one, just the same. “You don't know. Ok. Well, that's who she is.” She moves to the rack of pink and blue and yellow tshirts. “Why don't you go to church?” she says.

“We just don't.”

“Too sinful,” she says.

“I don't know.”

“It's pretty funny when going to church is too sinful,” she says. “You have to admit, babe.”

“We can get pizza if you want.”

“He likes you,” she says “That creepy driver.”

“Why do you think he was creepy?”

“All serious,” she says. “Maybe you like that. All asking you if you know Jesus.”

“You're supposed to.”

“*I'm* not supposed to do anything.”

“Christians are. Anyway, I said I would go.”

“You did not,” she says. “I was sitting right there.” But it is possible you did, only quietly, when she wasn't looking. “So what?” she says. “You think he's going to be so disappointed? He probably invites everyone he tows to that Bible study. How many people you think actually show up?”

“It doesn't matter,” you say. “Pizza is fine.”

The things you are sure about are the dangerous things. When your dad met Tina, before he knew better, he was sure that God had chosen her especially for him. Every shrug, every strand of hair she picked out of the joints of her glasses was a sign of her rightness. You know because he used to tell you the story, because you used to want to hear it, in the other life that you have left, the dead girl's life. The dead girls bounced on the couch, up and down, and grabbed their dad's sleeve, before he had the chance to change out of his work shirt and into his soft green polo

with the EDS logo on it. "Tell us how you met Mom," they said. And he told his girls, who were not yet dead, that God had kept his heart safe, and God had shown him the hope and the future He had planned. Were you there? You were all there in his future. He didn't know yet what you looked like, but he knew he loved you. He knew that you were meant to be.

"I was a waitress for fifteen years," says Grandma Wizeck. "Hands down the worst tippers in the world are Bible studies and people who just came from church."

Grandma Wizeck is picking through the shirts on a circular rack. Most of them are too big for either of you, or have ugly cartoons on them. She lifts one to her chest, smaller than the others, broad and black. IT'S NOT A BEER BELLY, the shirt says. IT'S A GAS TANK FOR A SEX MACHINE. "What do you think? Seriously, though, what do you want to do? Do you want to go to Denny's?"

You hold out your hands to show there is nothing in them.

"Whatever is fine," you say.

"Ok," she says. "Be honest." She unfurls a huge pink tshirt with a cat's smirking face, silver sparkling whiskers, the words I'VE GOT CATTITUDE, and tosses it at you, so it slumps against your crossed arms. "It's cute. Don't you think it's cute?" There is something intolerable about the cat's lowered eyelids and flat uncatlike teeth. She takes it from you.

"Someone will want it," she says. "Are we going to Denny's or what?"

## The Tow Truck Driver's Bible Study

Some time ago your dad got the idea that Denny's was your favorite restaurant, and it is possible that he is right, though you will never find out unless he takes the risk of going somewhere else. The Denny's in St. Joseph is where he takes you for breakfast on your birthday. The members of Janet's family who still lived in the area come late, order coffee and dessert, and give you awkward gifts: a chapter book about socially adventurous third graders from Janet's aunt, who could not remember that you were not still nine, a velvety paperback called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* from her pudding-like cousin about the sinful life of rampant fornication you did not actually need to be rescued from, fussy patterned shirts from her niece that would be declared immodest before you left the parking lot and dumped with the Salvation Army on the way home. The waitress knew you all by sight and never bothered to refill the coffee or the coke the Boerman relatives called pop (the *o* half-smashed into a bruised and defeated *a*) and your dad always filled out the comment card in the same way: poor, poor, poor. He would write, *I expected better* in his clumsy rounded hand, each letter painstakingly connected with a curt line of pencil, and leave it in the center of the table with the straw wrappers. There were always loud families there at brunch, and Janet had begun to show them to Micah the way Tina Blake had showed bad children to you at Grapevine Mills and in the parking lot of Tom Thumb. See how that boy isn't listening to his parents? I really appreciate it that you always listen. And the waitress, who had been the same sturdy plain-faced woman for years now, would walk to every table but yours, leaving an arm's length between herself and the chairs and staring intently at her order pad until she was out of sight. Even if you do not see the tow truck driver, which would be the best thing for everyone concerned, you can still get the French toast platter and a French vanilla cappuccino, which your dad let you get even when you were ten years old because he didn't realize it was made of coffee.

This Denny's is dimmer somehow, subdued and faintly hairline-fractured like everywhere in this town, which the tow truck driver's card says is Joybridge. Even the indoors seems

overgrown, the nylon plants along the dividing walls lingering next to weediness. There would be grass growing through the floor if there weren't a boy in sweat pants here to sweep it. The broom knocks against the plastic dustpan, clunk, clunk, and he hums distinct from the whine and woozy stumble of walking-into-the-bar music from somewhere in the ceiling, clunk, and teeters from one foot to the other, slowly from one empty table to another, clunk, from one accidentally embraced chair to the next. He knocks the feet of the waitress who is looking past you as she introduces herself, *Keisha*, and fits her mouth lazily around the words *taking care of you*. There is another part to the introduction that she has forgotten, or is debating whether or not to bother with. Her tired eyes drift in the air above you. At last she decides on silence and to rock slightly backward on her heels.

“I'd like an iced tea,” says your grandmother.

The waitress doesn't write it down. She's smeared her eyes with black to trick them into looking old, but like the tow truck driver she has only succeeded in looking like one of your sisters playing dress-up in Grandma Blake's bag of Mary Kay makeup samples, down to the smudge of lipstick escaping the borders of her mouth, the orange powder thickest on her small nose and smeared across her forehead. Is this what we're teaching our daughters? To look like-- not moral women? What is this-- Tina Blake's fingers red with Mary Kay liquid blush-- pale brown with Crème Foundation 40: Summer's Kiss-- what *is* all this? And Grandma Blake's narrow face grim as she wet a washcloth with her spit. *This* is your girls having fun and looking pretty, *like their grandma*. This is nothing more than that.

“Do you need a minute?” she says.

“Yes. And an iced tea. Two lemons, no straw.”

She doesn't ask you what you want. She turns on one foot, like a child playing ballerina, and her dark hair floats for a moment as she walks away.

Grandma Wizeck pulls from her purse the things she's bought: two DVDs, the shirts, the shot glass, a candy bar and a bag of Cheetos she sets on the seat next to her tea.

The waitress' eyes have sleepy lids and she makes no effort to hide the phone tucked under her order pad. She turns away from whatever she last looked at and bends toward the phone as if its light were a private room. She stands most of the time by the coffee heaters, smiling tenderly into her hands and shaken now and then by silent laughter. She does not notice that she is in the way of the other waitresses or that the cooks have begun to make fun of her, fists on hips, wagging their heads from side to side and flipping invisible hair. They mimic not her actions but the kind of creature she has become. She is in love. You realize this without knowing why or how, and the knowledge covers you and fills your lungs. When she comes back to take your order you try not to stare at her drifting sleepy smile that never touches down on either you or Grandma Wizeck but stays fixed somewhere outside Denny's, where she is only pretending to be your server this evening until her shift is over and she can join the real world that circles it. She is already there, suspended between memory and anticipation. What does she care if the tow truck driver's Bible study tips a dollar and a green Bible tract every weekend? Her phone buzzes as Grandma Wizeck describes what she doesn't want on her burger, and she tips her order pad aside to glance at it and bites her lip. Down, down. The world's vines curl around her ankles. You order a French Toast Platter and a cappuccino. "Are you sure you want coffee before bed, babe?" Grandma Wizeck asks, but the waitress has already stopped listening.

"It's what I always get," you say.

You used to think that if you concentrated hard enough you could switch lives with other people. If you thought the right strain of sound and kept your eyes closed for the right amount of time, whatever barrier there was between you and the rest of the world would soften and you would step through it, and walk away one of the old or young men eating from the Meat Lover's Skillet, or one of the cooks who have given up mimicking the waitress, or the waitress herself, Keisha who will be taking care of you. Then the messages in her hand would be for you, and the

life she was waiting to wake to would be yours, somewhere in the dusk above the freeway like a scent. You still think it, but you aren't going to admit that, not that it's *real* though knowing it persists under the layers of disbelief. It's happened a hundred times already, maybe. It was happening all the time. You only notice for a second before the new memories clot and harden and have always been. Just now, for example, you have had the bad luck to change into this fat girl sitting slumped with her grandmother in a Denny's somewhere, with a chirpy pink-lipped voice you don't know telling you to *sit up straight, Cedar Blake* and wondering, for reasons impossible to place, if doubling your chin against your chest and looking sour-faced is glorifying to God, who in His mercy gave you a spine and not a sack of potatoes, Cedar!

You don't believe in it anymore but your mind still plays the game, pretends that just a moment before you still remembered what it was like to be somebody else. The cotton-candy threads of lost memories, TV shows you never saw, aunts and uncles gathered around a guitar covered in peeled-off stickers, a dog wheezing in a garden, the cyclops face of someone else's mother's camera dissolve on your tongue with no residue but sweetness, and after that, no taste. You stare at Grandma Wizeck as if you didn't know her name yet, as if you were still dazed from the switch and wondering what it was she was telling you so intently, if you had asked to be told or if it just fell out of her. She is trying to tell you about her days as a waitress, in the old diner in Wayne, down by the federal building. The federal workers came in at one o'clock in their gray suits and their sideburns, and condescended to her; they did not quite believe she was not a character in a movie, someone hastily invented to mirror their dramas with low comedy and buffer them with advice. In the diner all milkshakes came with an extra stainless steel cup of the same milkshake, and they had to cook all the burgers well done, and she remembered how cold it was in winter then in her old apartment with the warped windows and the piece of carpet stuck under the door to keep the snow from spinning under. She is telling you about the time Child Welfare came and picked through the cigarette butts in the bathtub and made her take parenting classes at the County Services building just to be a nuisance. She couldn't get a babysitter, so she

took Tina with her, and her little brother Mike, and they colored pictures of their alleged neglect on the floor of the classroom while a lady in a pageboy haircut made everyone demonstrate how to change a diaper. “But I don't blame them,” she says. “They just didn't know.”

The food and the iced tea arrive at the same time, and Grandma Wizeck peels the bun from her burger to show you what's wrong with it. “What do you think this is?” she says. “It looks a lot like onions. But I know it can't be onions, because I clearly said, no onions. What can it be? Oh, look, not a pickle!” She drops two coin-sized pickle slices on the edge of your plate in a pool of syrup and whipped butter.

“Eat that and tell me what it is,” she says. She scrapes the ketchup and mustard off the bun with her fork, onto an open white napkin, and pulls a little bottle of hot sauce from her purse to shake onto the meat. She looks around for a knife and when she can't find one she grabs yours, puts her lips around it to suck the syrup off, and saws her burger in half. Probably you have a look on your face when she hands it back to you because she says, “What? We're related. It's cooked. Here.” She wipes the knife on your napkin. “You know this is not the best place for a burger,” she says. “In here you always have to order it well done, you can't do medium rare like in a good place. Because they *say on the menu* it's premium quality beef, but they can say whatever they want, because premium quality is not a USDA specification.”

“Ok.”

She laughs. “Ok,” she echoes. “You're so stoic.”

She pecks a scrap of bun with her bitten fingers and eats it nervously.

“It's really for the best,” she says. “I mean, not the *best*. But you know. It was probably going to rain all night, and if we were on the road, we'd probably get in a worse accident.”

This time you don't say anything, though in not saying anything you are only giving her the opportunity to explain your lack of social skills.

“Are you listening?” she says. “Are you tired? Me, too. I'm going to bed when we get back.”

Something about being still has thrown off the equilibrium of her talk, and her words wobble and fall. She pours the thin iced tea over new ice from the store and the ice sinks. “Tell me about you,” she keeps saying. “What’s your favorite thing in school. I mean, I know you don’t go to school. You know what I mean. Subjects.”

For a long time you liked history, but recently you have begun to suspect that the stories in *God’s Hand in History Vol IV* have less to do with what really happened than with the lesson *God’s Hand in History* wants to teach you. When you were small you took for granted that some stories would be made up, but the older you get there more seems to be missing, the stories disjointed, without motivation. Science is all right still, but in its essential structure it has not changed since *God’s Amazing World Grade 3*. Only the vocabulary lists have grown longer and the type smaller, and more thin lines have appeared around the diagram of a skinless man to name more parts.

“Science is ok,” you say.

“Your mom was a science teacher,” she says.

“I know.”

“She got that award, her first year. Most promising something.”

“I like history, too,” you say. “I think maybe I’d like it better in college, with other books.”

“Do you know what I think she wanted,” says Grandma Wizeck. “She wanted someone to tell her she was the worst person in the world. Always. Just that. Everyone loved her, you know? Everyone believed in her. She was valedictorian of her high school. That is a fact. She never, she always, always she was so sure there was a catch. Right? That’s why she moved in with the first asshole who bought her dinner. No offense. She never believed anyone was telling the truth unless they told her she was worthless. Why is that? How did that happen? I probably said something when she was a baby, I don’t know. I probably wasn’t even talking about her. And now I’m sitting here *telling* you like it’s something I can talk about. But it’s not. Nothing is.



Something happened, but I don't even know *when*. Eleven, twelve, maybe she never told me a thing about her life after she was ten or eleven. Not even when her softball games were. I'd just come home and there'd be a note. I had to find out everything from her friends, and you know. . .” she takes a long drink from her iced tea, slurping the ice, shaking it. “*They* didn't know either, half the time.” She shakes the ice, staring sad into it with her pinkish eyes. “Any more than your dad knows about you, babe.”

She peels the bun off the remaining half-burger, picks a pinch of meat and dips it in the pool of hot sauce on her plate. “What about you,” she says. “Any secrets, I mean, besides whatever this is?”

“No secrets,” you say.

“None you're going to tell me, anyway.”

“I think, you say, “there's a difference between knowing about sin and thinking someone is worthless.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

You squash a piece of French toast in your mouth so that you will not have to speak for a minute. There is something wrong with the way Grandma Wizeck has been talking, but you don't know how to pin it down.

“I mean, you said there was a catch. There *is* a catch. I mean, there's sin.”

“What is sin, though,” she says. “Are you talking about sin, as in, I robbed a bank or stole some money, or are you talking about original sin, as in babies are born evil? And if it's original sin, I wonder how you can actually believe that about people.”

“Babies aren't evil,” you say. “Nobody says that.”

You don't tell her that her question is a stupid question, but *quietly* in your heart you know it is impossible to ask a question like that and mean it. If you asked it of yourself you would be shocked at your own stupidity even more than usual. If there were no evil in the world you would be home right now putting dishes in the dishwasher and “Praise You In the Storm” would

be playing, and Micah and Amos would not exist and you would be someone else entirely in a country you can't imagine, with the legged snakes in Eden and none of this would make sense.

“That's not what the doctrine of Original Sin says. Do you believe in the doctrine of Original Sin?”

“I don't believe in Catholic things. I'm not a Catholic.”

“So what is it? Babies are innocent, but when they turn eight, they suddenly get full of sin? If not original sin, what is it?”

“No,” you say. “Babies are born innocent, but they can't stay innocent because of how the world is.”

“How's the French toast,” she says. She leans across the table and spears a square of it with her fork, and dips it in the syrup, skirting the pickles. “I guess that's what your dad thinks,” she says. “Does he think it's possible to *keep* babies innocent? Like by not sending them to school?”

“I don't know. It doesn't work.”

“Do you want to be innocent, babe?”

You lay your fork across the plate and suck in your stomach. She turns, knocking over her denim purse, to see what you're seeing. Hidden still behind the green partition, the tow truck driver is talking with one of the waitresses in his low forward-curving voice which is already familiar. Grandma Wizeck pours more tea into her ice and sucks a tea-flavored ice cube.

“When I was your age,” she begins, but thinks better of it. “Listen. Ok? Your dad doesn't know everything. What he thinks is best for you isn't always the best for you. Because he's not you. And you know what? It's ok for him not to know everything. Was I always the best possible person for my kids to talk to? No. Absolutely not. Did I go to *my* parents with everything? Hell no.” She picks up each burned or soggy French fry and breaks it in half or twists it around and tosses it back in the basket, but eventually she eats them all, white tips soaked in hot sauce. In the past, when none of this was possible, her daughter watches her fill sugar bowls and ketchup

bottles in the American Eagle Diner on Michigan Avenue. You wouldn't believe how smart she was, smarter than anyone, with her huge eyes all full of every silver napkin holder, every beanbag ashtray, holding each new thing out to be named. Why this, she says, mommy, why this?

“Did you want any fries?” she asks. She holds out the basket of ends and slivers. You shake your head.

The tow truck driver is here with two girls and a pudgy boy, maybe a college student, with an unshaven double chin. The tow truck driver has changed into a blue-and white Jesus shirt and a small collar with three beads in it. Both girls have brittle hair and eyes made small with eyeliner. When he sees you, he waves and smiles with his broken crooked teeth.

“When I was your age, I didn't want to be innocent,” she says. “It's only old people who want their kids to be innocent. You want to know things. Everyone wants to know things.”

“That's not true,” you say.

The waitress is required to ask if you would like to take home a whole pie this evening. Grandma Wizeck says, “We're a long way from home, babe.” The waitress blinks as if she had spoken in a foreign language. Her soft head lists to one side and she edges the order pad away from the screen on her phone, anticipating a message from the outside world, a word of anticipation. If you close your eyes *now*, you will be her when you open them.

“No pie,” says Grandma Wizeck. “Iced tea refill, with ice, and the bill.”

The tow truck driver has noticed you and all he wants in the world right now is for you and your grandma to come sit down with him and his friends at the big round table in the center of the room. His hair looks clean and his eyebrows are full of stray hairs, reaching out to each other over the narrow gap of his nose. You can make him happy in this simple way, make him feel as if he has done something good for a stranger, and it will cost you nothing. He doesn't know what you are thinking. He doesn't know that wrong hopes are growing in you like a vine. There is no reason for him to think about any of that, because God in His wisdom made you ugly,

and even with his twisted and yellow teeth he is not blind. He has seen your lack, the blank spots in your mind, and he thinks it is Jesus you want.

The tow truck driver pulls out two chairs, and when you stand up he is surprised and happy, his whole thin body changed by this good deed from God. Your grandmother is not interested. She will sit in the booth and play Free Cell on her phone and pay the bill, but it is a free country and she has a book if she needs it. The tow truck driver sits down beside you, diminished in his ordinary clothes but also somehow closer, his hands scrubbed and shiny, and there is a smell around him of oil and powder and something waxy he puts in his hair. He smells like a baby born in a dealership. He unzips his Bible cover with its burned-leather seal and rawhide stitching, and small pieces of paper spill and push the pages apart, yellow sticky notes and sheets from the dealership he has filled with small angular letters in a thick black ink. He is nodding at something the bearded guy is saying, and doesn't notice you watching and trying not to watch his fingers as he finds his place between thin gold-edged pages. The girl next to you has a constellation of black pimples on the left side of her face, with powder caked around them, and the other has a smooth fat college face, and both have brittle hair and black eyeliner. The girls' Bibles are softer, quilted, one with a red heart, one in blue and yellow plaid, and only the bearded young man has a bare Bible with colored squares on the cover. Maybe they are a little disappointed that you have decided to join them, but you can't tell. You have never learned the way of eye with liner. Janet doesn't wear it. It makes their eyes look narrow and unkind. But that may be an illusion.

"I'm so glad you've decided to join us, even if it was just by accident," he says, and there is This is. . ." he opens his hand at you, and you are supposed to supply your name. The brittle girls look at you disapprovingly.

"What's your name," the bearded man says finally, his voice stuffed with phlegm.

"Cedar." You say it before you have time to think about whether you should use your real name or make one up.

“That's a pretty name,” says the girl with the blackheads.

“Cedar is passing through on her way to Texas,” says the tow truck driver. “Should we begin with a prayer for her safe passage? Are you visiting some family, or what?”

“Ok,” you say. “Yes.”

He raises his pale hands and his eyes are closed, and his friends raise theirs. Without warning, his fingers twine around yours, lift your arm up and back, and the same wave of knowing crashes on the soccer players, on the little ancient houses. His palms are cold and he is stronger than you.

“Lord,” he says, “we just would like to call on you to bless this group as we strive to live by your word, and especially to bless our newest temporary member, Cedar, that she may arrive safely at her journey's end, and on all of us Lord, just to open our eyes to Your Word. Amen.”

He squeezes your hand before releasing it, lifts his thin arms to the ceiling.

Amen, they answer, and you form the words with your mouth but no sound comes.

They are all friends, apparently, graduates of the same high school, and they speak easily and quickly with each other in coded jokes and names of people and places you have never seen. The girl with the blackheads is Leslie and the smooth-faced girl is Ailene. Jake is the boy with the phlegmy voice. The tow-truck driver has not introduced himself to you after introducing you to the group, but from something Jake says he is probably Travis. Travis. If you said it out loud now, would he look at you? *This is Travis*, you imagine telling your dad. *Travis and I are getting married*. No. That wouldn't make any sense.

If you said it to him in the right voice, in a soft voice you don't have. *Travis*. The way in books sometimes a boy will say a girl's name. What would he do?

“Let's go straight to the passage we were talking about last week,” he says. And he begins to read from the book of Joel, Chapter 2. For I will restore to you the years the swarming locust has eaten.

It's repay you for,” you say. “In my translation.”

“That's ok,” he says. “We've been using this translation, but you've got a different version. Some of them translate different names for the different kinds of locusts, which is an interesting controversy, as we don't know exactly what those words mean.”

“Sometimes it says, I will pay you back for the years,” says Ailene.

“What's the difference?” says bearded Jake.

In a minute, if you don't answer, they will realize that you don't have anything to say and leave you alone to listen to them talk. You should never have said anything in the first place. But the tow truck driver taps your hand with his and tries to meet your eyes. He *likes you*, Grandma Wizeck said. What made her say that? His pale eyes are bright and curious, and his mouth is moving cautiously over his terrible teeth. If it's true, you can't ignore him and disappoint him by not taking part in the Bible study. Maybe he doesn't notice-- maybe none of them notice that you don't belong, that you have no childhood, no anchoring jokes. They *want* to hear what you have to say about Joel. They want to believe you might be their friend in some possible world, even if it isn't this one.

“You can't restore years,” you say. “They've already passed. So it makes more sense to say, pay you back for.”

“*You* can't restore years,” says Jake. “But God can do anything.”

“Not change time.”

“I think He could if He wanted,” says Ailene. “I think it would be wrong to say He couldn't, if he wanted to, literally restore the years.”

The appetizer basket arrives on the table, joined by two plastic cups of ranch dressing.

“I'm going to pray for our waitress,” says Leslie. “I think she's having a really bad day. Lord, send your blessing on Keisha, our sister in Christ, that she may do her job in a way that is pleasing to You and not forget to glorify You in her work here.”

“But listen,” says Jake. “In Joshua, God makes the sun to stand still in the sky. Since we know that the sun actually is orbited by the earth, can we take that to mean that what God actually did was stop time from going forward?”

“But He didn't stop time for the Israelites,” says Ailene.

“When He brought Jesus back from the dead,” offers Leslie. “That was restoring the years, or days, in that case.”

“But God didn't make it Friday again,” you say. “It was still Sunday. And Jesus spent all that time in the grave.”

“That's a good point,” says the tow truck driver. “Does God usually restore time, literal time? Probably not, right? He doesn't actually make it the year before the locusts came. But when you think about it, what would that do? They would just come back, and eat all the crops again, and then you wouldn't have things restored, and the prosperity in the land. So restoring actual time, making the years like they would have been if it hadn't happened, I guess that isn't something God does. If you look at Job, we have a similar thing on a smaller scale. Job loses everything. His land, his crops, his children, his house. And God restores to him what he lost. But they're not the same livestock. They're not the same crops that didn't grow. They're not even the same children. When you think about it in those terms, everything Job lost is still lost, including all the time he spent lamenting his fate. So what does that tell us about God?”

“That he can't,”

You throat closes around the words.

“Can't what?”

“I don't think you can ever say the words, 'God *can't*,'" says Leslie. She stares thoughtfully at Grandma Wizeck and her phone, then past her.

“I mean he *can't*,” you say.

“Maybe it's not so much that he *can't*,” says the tow truck driver. “Maybe He knows something about that lost time that we don't, and if he were to take us back to the beginning, like Job, back to before he was tested, then all the lessons we learned from that time would be lost.”

“Like the locusts,” says Ailene staunchly.

“Whenever God sends a curse to the people of Israel, it's always about something particular. In Joel, the plague of locusts was in response to the worship of false gods. One thing we know is, when false gods are being worshiped, God's protection gets taken away.”

The tow truck driver's quiet words are closing in on you. He is listing curses and their causes, and the things God says about His love. You don't trust yourself to say or not to say anything else and everyone is too close, too earnest, so you get up and hope they assume you are going to the bathroom. Instead, you go outside. It's chilly, you don't know how close to freezing, and the cold wind blows icy on your neck as you walk to the edge of the parking lot and back to the curb and out again where the green dumpster faces the ravine and the creek beyond it. Maybe God is trying to send you a message, but what? What is He promising? You are just about to turn back inside when the door swings open with its sigh and the tow truck driver is jogging toward you, his long legs scrambling. You want him to take your hand again, or both your hands, and you walk around the dumpster, away from the doors so that he will follow you.

“Are you ok?” he says.

You sit down on the yellow curb beside an empty parking spot. You can hear the rush of the cars in the dark, the rumbling of trucks. The lights of the parking lot illuminate his thin face and you wonder if you can speak without telling him everything.

“I'm fine,” you say. “I don't like talking about Job.”

“It's a hard one to take sometimes,” he says. He sits down beside you, powder and oil and wax. What would his skin feel like if he leaned against you right now, if you slipped from the curb and fell sideways and he had to catch you? “It's a challenge, especially if you've lost someone.”



“Did you?”

“I lost my dad when I was ten,” he says.

“I’m sorry.”

“I think it’s really smart what you said about time,” he says. “I don’t think you meant to say that God *can’t* do something. But we all wonder, even when we think we’re walking with Jesus, we *all wonder* sometimes if God couldn’t have done things a little differently. But you know what? He *will* make it up to you. He always does. It doesn’t seem like it now, maybe, but after a while you start to see things His way.”

“Ok.”

“I’m really glad you decided to join us tonight.”

“Ok.”

“It makes me feel like God is working through us,” he says. “Wherever two or more are gathered in My name, I am with you. I feel that every day.”

Something buzzes in his jeans pocket-- a phone. “They’re worried about us,” he says.

“Are you ok to head back inside?”

You look down. His shoes are white and blue. What will he do if you say *no*?

“I’m probably--”

“It’s ok if you’re not,” he says.

“Maybe I’ll go back to the motel.”

He nods. “Do you want to talk?”

“Yes. Maybe later?”

“Ok,” he says. Something in his voice is hesitant, some catch in his breath, like he is turning you over in his mind. “Ok. He stands up, and seeing you still seated he crouches down again, then sits, his knee brushing yours. “We usually go till about ten, so. If you want to come back here, I can stick around.”

“Yes,” you say. “Ok.”

“I really want you to get the chance to know Jesus like I do,” he says. “I know He's got amazing plans for you.” He puts his arm around your shoulder and its solidity, the realness of his side and neck and powdery gasoline smell are a shock. Because you may never have another chance, because you are ugly and clumsy and hopeless, you throw both arms around his thin body, his living body, and kiss the tow truck driver on his startled open mouth that smells like ranch dressing and breaded chicken fingers and some other, distant rot. He shifts, startled, and you feel him pulling away, but in the flicker of a second his tongue touches the inside of your lip and something in his posture melts, falls over you. For a moment that is also forever you only hear the slow thumping song that was playing in the car as you passed warehouse and soy field, *just what the truth is, I don't know anymore*. Your hands find the back of his head and his thick hair, stiff with gel or wax, and now his hands are pushing you away, and his breath is half coughed out, and he is pushing the solid part of your chest, a wall of fire and fear.

“Hold on,” he says. “Hey, now, wait. Wait.”

You were wrong about everything. He is full of regret, because he cannot. Of course he can't. Of course it wasn't what he meant at all and you are ugly, too ugly even to take advantage of the way anyone else in the world might be.

“I'm so sorry,” he says. He stands up and walks to the dumpster, leans against it. “I am so, so, so sorry.”

He is rubbing his face with both hands, and with one fist he gestures toward the dumpster but does not punch it.

“I gave you the wrong impression,” he said. “I led you astray. Please, please don't think I was trying to take advantage, because I would never do that.” His face has turned a bright blotchy red and he is literally shaking, holding himself steady against the dumpster. You want to tell him that it was *you*, that he has no business feeling bad, and to be close to him again, but you are stuck in place, as if you were made of stone.

“That was my first kiss,” you say.

“I'm so sorry.”

“No,” you say. “It's ok.”

His phone buzzes again. “Aliene, hi,” he says. “Everything's ok. Cedar just needed to talk. No. No, that's ok. Go ahead and tell her.”

“We should get you back inside,” he says.

You hold out your hand.

“Can I still talk to you later?”

He looks at your hand, how you are waiting for him to help you up, and his instinct toward chivalry is warring with the knowledge, snakelike and shifting, that you are up to something, that it was not entirely his fault after all. You can see him trying to keep from thinking it and for a moment you hope he is pitying you, and you want nothing but for him to pity you enough to forget your wrongness. And he reaches for and touches your hand and you don't pull it toward your chest the way you want to but try to keep him by you.

But he pulls up on your hand and you have to stand up or yank him down to the curb. You stand up. He puts his cold hands on either side of your face and takes them away.

“I hope you can forgive me, he says.

“Is your name Travis?”

“I'm sorry. You're right. I never introduced myself. That's really inconsiderate of me.”

“Travis. There's something wrong with me.”

“No, he says. “It was me. I'm sorry”

You would be happy if you could stay like this and listen to your heartbeat. The wind begins to blow, prickly rain in the dark, and the tow truck driver is torn between pushing you away and feeling sorry for you.

“I mean, I'm sick. I'm going to die.”

“Cedar,” he says, so softly heartbroken that you wish it were true.

“I have leukemia. I just stopped treatment. That's why my hair is so short,” you say. He starts to speak but you interrupt. “I'm never going to live to get married. I'm going to Texas to die where my sisters died.”

“I'm so very sorry to hear that,” he says. His whole body has gone slack with pity, and without noticing it, as if, he has begun to trace a light pattern of curls like wisps of smoke on your cheek, pushing the same strand of hair over your ear again and again. You want more than anything to stop speaking and close your eyes, but if you stop lying he might remember himself and pull his hands away. His fingers find your scar, and stop, awaiting explanation.

“That's where I had throat surgery,” you say. “It got better, but then it got worse again. Now there's nothing I can do. I have six months to live.”

“Do you want me to pray for you?”

“I want you to talk to me later.”

The door swings open with a small squeal, and he drops his hands to his sides. It's Grandma Wizeck. “Babe?” she says. “Are you ok?”

She has her giant iced tea in one hand and with the other she is pushing a receipt into the mouth of her denim purse. You shake your head and she advances.

“We're just talking, ma'am,” says the tow truck driver. Uncertain, he holds out his hand for her to shake. “I'm Travis, by the way. We were just talking about some things.”

“I'll be right there,” you say. And Grandma Wizeck shrugs and ignores his hand and pulls her phone out to check it.

“When can I talk to you?”

“I'll be here till eleven.”

“Come to the store across the street.”

“I don't know if it's appropriate. . .”

Your voice drops to a whisper. “Please. I need someone to talk to.”

He looks over at Grandma Wizeck, impatiently scrolling through her phone and shaking her head, and he sees-- what? Someone ill-equipped to help a dying girl come to Jesus. Someone abrasive and angry.

“I don't know when I'll get the chance again,” you say.

He puts both his hands around your hands and presses them together. “Jesus loves you, Cedar,” he says. “Jesus wants to help you live the best life you can.”

Grandma Wizeck drops her phone into her purse. “Come on, babe,” she says. “It's late.”

You look back at the tow truck driver but he has already turned to go inside. You will have to plan, and then what if he doesn't come at all? There is no reason why he would. He is back inside now, apologizing to his friends and getting ready to pray again for forgiveness, for Cedar who is struggling with issues of the heart. Maybe he will even tell them that you are dying, and that you wanted to talk to him later. One of the girls might offer to go as a chaperon, especially if he tells them what happened in the parking lot.

“What was that all about,” says Grandma Wizeck. “Was he trying to get you to accept Jesus in your heart?”

“A little.”

“Did you tell him to mind his own business?”

“He was just trying to be nice,” you say.

In another hour you will see him or not see him. Would he agree to get a motel room, with whatever you have left in your backpack, or will you have to be in the crowded bed of his truck with the gear shifts? It doesn't matter. In an hour it will be over and you will be disappointed and cold, and you will have lost the only virtue you could be said to have. Not through carelessness or a failure to see the dangers as Janet fears, or through the malice of others, but from your own deliberate choice. The rain falls ice-cold as you pass the travel center and behind the truck pumps to the motel. Grandma Wizeck turns on the lights in the room and shuts the blinds, and turns on the TV automatically, as if she has been starving for it.

## A Phone Call from Your Dad

As soon as you are in the motel room, you realize your mistake. He will not come to the store, and if he does, he will bring one of the brittle-haired girls, Ailene, probably, with her black-rimmed eyes, to stand between you and ensure gentlemanly behavior. And even if she weren't there, it is no use. You are ugly and he feels sorry for you-- that's all. Maybe in the world people act like that toward people they feel sorry for, and it is only your own wishful thinking that makes it seem otherwise. Didn't he say he didn't mean it like that? How would you know what anything is like, what people act like when they *mean it like that*? Have you ever *seen* anyone kiss, even on TV? No. Only big smacky cartoon kisses glimpses of movies in the electronics department at Meijer, and the shiny covers of romance novels with their storms of clothing and towers of flesh, and these things are made deliberately to be nothing like the world.

Headlines peel past in a black stream beneath the anchorwoman's face, *Missing child found, wedding called off, 300 dead in surprise*, but the anchorwoman's swollen lips move on silence. One of the headlines somersaults forward, the silver letters turning in the air before they settle above her hairline. MISSING CHILD FOUND DEAD. There are the river's muddy banks, the rust-colored water. As Grandma Wizeck pulls receipts from her denim purse, men in high black boots pull the tarp up the bank. The woman's slow slick lips turn toward the image in a practiced sadness, then lighten in anticipation of a happier story. The screen fills up with puppies, tumbling over each other like fat jelly beans.

"I need to call my dad," you say. "I'm sorry."

"Why sorry?" she says. "Did I say you couldn't? Here," she says. Her phone is surprisingly heavy. She takes it from you, dials the number, and hands it to you. "It's ringing," she says. The yellow letters next to a blank blue face say Clinical Narcissist.

"What does that mean?" you say.

"It means your grandma is a bitch. Never mind."

For years you have taken for granted that anything you say to your dad will be a lie. He must expect the same thing. The thought that you might tell him the truth, even by accident, is strange, like the feeling of hitting the ground, the inability to breathe, when you fell off the Mcleod's swing set after trying to jump. Maybe he will come and pick you up, and you will carry the swarm in your body back to Michigan and your room with its dolls. He will be angry, but you have made him angry. You do not deserve to have him not be angry. Maybe he will throw you out of the house. Will he be able to tell? Grandma Wizeck pretends to know things about you, but she hasn't smelled it on you, hasn't even seemed to notice you are different. Some Jesus thing, she imagines. Some evangelical trick. In her mind you are always crying over nothing.

Four rings, then five, then a click. Janet's voice falters, then breaks into hello! You've reached the Blake residence. We're busy, busy, busy, but that doesn't mean we don't want to hear from you! Please leave your name and number after the tone and we will get back. Have a blessed day! You hand the phone back to Grandma Wizeck. She looks at you with crinkled forehead but takes it, cradles it against her ear. "Jim," she says. "Hi. This is Diane." She pulls the second syllable of her name down like a weight. "Ok. Your daughter is fine. She just came to visit. Everything is fine, so please don't waste taxpayer money with a whole Missing Persons thing. We're having a good time. Ok? So don't-- you don't need to--"

The answering machine beeps.

"Your dad is," she says, sucking air through her nostrils. "Completely-- an idiot. Literally mentally retarded. Why the hell doesn't he call me. He knows you're missing. Does he think I might possibly be able to help, possibly, in any way? Even if he doesn't, does he think I don't care what happens to you?"

Grandma Wizeck reads her cat book to the end and flips to the beginning. The clock's red number say 10:30, then 10:45. On the TV, a crisp man with almost-white hair stands over men and women who are cutting fabric at long tables, hunching over their flat shapes the way Annalise and Jessalyn used to in the same screened-in porch where Roo was almost born. There

they would talk softly about the clothes they were making, costumes for the Christmas Carol Festival at Pioneer Park and identical dresses for each Mcleod or Blake girl. There were other families who came and left again and sometimes they had their own dresses cut and marked and pinned by Annalise and Jessalyn, but your family was special. All of you were *so close* to being saved, to being able to help people the way Doug and Stacy did. If only your dad could see that! They sighed and shook their heads, because they knew all about the long discussions your dad had sat through with their father, who carried all his wisdom to his daughters, and they knew about your mother's doubts, and the temptations that both of them battled. The temptation to an ordinary life was terrible. It could be so lonely, walking with God, until you remember how much He cares for you, and how much it means for you to follow in His footsteps. All other paths are false, though they are filled with travelers. They cut and marked and told stories about their own doubts, vanquished long ago by the love of Doug and Stacy. What would they think if they saw you now, if they saw into your seething ugly heart and found the canker of lust in it, that Eveish greed for knowledge? If only they were here, to remind you of God's plans, God's hope and future set out for you, God who so loved you, Cedar, God whose death is your fault and yours alone. If you have never left Vinelands Fellowship, you might have grown up to be like them then, smooth and clean and hollow inside as a vessel of glass.

The men and women on the TV have lain the flat swatches like headless torsos one on the other and they are pinning them together, marking the edges with chalk, and when the crisp man stops to speak to one of them she dips at the knee in happy self-deprecation. They move their hands in the shape of collars, in the shape of sleeves. "What is this," you ask.

"I can change it," says Grandma Wizeck.

"It's fine. What is it?"

She sets *The Cat Who Cried Wolf* face-down on the bed and explains the contest to design the best clothes, the weekly constraints on material and purpose. When the contestants appear one by one on a sound stage to explain their concepts and estimate their chances of



winning, she tells you which of them are arrogant but talented, which have no future, which would be better off in a totally different contest. “That man,” she says, pointing with the black edge of her phone, “wants to put feathers on everything. Last week, they said, 'Design a practical suit for work.' Feathers. He can't help himself. Do you believe that?”

Women are walking in the finished dresses, faces streaked with bronze. Their skirts sway back and forth like songs for children.

The clock says 10:58.

The phone rings.

You can't see the letters but you can tell it's your dad by the way she picks it up, the way her feathery eyebrows hunch down and her shoulders stiffen as she listens to his panic. “Calm down,” she says. “Jim, just calm down, I am serious. Listen to me for a minute.” She presses the mute button on the TV just as one of the contestants-- the man with the feathers, tall and bullet-shaped-- crumples forward in laughing tears and turns red, his mouth opening and closing like a fish's all these things at once. He throws his huge arms around the crisp man, pushes him away and clutches him again as your dad's voice clatters beside you. You can't hear the words. The other contestants are clapping now, flat smiles on their faces; the model, dizzily tall in feathered skirt and feathered cape, has flung her arms around him with a smile like gleaming tiles.

“That isn't up to me,” says Grandma Wizeck.

Far away in your real life which has been beside you all this time your dad clutches the back of his neck in the same way you do, though there is no scar for him to hide because his life is the scar, and he is breathing in his old helpless way. This *is* you now, just as the cruelty is you.

“Let me talk to him,” you say.

Take the phone, hold it to your ear just like this, the way you have almost never done-- not for years, not since Grandma Blake used to call and ask for you. He starts to speak too soon, realizes, and waits, empty seconds hissing in the distance.

“Where are you,” he says. He's trying to be stern but his voice is not stern and why did you have to be born if you couldn't help but make everyone stumble, if you had to be the last one alive at the end, any end of any world. A stain on the rug, old brown or old red, pinned under the pine cabinet, and on the mute sewing show the contestants go on lifting their hands and lowering them, in their excitement lifting their faces again and again.

“I'm fine,” you say. “I got a letter.”

“Tell me the truth,” he says. “Did she come to the house? What did she tell you? Where are you now?”

“Mom sent me a letter,” you say. “Did you know that?”

There is a long pause, a living pause.

“Cedar,” he says. “We should talk.”

“God told me to leave,” you say.

Fear curls around him. You weren't going to say it because why would you, and you could stop there but you don't. You hear your voice at the same time he hears it, stubborn and shrill. It must have always sounded like that. You had a dream voice in your head the way you have a false face, the voice you will have when you leave home, the face you will have when you lose weight and put on better clothes and are someone else. “God said I should visit mom.”

“Cedar,” he says. He is trying so hard to make his voice small and quiet, to make it fit in one place. “God knows your heart.”

“I'm telling the truth. We're not supposed to have secrets.”

“What am I supposed to tell your brothers? Do you have any idea. . .” He lays your multiple and inevitable deaths before you, calling them forward. He lays out the ways in which you have already been violated, for all he or anyone knows, the ways he cannot and does not wish to imagine but has to anyway, has to call out to meet you, all the ways you've been scraped bare by the drifters drawn out of the woods by the girl-smell of your aloneness. All that has already unraveled in him, impossible to recover, *recoil*. All you can think is that you have to push them

away, all his phantoms, shove the recitation back into his head, to stop the pain you caused him from falling on you.

“Stop,” you say.

“Excuse me?”

“Stop.”

“What am I supposed to tell them,” he says. “For all I knew you were dead, Cedar.” And he is not trying anymore to be the church leader, the father, he is just shaken, just Randy in the darkness on the edge of the marsh, Randy in the absence of children's voices.

“So what,” you hear yourself say. The shrill voice rises through you and you try to soften it but it turns into a hiss. “I'm not.”

It's the worst thing you could say and it is true. You're not dead and you are not going to be dead and that is the worst thing about you, worse than your ugliness or your lack of faith. There is nothing to do but pretend it isn't what it is.

“You overreact to everything,” you say.

He scoffs and tries to say something you can't catch or don't want to listen to. It isn't really a scoff, but that doesn't matter. It is not what you expected, not the anger that might have pulled you up by the roots and flung you away, that would have set you free. His silence swims in the air with everyone's anger and everyone's love and listless gossip in the sea of cells between you. Every boundary you try to raise is a ribbon of police tape rippling, and every day is Saturday, a blind dead day, a sea without a coast. It can't be like that forever. God knows your heart, so Randy might as well. Better now that at the Last Judgment, when he will have to watch the movie of your life. He will see all those thoughts spilling out of you and turn as red in the ears as if he were on TV again, looking at his hands and forgetting your age in front of everyone. At least this way he'll have time to get used to it. Maybe now he can give you up, and his life will really be his own at last, with Janet and Micah and Amos as if nothing ever happened but them.

“No secrets,” you say.

“I need you to tell me where you are,” he says. He has gathered himself to a red point. You can hear it in his throat that his arm is crossed over his chest and the other is pressing hard on his hand with the elbow, holding himself closed. “If you don’t tell me where you are I am going to have to call the police.”

“Call them,” you say. You turn the phone toward you to hang up but its face is all one pulse of slow light, so you throw it against the bed. It bounces and lands face down, still blossoming blue and yellow against the bedspread. Then you pick it up and sit on the edge of the bed and hold it to your ear again. He is already asking the air to listen to him. When you get home all of you will work this out together. He draws the circle of prayer he will lead you into the moment you take his hand, the wall he will build against the enormous dark landscape of everything he doesn’t know but is willing to forgive. “But you need to come home,” he says. “I need you to come home.”

“Babe, that’s an expensive phone,” says Grandma Wizeck.

“Cedar?” he says. “Hello?” You hold the phone away from your mouth. He says it a few more times and then you hear the pinch and the soft silence that follows. Then you press it to your face and listen to nothing until the light resolves itself into scowling China-cat and the numbers showing the date and time. Through the motel curtains, headlights scrape the carpet and recede.

Grandma Wizeck holds out her hand for the phone so you won’t throw it again. She holds out her arms to you and the smell of old smoke in her pink hooded sweatshirt is the smell of something you knew once and don’t anymore. She wants you to think she understands everything, but she doesn’t understand. She thinks you’re afraid of him. “Don’t worry, babe,” she says. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. We’ll dye your hair, we’ll go to Mexico, ok, I don’t care. Believe me,” she keeps saying, because she knows you don’t. She puts her dry hands on your head and leans against your scalp as if you were Tina, and she is searching the past for the perfect thing she can say that you will remember just in time, in the future, before it’s too late.

## The Tow Truck Driver's Pity

The person you have become is late for an appointment she will not call a *date* because it is not going to be like that. She moves her feet in her awful shoes and her heart is stung, she thinks, knowing no other way to say it, stung, stung in thought and body. She buries the thought, but sits up, pushes her useless body to the edge of the motel bed. A tiny hole in the bedspread, a cigarette burn. It seems impossible that the grandmother does not notice her heart pounding, the swarm of meaningless thoughts, the anatomically inaccurate jumble under her skin, but she has not, or if she has, she isn't mentioning it. The grandmother is more concerned with her ex-son-in-law, his callousness, his clinical narcissism. "I know it's childish," she says of his designation in her telephone address file. "But I can't, literally, I can't put his name in my address book. You don't know how it is, babe."

She is not thinking of that. She is handling the ice bucket, trying to make her leaving plausible even if she doesn't meet the tow truck driver, who if he has come at all, will have left by now in any case, back to his home, wherever it is, to his bed where he will not take her, in his truck where they will not sit twined. She knows that her father is already sure of her contamination. It might as well be true.

After all, maybe it will be nothing in particular. Maybe she will ask him about Jesus, and sit close to him, and that will be enough. She picks up the ice bucket and walks to the door.

"Oh, here, babe," says Grandma Wizeck. "Put these on. I know it's just around the way but it's going to be freezing rain tonight. Are you sure you want ice, babe?"

You nod. She doesn't ask if you are going to meet a stranger in the traveler's center because it would never occur to her that you are so stupid. She might, with a little difficulty, imagine you with boyfriends, youth-group kids with floppy hair and What Would Jesus Do bracelets, not someone with a job, someone you just met. You don't want the fleece and the gloves but you put them on out of deference to her kindness and her innocence and leave the room for the wild and frozen wind.

Sharp rain, wrathful rain. If Jesus really cared, he would stop crying, he would listen to you sometimes instead of making it All About Him like a petulant teenager, a selfish teenager who will probably be crazy someday. What difference does it make to Jesus what you do?

If only you had different shoes. If only you had not been so good at averting your eyes, you would know now how to act, how to ask. The rain beads on the slick plastic lid of the ice bucket, on the empty ice bucket, on the sidewalk and the flat roofs of trucks, on the curved roofs of cars and the green Subway awning. If only your grandmother would look out the window of the motel and see you pass the office and the ice machine with her big pink gloves on, with your nails pared down to the bare white, because we love you, honey, because that blood is your blood now. Junkie, hooker, wayward, sore-bald lamb. She doesn't watch you carry the ice bucket around the corner and across the parking lot that has filled with water. She won't follow you, even if you stop looking back. If you are going to stop it you will have to stop it on your own.

The bells ring on the bright yellowy stillness of the travel center. Men, tall men, men with helpless swollen bellies, men in red caps with stubble on their necks, and the tired cashier bobbing forth for each of them and receding. This is how your life will be from now on. This is how you will enter every room: drenched and cold, clutching an ice bucket, in the wrong shoes with cold water seeping through the holes. You look for something to pretend to buy— the sandwiches in their cellophane wrappers— egg salad, chicken salad, bulging in the middle, spilling forward. Coffee would be good. A cappuccino from the machine, with the little dry marshmallows in it. And then back to the motel, with a stop for ice. That would be easy to justify, though Grandma Wizeck might yell at you for drinking coffee at eleven PM. But it wasn't any worse than drinking coffee at eight— or a gallon of iced tea on constant refill. You set the ice bucket down and take a styrofoam cup from the tower of tall cups by the cappuccino machine and there is the tow truck driver, standing up from one of the booths next to the shuttered and dim Subway. He has seen you and he smiles, though he is careful not to smile too broadly, because he has seen the way you misinterpret things, and maybe— but you won't let yourself think it. Now

he is coming toward you with his long steps, his jumbled steps, as if his legs were too long to walk normally and he had to constantly think about where to set them down so as not to fall forward, and he has his Bible in his hand, zipped shut with its rugged silver teeth.

“I’m glad to see you,” he says. “Do you want to sit down?”

You leave the cup beneath the spout of the cappuccino machine. You should refuse tears in front of your dad, who has been through so much and deserves your encouragement, and you should refuse them in front of Jesus, who only wants to rest from everyone’s meaningless troubles, but with this stranger, who will never see you again, what difference does it make?

“I’ve been praying for you,” he says. “We’re all going to be praying for you. Sit down for a minute.”

The broken way he says the word down is comforting. With the ice bucket in your arms you sit in the booth by the cold window and the wind howls.

“I can see you’ve got a lot on your mind. Would you like me to pray with you now?”

You want him to pull off your thick gloves for you, but he won’t. If you take them off and set them together at the edge of the table he will take your red hands in his and it will not matter if you close your eyes. It will not matter what you think about because his mind will be on prayer.

In the window of the Travel Center, the girl who is not really dying nods and forgets to suck in her chin as she nods, and wipes with her hand the soft underside of her chin as if to erase its doubling, and the young man who has only recently come to know Jesus and to want to be Jesus to whatever strangers he can find, reaches across the table to take her hand. Time sees this; time swallows it.

The girl’s feet are soaked through, her black socks heavy and squishy with rainwater, and she shivers and moves her feet under the table; Time sees that, too, and anyone passing would see it and file it away in the folder marked *miscellaneous*, the folder of things that are true but have no immediate meaning.

The young man, his thick hair mussed and spiked down over his anxious, gentle eyes, is speaking words that the girl does not hear, words she cannot distinguish from the sound of his voice, and he has lowered his head so that his nose is parallel to the plastic coating of the table that reflects it. All of this was glimpsed in passing by the men with their bellies, the men in their red caps, the cashier who had worked at the same travel center for years and in an older, smaller travel center in Marion for years before that, and who had stopped allowing herself to see those things that might disrupt the smooth surface of her thought, because someone was always crying in the Subway booths— a child or a woman if someone else was with them, sometimes a man by himself in the furthest booth behind the tree of chips— collected for a moment and then let go into the currents of time passing without and around them.

“We just ask you to protect her,” the tow truck driver is saying, “and watch over her, and just to send your spirit to dwell in her, and heal her, Lord, if it’s your will that she be healed from this illness. But above all we just want to ask that your will be done. That’s really all any of us our asking, that your will be revealed to us and done, just— just like you want it to be revealed. Is there anything you would like to add?”

You shake your head.

“What did you want to talk about?”

The cashier has moved to the cappuccino machines. She sets the cup you left back on the tower of cups, and leans toward the door when the bells ring again.

“I’m not really dying,” you say.

The tow truck driver does his best to look sympathetic.

“Do you know about Tina Blake?” His face is a blank. “The shocking Blake Murders? It was a movie on TV. Texas Killer—”

He has never heard of them.

“This isn’t throat surgery. It’s a murder. I was killed and I came back to life.”

You realize how crazy that sounds but you aren’t sure right now how to fix it



“I’m sorry,” he says. But he does not reach to touch the scar again, or any part of your face. He has released your hands and now he is squeezing first the fingers of his left hand, then the fingers of his right, back and forth. “So you don’t have leukemia?”

“No. I lied.”

“I’m sorry that you lied,” he says carefully, “but I’m glad to hear you don’t have leukemia.”

“I want you to kiss me again,” you say.

His face falls. He digs into his palm with his fingers and looks away. “That was my mistake. That was a momentary-- I hope you can forgive me.”

“I know I’m ugly,” you say, and he leans forward in protest, so hurt by your words that you realize it was manipulative to say them even though they are the truth. “But maybe it’s good that I’m ugly, because you won’t get attached to me. No one is going to marry me. My genes are all. . .” In the buzzing ceiling there is a word for what your genes are. “Awry. As soon as I get back home— I won’t know anyone. And if I did, I couldn’t marry them because I’m going to be crazy when I grow up. Probably. I don’t want to be, but I think I probably will.”

“I think you don’t give yourself enough credit,” says the tow truck driver, slowly and deliberately. He has pulled his hands under the table to keep you from grabbing them, now that he knows what you are about. “I think God wants you to be very happy in your life, and not crazy at all. And He wants you to have patience and wait to see what he has in store for your life, which I’m sure is something amazing. Because I know just from having talked to you for a few minutes that you are already an amazing person. How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“I just turned twenty-two last Friday,” he says. “And let me tell you, when I was sixteen I thought a lot of things were permanent that turned out not to be permanent at all. I never thought I could ever have the courage to let Jesus into my life, for example. And now my life is a thousand times better than I ever thought it could be. When you know that Jesus has a plan for you. . .”

“I don’t care what Jesus wants,” you say.

Poor wrathful rain, poor wind.

“I’m not going to get married,” you say. “Even if I *could*, I would end up making whoever it is miserable. So I don’t have any future husband to defraud.”

“You don’t know that at all,” says the tow truck driver.

“I do know, because I *decided*. It’s stupid to think— it would be like giving someone a bomb for a present. Here, have this lovely bomb, I hope you’re happy for ten seconds.” You are not making sense and you need to stop talking until you can start making sense again. “But I can’t hurt you, and you can help me. I don’t have any diseases, and I don’t care if you do. And I’ll never see you again and no one will know. So what difference does it make?”

You can see that he is trying to put off understanding what you mean because when he does he will have to say no. You can see the no forming under his skin already and it would be foolish to say anything else, foolish to ask him to say it finally, but you can’t stop the words coming out, childish and reckless and red. “What difference does it make? You have the whole rest of your life to be forgiven.” His stricken face all blotched and red. “As a favor. If I *was* going to die soon. . .”

“Are you going to die soon?”

“What if I say yes?”

He shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I understand you’re confused. But I’m asking you please, don’t let your confusion lead you to do things you’ll regret. Before I found Jesus. . .”

“It’s because I’m ugly,” you hear yourself saying. “Isn’t it? Just say it, so I’ll know.”

“No,” he says. “No, no, Cedar, no.” He slides out of his seat and into the seat next to you, and his arm is around your shoulders, and he is touching the valley of your eyes with his scrubbed white fingers. “That isn’t how it is at all, that has nothing to do with it. Look at me—“ and he puts his hands on your shoulder and your neck, and tilts his chin upward to show that you should

do the same. “Look. You are beautiful. Who told you you were ugly?” His face is so close that you can smell the distant rot of his gums and the faint hint of cigarette smoke beneath it. “Who told you that?”

You shake your head. In the next few moments, or seconds, or hours, two things happen, two categories of things. He puts his hands on either side of your head and draws your mouth to his, eyes closed this time, into a sloppy, plummeting kiss; you feel your arms scramble over him and breathe in and hold your breath; the real, red thump of his heart becomes palpable through Grandma Wizeck's pink fleece. And years later or at the same time, there is a loud rap on the window beside you and Grandma Wizeck, drenched and furious, holds her phone to her ear and shakes her head.

The tow truck driver jerks away and tries to hide himself by pulling in his arms and legs, as if he could become small enough that way not to be noticed. The bells jangle over the glass doors and Grandma Wizeck thumps herself down into the booth across from you, shoving the tow truck driver's Bible aside with her elbow.

“Jesus H. fucking Christ.” She lifts the phone to her ear and listens, listens. “Jim? This is Diane. She's fine. She's here at the truck stop. Just came out to get some coffee or something. Sorry about that.”

“Ma'am, I'm extremely sorry,” says the tow truck driver.

“Sir, who the fuck cares what you are,” snaps Grandma Wizeck. “You are not a part of this situation. And Cedar, if you keep on making a face every time you hear a word you don't like, you are going to get permanent nerve damage, I swear to God.” She hands the phone to you. “Tell him you're not being illegally trafficked. Who the hell does he think I am?” She cuts her eyes at the tow truck driver and flips his leather Bible case heavily back and forth.

“Hi, Dad,” you say. You can barely hear his reply. “No, I know. I'm fine. Hey, Dad.”

The tow truck driver slides his Bible across the table and sets it in his lap, and leans against the plastic bench with his eyes closed.

“I met a guy,” you say. “He’s never heard of you.”

“Cedar, I hope in the future, if you decide you want to visit one of your relatives, you will ask me about it first.”

“His name is Travis,” you say. “He doesn’t know anything about you.”

“Cedar.”

“Isn’t that good news? I thought you’d be happy.”

“Where are you? Your grandmother mentioned a truck stop. Where are you going?”

“Did you know she was writing to me?”

“What?”

“Did you *know*. Did you get *letters* for me.”

“We can talk about that when we get you home.”

“If I get home.”

“Right now we just need to make sure we know where you are so we can make sure you’re safe.”

“I said *if* I get home. Maybe I’ll stay here and live in the truck stop”

“Cedar, that is not a laughing matter. Don’t make jokes about things you don’t understand.”

“They have showers. I didn’t say it was funny. I said *maybe I would*.”

The tow truck driver is trying hard not to listen to the conversation but there is a crazy feeling in the air. Maybe you want to prove to him that you are crazy, to prove it to your dad. Or in the time you have been cut adrift in, it doesn’t matter. “Hold on,” you say. “I’m going to have you talk to Travis. Tell my dad you don’t know who he is,” you say.

The tow truck driver tries to refuse the phone, but yields at last. His face has gone all blotchy with shame and confusion. “Hello,” he says. “Travis Anders. New Tabernacle Church of Christ. Yes. I don’t know the situation here, but I just want to say, your daughter is an amazing young lady and Jesus has. . . no, no sir. No, of course not. He wants to talk to you,” he says.

“Did you ask him?” you say.

“Cedar, no more foolishness. Your grandmother is not a safe person to be with. I know she’s your grandma and she cares about you, but I don’t like the idea of you going anywhere with her, not to mention not telling me. I think we’re going to have to discuss some things when you get home, and I think that should be as soon as possible. Right now. . .”

“I thought you’d be happy,” you say. The tow truck driver has folded himself up in his long limbs and is staring at the table and through the icy window. What would he do if you leaned against him now? Push you away? “You can go to church now.” If only your heart would stop pounding, if only your breath were not burning. If only the tow truck driver would unfold and close around you and lay his mottled cheek against yours. “I have to go now.”

“Tell your grandmother we can arrest her for transporting a minor. Let me talk to her.”

“Tell Micah and Amos I love them,” you say. “Tell them I’m ok because I am.”

You hand the phone to your grandmother, who hangs up and shoves it deep in her purse.

“What the hell was that about,” she says. She sinks down in the booth and fumbles with her box of Virginia Slims.

“He wants to know where I am,” you say.

“What was that about living at the truck stop? I just got done telling him I *wasn’t* running an international pimping ring.”

“I don’t know. Let me have a cigarette.”

“The hell I will. You’re not starting smoking on my watch. That’s a filthy habit and it *kills* people. Why don’t you just tell him where you are? What’s gotten into you?”

“I don’t want to smoke *all the time*,” you say. “I just want to smoke *once*. Can I do that?”

“No. No you cannot.”

The tow truck driver’s head is tilted back. He draws in a long breath and the red blotches have begun to recede from his face, and he is looking away from you with his mournful eyes.

“Here,” he says. He hands you a crushed packet of cigarettes, small brown cigarettes.

“You can have them all. I’m trying to quit.”

“I don’t want them all,” you say.

“Who are *you*,” snaps Grandma Wizeck. “You don’t give a sixteen-year-old girl cigarettes. What the hell.” She lights her Virginia Slims and shoves the rest in her purse, and with her naked-lady lighter summons a tall flame, lights, and draws breath. “You’re supposed to be some kind of Christian? Do you know these cause cancer?”

You pick up a cigarette and he takes it from your fingers and turns it, and touches your mouth with the tip to open it. He pulls a silver lighter from his jeans pocket, and lifts your hand to hold the cigarette in place as he draws near you with the flame, all sadness, all caution.

The heat of the flame touches you. Under the glare of Grandma Wizeck, the tow truck driver reaches for the cigarette as you cough and hold it away from your mouth. He draws his two fingers slowly down the side of your face, across the scar on your neck, and withdraws them as your lungs burn and the ash burns at the back of your throat.

“That’s what it’s like,” he says softly. He draws in a long drag of smoke, sweet-smelling like burned candy, and exhales it toward the empty booths behind him. “That’s it.”

“It’s disgusting,” says Grandma Wizeck. “The worst thing I ever did was start smoking again.”

“She’s right,” says the tow truck driver. He places his hand against your back, and draws another breath of smoke. He looks up at Grandma Wizeck, who is shaking her head. “I don’t know anything about you, ma’am,” he says. “I don’t know your situation, you’re right about that. I came here to talk to your granddaughter? Because I saw that she was hurting, and she asked me to. When I let Jesus take control of my life, I knew that it meant I had to be there for people who needed me.”

“I saw what you were doing,” says Grandma Wizeck.

The tow truck driver exhales through his nose and looks down. Grandma Wizeck stands up and you are meant to go with her. Even if you could convince him, the tow truck driver will not take you anywhere while she is watching, and she will go on watching until you come away.

“Thank you for your prayers,” you say.

He takes a final sip of smoke from his little cigarette and hands it to you.

He says. “I’ll keep praying for you.”

You take the cigarette and it seems you should say something else, but the tow truck driver is gathering his things, his Bible and his crushed box of cigarettes, and the Coke he has reduced to ice and will throw in the trash. So you hold on to the cigarette and try to catch his eye as you clutch the empty ice bucket with its empty plastic bag and the bells ring over the glass doors, and he flattens his mouth into a smile that isn’t a smile, that is a shrug and a sigh, and then he is out of sight and Grandma Wizeck grabs the cigarette from your hand and throws it into the black rushing waters of the parking lot.

The tow truck driver’s pity is ringing in you like a bell, a buzz from Grandma Wizeck’s black phone. For all your obvious lies he must have believed one thing was true, one thing maybe that was different from all the things you said, and that in your confusion you had forgotten the truth, whatever it was. He believed that it was serious, or he would not have tried to feel with his fingers, the outline of your jaw under your skin, the pulse at your temple, your ragged new hair. He might have said yes after a while, if you had been more desperate, if Grandma Wizeck had not shown up with your real past and your real future to wreck the tableau in his head. What did he imagine would happen?

Maybe if you had prayed the prayer with him, and asked Jesus for the thousandth time to come into your heart, it would have worked. This time, you would have felt the soft static of Christ’s love spreading from soaked toes to chest to blossom behind your eyes in a burst of holy heat, and you would understand all you have failed to understand, all the threads and fissures of

His plan, His guidance. Grandma Wizeck has gripped your wrist to keep you from running off, as if you were small again. She imagines you are crying for some other reason, some invented abuse at the hands of TV-movie Randy, with his square jaw and his job at the defense laboratory, the bombs forming under his gloved hands in the montage that opens *Living Sacrifice*. She imagines she will have to rescue you from everything: your family and your own bad judgment, and she sucks her own cigarette angrily and flings it away into the dark.

“I don’t even want to know,” she says. “I literally do not want to know.”

“Ok,” you say.

“Don’t be stupid,” she says. “Of course I want to know.”

“Ok.”

She can’t get the motel key to work. “Here,” you say, but she waves you away and it clicks open at last. Inside, the TV is still running on mute, the headlines returned in their black and white march across the base of the screen.

“I will know where you are,” she says. “If I’m going to take time out of my life to drive you around, you are going to be upfront with me. I don’t care if you want to talk about the Bible. I don’t care if you want to make out with some guy. But I should *know*. Your dad called and I had *no idea* where you were. Do you know how that makes me look?”

She sinks down on the chair with her pink gloves in her hand. “What is this really about?” she says. “What are you trying to do?”

“Nothing.”

“You show up out of *nowhere*. What am I supposed to think? I haven’t seen you in *years*. And what I— I don’t know who you are or what you want.”

You are peeling off your soaked long socks by the heating vent, laying them one on top of the other over the dry air. Your toes are white and angry red.

“Look at that,” she says. “Look at your feet. Why didn’t you just tell me if you wanted to stay at Denny’s? I don’t care. I’ve got a book.”



“I’m never getting married,” you say.

“Babe, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

She doesn’t understand and you have nowhere to go but the bathroom with its wheezing fan, its hot water. She will knock on the door a few times, and tell you she is here for you, and after a little while she will go to bed, and the TV will reach the end of its timer and go black, the trucks breathing and their headlights scraping you, scraping the bones bare of what God knows, of what God cannot help but know.

Now everything is different without having changed. The alarm clock buzzes needlessly in the dark and the day drifts open, and you are still in the motel room on the edge of the freeway.

Grandma Wizeck is awake before you, sorting the things in her purse and drinking new iced tea from the travel center. “Look outside,” she says, and moves the blinds outward so that bisected by vertical lines you see the world coated in a thick layer of ice. The puddles have frozen and broken and frozen again outside the door.

“How do you like that?” she says.

She has called the dealership twice and is waiting to hear back about the status of her car. “I have to go over and get it when it’s ready, but you can stay if you want.” She doesn’t mention the tow truck driver.

You have a long road ahead, back or forward. She will want to take you back after the way you have behaved; she will not trust you further from your home. All the swarms have left your body and you are quiet, too quiet, a little pile of ashes in your throat.

There is a continental breakfast under a mute TV, the red screen crowded with serious bald children. The white slices of bread and featureless white bagels look so forlorn and unappetizing in their plastic case beside the toaster that you take two out of pity, even though you know it is stupid to feel sorry for bread. You set them side by side on the conveyor belt that

carries them into the heart of the toaster and put two cups of cream cheese and a square of strawberry jam on your plate which is plastic and creaks and will live forever in the earth.

When the phone call comes your grandmother leaves and returns and does not invite the tow truck driver in though he may have asked. Her car is the same car and everything has changed, and when you leave the motel heating system the road falls beneath you and she does not ask what you wanted or what you hoped. All around the branches are falling under the ice weight and the music moves slow in the speakers, thump and thrum and the high trill of a flute, thump and groan and wail.

“You know,” she says at last. “I was nineteen when your mom was born. I married the guy I was seeing just to make my own mom mad. Well, and I was in love with him. But I don't talk about that now.”

“Why didn't you stay married?”

“These days people talk about everything, but back then, we didn't talk about anything. You just took it for granted that there were going to be things you never talked about. And they would be the most important things. I don't think we ever sat down and said, this is what I want my life to look like. Plus, I was a drunk. I wrecked a lot of relationships.”

“Were you in love with him?”

“I don't know. It was a long time ago.” She is glancing around her. “Probably I was. I was in love with a lot of people.” She unwraps a piece of gum and folds it into her mouth. “How are you doing, babe? Are you going to sneak off every time I look the other way?”

“Nothing happened,” you say. “There's nothing to talk about.”

“Here,” she says. It's a paperback New Testament and Psalms, the kind made to look like a spiral school notebook with a pencil painted on the cover and yellow legal-pad lines.

“What's this?”

“I don't know, some Jesus thing he wanted to give you. What does it say?” She leans over and the car veers to one side. “New Testament.”

At first you are afraid to open it for fear of what he may have written inside. But there is nothing inside, only the title page, and you try not to be disappointed.

“Ok,” you say.

“Look,” she says. “I don't know what happened. I'm not going to ask. But you can tell me if you need to. And if you need to talk about anything, I want you to talk to me. I'm not going to say you're wrong or whatever, unless you're really, really wrong. But you're not. I mean, you're sixteen. Whatever it is you're worried about, it's probably ok.”

The ice has turned to slush and back into ice, but she is still driving faster than all the other cars on the road, and when it begins to rain again she does not slow down but lets the windshield wipers scrape the freezing windshield to no avail.

## Welcome Center

When Tina was your age, the last of the old women were ushered out of Oakview State Hospital, shouldered into thin musty coats and tucked into the black back seats of cars, taken to nursing homes in Priesthead and Sitwell, in Waco and Odessa. As Tina lay on her stomach in her white and violet bedroom reading *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, the vines grew over the old bathtubs and the little peeling tables, and vagrants and teenagers left empty bottles and their names in the rooms where shocks had been given.

In the new waiting room there are photographs of the old days, silver and gray, before the world grew rough and close-up. Here are the young women doing patchwork in their peaceful rows, their nests of pale hair wild around their milky faces. Here are the serious leather suitcases on shelves in a back room, and the nurses in crisp white, their thick legs and stony faces. You would not have wanted anything if you had lived back then. You would have slipped into your madness as into a warm bath. Later you would have been content to walk the worn white floors in a thin gown, and work in the steam of the laundry, and sew one quilt square to another in the quiet company of hours.

By the time the hospital closed, the world had changed, and it was no longer possible to run it in the old way. The patients had grown too difficult. Maybe it was the invention of TV that did it, or the influence of ragged new music. The world had grown too complicated and the ways people went awry grew more unsavory, unclean. It was no longer possible for everyone to eat at a long table, or to work in laundries, or to sew. The men and women had grown angry, intractable, promiscuous; they stole the drugs that were meant to be doled out to them in little cups and swallowed them in handfuls in broom closets, their paper dresses riding up on their prickly thighs, their coarse elbows pushing out, the smell of their unwashed bodies dense and dank as it had never been in their grandparents' days.

In the year you were born, they began to dismantle the old structure. The old copper pipes carried away by truck and the bathroom tile broken. The new cottages were built and painted ice-cream colors and named for birds as she folded you in her arms and left the hospital.

Now the parking lot is cracked from the heat and grass grows through it, the real grass of Texas, soft and sun-crippled. Inside the gates you can no longer see the fence with its canopy of barbed wire; the trees have grown around it and the vines, and this is deliberate, so that those patients who are here by legal requirement do not feel that they are in a prison. They can look at the trees and imagine they could walk between them, and even though some of them know there is a fence, the illusion is important to morale. The enormous oak tree beside the security checkpoint is all that remains of the Oakview State Hospital that was.

At the door a little boy in pajamas is asking how the metal detector works. Can it detect even the smallest piece of metal? What if he had a gold tooth? What if he had metal plates in his head? “What if, though,” he says, “I had a gun made all of wood? Would you find it? What if it's all made of wood?”

“That's enough.” The woman with him might be his mother. It is better not to make assumptions. The woman with him fumbles for his hand. “You've made your point,” she says.

On the plexiglass shield in front of the check-in desk someone has taped a poster of a kitten handing from one paw over the words Don't Give Up! The little boy climbs onto his seat and propels himself into the woman's lap. She pretends to ignore him and a nurse comes to escort them across the campus. Then the waiting room is empty again, and only the birds and the small clicks of your grandmother's phone. There are birds chirping in hidden speakers, over the sound of water.

At first the woman behind the plexiglass tells you to have a seat. She spends a long time on the phone as your grandma opens but does not read *The Cat Who Cried Wolf*, and then a doctor or nurse comes in, a short man with short hair razored close to his head, and they talk and

glance at you. Finally they call Grandma Wizeck to the desk and whisper to her as the false birds sing.

“What do you mean,” she says. “What happened?”

“Nothing has happened. Tina is on 24-hour watch and limited visiting hours are being maintained.”

“Why is she on watch? Since when?”

“That's not something I can disclose,” says the nurse, a young man with an Adam's apple. “There is a possible crisis which we are dealing with, but disclosure is at the discretion of the patient and her next of kin.”

“Do not be euphemistic with me,” she says. “If something has happened, I need to know what has happened. Tina is my daughter. Do you understand that? This is my child.”

“I'm aware of that, Mrs. Wizeck.”

“This is Tina's daughter,” says Grandma Wizeck.

“Yes, I'm aware.”

“Do you want to tell her why her mother is on watch right now?”

“We're not authorized to release that information at this time.”

“Don't give me euphemisms. She tried to kill herself,” says Grandma Wizeck. “Am I right? Surprise, surprise. I don't know why you want to keep it from me when I know. I know my own daughter. Twenty-four hour watch. Why *shouldn't* she try to kill herself?”

“I think you need to sit down for a minute.”

“Don't tell me what I need. I need you to answer my question. It's a real question. What difference does it make if you do or do not tell me what I already know?”

“We are doing the best we can, Mrs. Wizeck.”

But Grandma Wizeck has unfolded her big beaded wallet and is laying warped photographs on the ledge in front of the safety glass: Tina in braces, Tina in crinkled bridal

headband with wild crimped hair, the Blake Girls jutting their chins at the camera. “This is my family, ok. We are talking about my daughter.”

“Confidentiality is at your daughter's request, Mrs. Wizeck.”

“I know that. I *know* that. Don't tell me what my daughter's request is.”

“I understand you're upset,” says the nurse. He motions for you to come over. You stand up, uncertain, the false birds chattering in the speakers.

“Your father has been looking for you.”

“Why don't we come back during visiting hours,” says Grandma Wizeck. “Why don't you tell me when those are so no one's time has to be wasted.” She picks up the pictures and pushes them back in the wallet. One has slipped to the floor. The nurse picks it up and hands it to you: Tina in a blurred over-the-shoulder pose, bare neck and clavicle and shoulders, the bright fuzzy lights making her look like a different person, her hair a massive dark cloud.

“It's not mine,” you say.

His mouth barely twitches.

“Can you tell her I'm ok,” you say.

“She's already aware.”

“I mean, tell her I was here. I was supposed to give her something.” You look around for something to give her. The purse is on the ground and you pull out the pink cat shirt, the sparkles that are whiskers already coming off on your fingers, and try to fold it. Janet tried to teach you had to fold men's shirts, a memory imprinted on her permanently, like kneading dough: arms crossed over the back, like you are handcuffing them, bend, bend wide uncatlike eyes at the top, eyelids reflecting the square flat lights of the ceiling, fold the arms under. Grandma Wizeck does not stop you. She is already listening to her phone and glancing upward. “This is a present, ok,” you tell the nurse. “I bought it for a present. Can you give it to her?” On one of the pastel sticky notes on the ledge you write Get Well Soon, then crumple that, take another, write From Cedar. “Here.” The nurse unfolds the shirt to look at it. “Fold it back up,” you tell him. “It's a present.”

“Mike,” Grandma Wizeck says, loud into the phone. “It's your mother, babe. Give me a call the minute you get this, ok, I don't care if it's three am or whatever, I don't care. It's about Tina and it's serious. Call me.”

Mike is Tina's half brother. He is her designated next of kin because Mike had a habit of seeming to agree with everyone he spoke to and therefore the reputation of being a great listener. Grandma Wizeck, on the other hand, was Not A Listener. Grandma Wizeck was a Shouter In the Middle of Your Sentence, an Eye-Roller, a Dismissor Out of Hand. She had a handful of solutions for every conceivable problem, Dump Your Husband being one, Lighten the Hell Up another. She was always remembering that she had a phone call to make, or olives to buy, or to write down someone's birthday before she forgot it. Then she would remember that she had bought something-- something you'd *like*-- and excuse herself to find it. After that it was time for tea, and when the water had been set to boil in her crusty kettle she would sit down, sentence still unheard, and say, “So what is Randy doing about all this?” There was no real hope of her hearing anything, of seeing a world other than the one she had decided on.

Back outside, the air has settled around the trees, warm and still. “I'm sorry,” you say.

“For what?” she says. There are beads on the ground among the gravel, seed-sized and big wooden beads for someone's lost homemade necklace. “For what are you sorry.”

“I can pay you back for driving.”

“The hell you will. Jesus. What's wrong with you? Pay you *back*, Jesus *Christ*. Do you ever listen to yourself?” She lights a cigarette with her pink Bic lighter and shakes her fingers free of the heat. Outside the gate the fences extend for a mile. “*I'm* sorry I got upset, ok? I don't really know what happened. That was wrong of me to say.”

“I don't care if you're angry.”

“They're just doing their job,” she says. “They've got regulations.”

When she reaches the end of the fence she turns down a road with small church signs, a numbered road, away from the freeway. “Why the hell did you give her that shirt, babe?”



"It's my shirt," you said.

Grandma Wizeck lights a cigarette, the last in her pack. She is driving in circles and the same CD has been playing for hours. It reaches the last thump of the last song and begins again, violins rising like souls the way you have imagined them singing toward the red sunrise at the end of the world. "Where are you going?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know."

"Then neither do I, babe."

"You're wasting gas."

"I like driving," she says.

The land around you is unfamiliar now, fields of oil pumps nodding and nodding. Ahead is the fair you passed on the way through town, just behind the row of new restaurants and motels that have gone up in the wake of the Priesthead prison boom. There is a Red Lobster, an Olive Garden, a Grand China Buffet. Beyond them is the Czech Point filling station and bakery, and the Ferris wheel rising above it, already lit with colored lights in anticipation of nightfall.

"I don't think I want to see her," you say.

"Good. Good," she says. "I'm glad you know you want something. What else do you want? A motorcycle? Want to get matching tattoos?"

"Probably not," you say.

"Do you want to go to the fair?"

"I guess."

"You *guess*. I'm not asking about the periodic table of the elements. I'm asking what you want. You are, actually, yourself. You can check."

"Ok," you say. "Sure."

## A Temporary Tattoo

Fairs and festivals have always been dangerous, even the ones the Mcleods liked to go to: Pioneer Pavilion's Pioneer Summers and the Claremont Heritage Festival that was half Victorian and half motorcycle clubs. Now Project Nathan has a yearly festival of its own, Reformation Day, and if you paid the registration fee and agreed to the behavioral guidelines you could go there yourself and see them all again, their costumes richer, their faces as florid and alight as you remember. Reformation Day is a celebration of the family-friendly past, when there was no confusion about who everyone was supposed to be. But regular fairs, the kind that used to tempt you with their Ferris wheels above the freeway, are flesh-focused and the flesh is a channel, a rope bridge for the Enemy. From the road, this one looked smaller, with its scattered rides unfolded into the air from dented blue and green trailers and the raised stage just beyond the hot dog stands where fifth and sixth graders from Priesthead Independent School District are performing the musical *Story of Our Settlement*. But once you pass the front gates it is clear that there is more space given to the fair, long rows of craft and food booths beyond the Tilt-A-Whirl, fields of sawdust where there might be horseback riding, shuttered pens where animals are sleeping. The smell of their distant bodies and the deep smell of things frying is mixed with beer and cologne and the sewer-and-Lysol of the long row of blue plastic outhouses behind the stage. The flesh reaches for these things as babies for a mirror, hungry as always for more of itself, for conformation in the world of its importance. Just beyond the gates, a man with hot-dog jaw and dense black mustache— David M. Brinkerhoff, Vice Principal of Priesthead Junior High, according to the banner— taunts his students from his perch above a tank of sloshing water. The cardboard sign says: Sink the Brink! “You couldn't hit it if your life depended on it!” he says, and Grandma Wizeck makes a face at the break in his voice. One skinny boy flings a softball at the metal target that will drop the Vice Principal into the water, suit and tie and all. It hits the back wall with a thump and falls to the dirt. “Nice shot, Dratler!” yelps the Vice Principal. “Try getting your hair out of your eyes!”

Do you want food? Do you want to ride the Tilt-A-Whirl? Grandma Wizeck pulls you to one side to discuss your options while the softballs clang against and around the metal target. Time is surprised by none of this. It knows these blisters of dough, the shrill voices of children shouting in rhyme about the plight of peasants in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. *Work all day, no sleep at night. Where is the man who can set things right?* If you aren't going to decide anything, she is happy to sit here and eat a brisket sandwich. Do you want a kielbasa dog? Do you want pop or lemonade? A beer? She grins at her own joke. The red thrones of the Tilt-A-Whirl spin and dip as shrieking children and their parents clutch and photograph each other, hair flying till it slows and stops. "Come on," she says. "It's safe. The only one you can get killed on is the Salt and Pepper Shaker." But your head hurts just looking at it.

"Maybe a different ride," you say.

"You know what," she says. "I'm going to get a beer." She tucks her wallet under her arm and moves toward the booth where hot oil is hissing in a black pot. Two girls pass you, one with a white goat in her arms, talking to the goat. "Who is a brat?" they tease it. The goat scratches its head on her shoulder. Grandma Wizeck orders a sandwich and beer, and if you don't say what you want she will order you the full rack of ribs and make you carry it around all day.

"I'll just put it in the garbage," you say.

"Tell the man what you want."

You order a pepperoni roll and a Dr. Pepper and the man with stubble and creased face is distinctly unimpressed with your politeness. The roll is wrapped in paper, the cold can dripping from ice that has melted. A long time ago your dad bought you a Dr. Pepper from the emergency room vending machine in Arkansas while you waited for your mother to be sent back to you. It was on the way back from Grandma Wizeck's house, a week early, and he planned to spend the rest of the time camping. But on the first day of freedom your mother slit her wrists with a pink razor in the pine showers of Lazy Acres RV Camp, and he sent you to the ranger station to call 911 while he held her shallow wounds shut and Sharon and Lily pounded and kicked on the door

of the shower. There was no one in the ranger station and you could not go back without calling, and eventually the retired teachers from Minnesota had to drive your whole family to the hospital in their huge blue and gray RV while the old lady wrapped your mother's wrists with gauze from their first aid kit. "I can get you a first aid kit to take along with you," she says. "If it was me, I wouldn't go anywhere with nothing but some band-aids, especially with kids around. You know how kids are." Then they stayed with you in the waiting room, the old man with his pale eyes explaining how things get a little overwhelming sometimes, and accidents happen, and the main thing to remember is it wasn't your fault.

Your dad called his mother and his mother made a sound like a squawk that you could hear all the way through the hospital courtesy phone. "It isn't," he said. "It isn't like that." He called Doug Mcleod, hoping he might send one of his college student converts up to babysit you so that Tina could stay a few days, the doctor said— But he hung up ashen, biting his fingers. "I guess we'll be heading home as soon as we can," he said. Later Doug and Stacy explained the dangers of hospitals, the powerful medicines that the Enemy had made to sow addiction and sever the faithful from God. There were many things you could have learned then, if you had stayed and listened. But Time was looking out for you. Time gathered you up and carried you blindly forward, out of the drone of newscasters and the coughs, away from Sharon pulling on your fingers with her almost-slimy hands, out of the demon voices toward the road.

"Water," Grandma Wizeck says, of the beer. "You could give this to a baby."

"A baby wouldn't like it, though," you say.

She snorts.

"Hey," she says to the creased man. "Do you have anything that isn't water?"

"We got soda," says the man.

She wobbles her plastic cup of beer from side to side.

"Is there another vendor with better beer?"

"No," he says, not looking at her.

She rolls her eyes and pulls eight napkins out of the paper napkin dispenser.

“Easy on the napkins,” says the man. “You hate trees?”

She grabs a handful of plastic forks and walks off toward the picnic tables.

“Can I ask you something?”

She dumps the plastic cutlery in her purse and drinks the rest of her beer. “What. Of course.”

“What happened when we came to visit?”

She twists a piece of meat from her brisket and passes it from one hand to the other before eating it.

“There was a movie, right?”

“Nothing happened,” she says. “We had a good time. We went to the park and saw a movie and got Happy Meals. There was nothing that could possibly happen that was wrong.” She lifts the bun and lets it fall again and wrenches open her little bottle of hot sauce. “It was up to me to suddenly become a totally different person just because I had grandkids. Well, what? That was completely possible. That was entirely reasonable to expect, but I did not.”

She stands a fork up in the brisket and leaves it there to lean slowly and then fall.

“Eat your dinner, babe,” she says.

There is nothing left in her cup but a little ring of liquid and she pours some of her tea from the Styrofoam cup and drinks it. Then the phone rings with muffled guitars and she picks it up. “Mike,” she says. “Congratulations on answering your voicemail. Listen.” She stands up and starts to walk around the picnic table “Do you know why your sister is on watch?”

On the stage, the children’s voices are swallowed by recorded song. They are marching with their arms out, singing about crossing the ocean. At the end of every verse, they shout the words *rolling, rolling, rolling*.

“Hey,” says a voice. “Hey you.” It's no one you know-- a girl with a metal folding chair in a bower of nylon bluebonnets. “Do you want a free henna tattoo?” Her skin is covered in red tears and red flowers, and she is wearing a thin plastic smock as if for finger painting.

“I got this crappy location,” she says. “If I do your arm, you can advertise for me.”

Some tattoos are permanent, and the Bible forbids them. Some are temporary and have drugs hidden in them, traps set for children, waking nightmares they will somehow also become addicted to. The henna girl moves a jointed lamp up and down, training its white beam on the folding chair. Red tears on her pale cheek, a spiral over each soft knuckle. Temporary Indian Tattoos, her sign says. Magic of the East. So they are the kind with drugs. The children who were tricked into taking them saw spiders and snakes, caverns of rainbow light, the endless details of everything. Sometimes they went crazy and stayed crazy. Sometimes, maybe, God spoke to them in their delirium.

“Did you ever get a henna tattoo before?” the girl asks. Her voice is small and soothing like running water, and she is pale, pale as the ghost fetus on Cartoon Cavalcade, with soft round chin and round eyes and drawn-on eyebrows. Her scabbed eyelids have no lashes. “I’m just going to do some leaves on your arm, and when people ask where you got it, say, I got it from Kestrel behind the food stands.”

“No,” says Grandma Wizeck. “You have to call her, *actually*, because they won’t talk to me. You have to find out what the problem is.”

Kestrel fills a paper tube with red paste and pushes your sleeve up. You have to leave it on overnight,” she says. Will you know when you begin to hallucinate, or will the false and real worlds be indistinguishable? You do not know how to tell whether Kestrel’s voice is drugged-sounding or just quiet. Her name is Kelly, she says, legally speaking, but that name is not her and as soon as she turns 18 she is having it legally changed. Kestrel is a bird, she explains. She isn't sure if she has a spirit animal but that would probably be it, if she did. You are supposed to go on a quest to find your spirit animal but her quest was just thinking about it. Someday she is going to

find out for sure. “But even if it turns out to be like a chicken or something,” she says, “I’m still going to keep Kestrel for my name because that’s my name.”

She hasn’t recognized you, or maybe she has and that’s why she hasn’t asked your name. Maybe in a town with two prisons and a special mental health facility, everyone learns not to ask about names or scars or how many brothers and sisters you have. Instead, she explains the children’s pageant on the founding of Priesthead, which is the same every year except for the Indian song which they took out the year after her class because it was racist, and they switched to recorded music for the songs because the sixth grade band kept messing it up for everyone.

A hundred years ago, or maybe longer, there was a priest in what would later be Slovakia who convinced his entire village to buy up a huge parcel of land in the Texas hills. You don't have to know his name. It was Stastny, but that doesn't matter. He had read a pamphlet about the New World, obliquely translated through a string of unrelated languages. There were pink and green lithographs of two farmers, rolling fields, a cow the size of a barn. Maybe God told him that it was the answer to his prayers. He gathered the villagers together, his sisters and nephews and cousins, and told them what he had learned about the fertile land of Texas. They were poor and most of the men had been taken by the draft, and the pictures were beautiful. By harvest time they had left for the far-off sea and the land beyond it, and the fields and cottages were empty, the Old World wheat warped in the early frost.

“No,” your grandmother is telling the phone. “No. *No*. You *don't* know what you’re talking about. How the hell else am I supposed to put it?”

The pilgrims landed in Galveston in the middle of a cholera epidemic, and the land agent spoke a language none of them could understand. They watched him grab their priest by the hand and pump it gleefully up and down, jumped as he slapped each of the men on the back and pointed to the spreading sky. Then they struggled toward the rivers and up the rivers and inland, away from the green swamps and deep into the red, where now oil pumps lie with their dinosaur chins in the grass, sick of love, sick of oil. When the villagers reached the land they had bought,

they found a band of Comanche already camped there, with long guns on their shoulders and skinny, nervous horses. The villagers had to barter their own things for the land they had already paid for: painted violins, clocks, out-of-date firearms, waistcoats and cookware, part of a bed. The soil was thin and starved and the river was brackish. A few crops grew, but the insects ate them, and the potatoes they brought up were husks of wrinkled skin and black dust. Years passed, disease flared and retreated, locusts ate the new crops, and the Comanche rode as freely over the poor fields as they had for decades.

In the winter of the third year, after the Comanche had burned down the chapel they had built in honor of the Assumption of Mary, the last of the villagers held a secret meeting in the last remaining barn to declare that their brother and spiritual father had led them astray. In the morning, the last four men, one only a teenager, met Father Stastny at the door of his cabin with a burlap sack and a length of rope. They bound Father Stastny hand and foot, carried him to the river, and drowned him.

On stage, his death is represented by a pink boa wound around his wrists and tied, a lonely spotlight, a monologue in which the chubby boy in black robes thrashes and laments his fate but cannot keep the smile from bobbing to the surface of his face, and has to re-tie the boa when it slips off. Then a little girl in blue leotards dances out of the curtains toward him with a blue bucket in her hands. She is blue from head to toe: tights and leotard, headband and skirt of wave-jagged scraps, blue ribbons streaming from wrists and ankles. When she comes to rest in front of him, she bows, and lifts the bucket high above her head. Then the recorded drumroll pops the speaker and swells as she swings the bucket once, twice, three times, and then the crash of recorded cymbals just before the small arc of water flies through their twinned spotlights and lands with a splash on Father Stastny's face, to laughter and applause.

“Don’t bullshit me, Michael,” says Grandma Wizeck. “I have a right to know.”



There is the clang of a softball against the metal target, then the splash and cheer, the drops of cold water falling on the prison guards' children, on their skin and hair and heavy white shoes.

Your grandma shakes her head and drops the phone into her purse and glances at you and throws the rest of her brisket in the trash, all with restless fury, scratching the back of her hand with the silver thumb ring. When she comes back she is carrying her empty cup and wrestling her wallet closed and into her purse. On stage, the fifth and sixth graders have gathered to sing the final chorus of “Nothing’s Going to Stop us Now,” slightly rewritten to replace “lovers” and “each other” with the names of Central European pastries available for sale at the Czech Point. Even the resurrected priest, still wet, has taken his place at center stage, holding the hand of the girl who was the river. The first thing she does when she sees you is smudge one of the curls of red paste with her finger, like it was cake icing, and flick it into the grass.

“Why did you do that?”

Now the children are running down the steps to their waiting parents, holding their homemade calico skirts and paper hats. Grandma Wizeck lifts a clear glass bottle out of her purse, sets it on the table with the little Amish glass.

“What is that?”

“What is *that*,” she says. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“It’s a henna tattoo.” You wonder if she knows about the drugs.

“Isn’t that a hair dye?”

“I don’t know. You ruined it.”

“I didn’t ruin it. I got gin from the lady at the shooting gallery. Apparently there’s a monopoly on what kind of beer you can sell officially, but if you buy your own and bring it in, no one searches your bag unless they already don’t like you. I mean, they have *bull* riding, how can they not have liquor. Right?”

“You’re not supposed to touch them. It has to dry overnight.”

“Didn’t you want to do shots on the Ferris wheel? It’s the best place to do shots.”

“I thought you didn’t drink.”

“I don’t. Come on.”

She tips a small amount of gin into her plastic cup and swallows it. The remnant of beer colors it faintly yellow.

“Ok,” you say.

“I’m a drunk,” she says. “That’s why I don’t drink. If I weren’t a drunk, I could drink more. Logic, babe. It’s a thing you learn in real school.” She pours the gin into the Amish cup and puts an ice cube in it from her tea. “Drink up,” she says.

The smell of the gin is spicy-sweet, but the first sip makes you wince and shake your head.

“No, no,” says Grandma Wizeck. “That’s not how shots work. Where are your friends to teach you how shots work? This is what I mean about homeschool. You have to *swallow* it.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Of course you don’t like it. That’s why it’s a shot. If you liked it, it would be something else. It would be a drink-it-through-a-straw. Here.” She pinches her thin chapped nose with her fingers. “Hold your nose and swallow. Like with cough medicine.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

You try to swallow some of the gin, but it sticks in your throat and closes it. “It’s like mouthwash,” you say.

“Everything is like mouthwash,” she says/

At last you swallow enough of it to satisfy her, and she puts your glass in her purse and buys your way onto the Ferris wheel. The man who runs it has thick hair growing upward like tufts of grass, and a big glossy face, and when you sit down in the big wooden carriage he lowers a bar across your legs and gives you a salute.

The wheel turns backward, lifting your feet from the platform and into the air, and the carriage swings sickeningly forward and back. “I will tell you something,” says Grandma Wizeck, adjusting her purse so that it is pinned between her leg and the side of the cart. “I have been sober for almost seven years, straight. Great, right? Ok. Everyone is proud of me and commitment and hard work and everything. But I am also extremely tired of being sober all the time. Do you know what that's like, to be tired of something?”

“Yes,” you say.

“Yess,” she says. She imitates the blunt end of your words, the little hiss. “What are you tired of?”

“I—“

“I have made my amends,” she interrupts you. “I have already made all of my amends. What difference does it make? There isn't anyone for me to hurt.”

“I saved you the rest of your roll,” she says.

“I don't want it.”

She bites off a piece, then throws the rest behind the carriage. The wheel turns, lifting you backward, and the carriage swings horribly. The front of your head feels clamped and dizzy. “We're going to fall out.”

“We are not going to fall out. Have you literally never been on a Ferris wheel before?”

“I don't remember.” She looks into her purse and draws the sides shut again.

“You must have. At least when you were little.”

The wheel lifts you over the tops of trees, high into the air as the carriages load slowly. When you are halfway up she pours you gin and tea together and you take another sip, a larger one this time, and the burning undertaste sticks in your throat and closes it. It stings and stings, but there is a small spreading warmth beneath it, like the feeling of being about to understand something, some formula explained in a low voice, with small marks of the mechanical pencil on graph paper. The laws of the triangle, the laws of long division. Everything eventually fits

together in the mind of God. Your face and hands are warm and the edge of the sky is red. Jesus is wincing from the pain you have caused him, but when is he not in pain? Go to sleep, you tell him. Don't worry.

“One day,” says Grandma Wizeck, “you need to promise me you will go to a fair with someone your own age. I am serious. I don't want to hear about you riding the Ferris wheel with your grandmother ever again. Do you know what I would have done if someone suggested I go for a ride on the Ferris wheel with my grandmother?”

“I'm not you,” you say.

“That's right,” she says. “You'd better not be.”

The fairgrounds are bordered on one side by an aluminum fence, on two more by roads. Tiny faraway people argue or point or walk while eating. In one of the pens, cows are being led in circles, some with wreaths of flowers in their horns. In another, huge pigs lie on their sides in cubicles of straw. You can see their ears flicking as the wheel descends. In a semicircle outside the NASCAR bumper cars, men and women and older teenagers hold phones and cameras in front of them, taking pictures of their children and their siblings as they round the corner and steer into one another in bumper cars that are covered with the names of engine oils and energy drinks and allergy medications. The stage where the pageant was is emptied out and people in black shirts are lifting the speakers to move them.

“The sun is setting,” she says. “Look how everything is golden.”

The glass things in her purse clink through the denim and fringe, and the Ferris wheel begins to spin steadily, down and up, and down again, backward, and every stop sways the cart hideously, but the sky is streaked now with sunset and the bright full moon over the ragged horizon, and beyond the borders of the fairground there is land as far as you can see. In the distance are buildings and the faint shapes of mountains, the thin herringbone trees with their small pointed leaves and the wide red hills in all directions. On the long roads disappearing in shadow, trucks and cars are passing. All of this gathers, waiting for you to say the answer. What

do you think it is? You can say it. It's all right if you're wrong. It's ok if you're right. The wheel's motor clunks and begins to slow, bringing your cart to a swinging halt above tree and fence. All the strangers are small now, and there are hundreds of them, crowding together between parking lots with the land on all sides. "Look," says Grandma Wizeck. The sheep in their pens, the goats crowding the gates with their satisfied faces, the bull riding pens siding closed. The little flags and banners flutter and sink as the fences rise around them and the wheel descends.

By the time you get to the Craft Barn on the other side of the goat pens, most of the vendors are packing up their wares for the night. Grandma Wizeck walks too carefully, sometimes with her hand on her purse. There are paintings of bluebonnets like the ones the Mcleods liked to be photographed in, a new family photo for every year, with the year's new baby. The faces of the children changed, turning serious or smug with age, but Stacy's startled half-pageant smile and perfect hair were always the same, and Doug was Doug as reliably as if he had been cut and pasted from year to year. There are windmills with motors in them and blown glass and jewelry made out of stones with a card taped to the table explaining what magical properties each of the stones has. Some of the booths are already empty. A woman selling quilts is folding her wares into cardboard boxes and eating a sandwich. Grandma Wizeck tries to get her to sell a quilt at half price. "Because you're shutting down? Are you going to sell those?"

"You can come back tomorrow and buy one at full price." she says. "Do you know what it costs to make a quilt?"

"What kind of fair shuts down at nine o' clock?" says Grandma Wizeck. "What is this world we live in."

Outside, the last of the 4-H shows is closing down, the kids in their jeans and rubber rainbow bracelets sprinting from the gates, some with red and yellow ribbons. Near one of the cattle enclosures she sits at a table that is littered with empty paper bowls and pours you another drink. "No thank you," you say. You don't know if more gin will sustain the feeling you have or

kill it. Grandma Wizeck drinks the gin with the ice cubes from her styrofoam cup and assures you that you will make better choices in life. It's almost dark for real now, and the stalls are closing down. The 4-H kids are saying goodbye to their sheep and pigs, their goats and cows, and all around you is flesh, softened now in the dark, and you try to feel bad for the girls in their diaper shorts, the men with their guts and visible veins, the children sticky with red and orange juice, popsicle-stained and crying. But what do you know about any of them? Grandma Wizeck sucks on ice cubes and leans her head against her denim purse.

"Tell me what you want," she says. "I never see you. What are you like inside?"

"I'm not like anything," you say.

"Yes, you are," she says. "You like things. You dislike things. What's a thing you like?"

"I used to be the oldest."

"I'm going to give you another drink," she says. "I don't care about your choices. Do you know? I don't care about anyone's choices."

She pours gin and tea and you hold it in your hands.

"I mean, I care," she says. "But I don't care. I just want you to be happy. That's what I'm saying. You can do whatever you want, only if you don't have any kids. That's what I said in the first place. You want to live in a van?"

"I'm not having any kids," you say.

"Maybe you will. You never know."

Two girls, pudgy and bare, lean on each other's shoulders, stumbling together past the lights that have come on against the dark. They catch their breath from laughing, and sing part of a song, their voices rising and crashing against each other. *Ask any mermaid you happen to see! What's the best tuna? Chicken of the Sea!* Poor girls, don't you have any self-respect? But even as you think it you know you are missing something; you have it all wrong. It doesn't mean to them what it does to you. Their skin is just skin and not a membrane that might let anything in. The world is just their home, and they belong there, even if objectively, eternally speaking, they

shouldn't. They don't know it's wrong; they don't know they're going to hell, and if you tried to tell them they would laugh at you. They are already laughing, their whole bodies rippling with reedy shrieks, and they shake the skin that is only themselves and hang on to each others' shoulders as they laugh. They would not understand you. What difference can it make to them that their souls are lost, that their lives are sad? They don't know these things. They don't need these things. If you tried to tell them, they would stare at you without understanding, and laughter would break from them in gasps and delicate snorts, not because they are cruel or stupid, but because everything you are able to say is strange, and you have no childhood that touches theirs, no common language of old songs, no connection to anything that for them is bright with meaning. In the uneasy harmony of dizziness and understanding you realize you have made a terrible mistake.

“I have to get that shirt back,” you say.

“What shirt?”

“The stupid one. The cattitude.” The smug eyes popping out of the head like a frog's, the flat square teeth, rise in your mind like an ugly dream. Why didn't you just leave? What was the point of giving her anything? Whatever was left of your mother could only be hurt and confused by something so stupid and meaningless. “We have to go back.”

“Ok, babe, they're not going to let us in right now and I don't think the night shift people are honestly going to know what you're talking about.”

As the Ferris wheel slows again and stops, the bright lights of the main stage are coming on, relentless and white like the back of a headache, and someone murmurs into the microphone. The minor strains of guitars stretched out and twisted by black speakers. “They're going to have a show,” she says. “Want to stay and see who it is?”

“Can you call?”

You stand up and the ground tilts beneath you, hallucination or gin? All the red is crusted on your arm, and there are streaks and flat smudges where you brushed against something

and there is the word again on the picnic table, in shiny pencil, returned for you. What do you want? What does the world want you to turn yourself into?

“We should move,” you say.

“Probably country,” she says. “I mean, you go to a fair and people expect certain things. Funny if it was some prog-rock guys or something.” She stretches across the table in her childlike way, rolling her head over her arm and back. “Now if you're not going to drink this gin, babe, I will, and then you'll never get anywhere, let alone in a car, because how am I going to drive if you made me drink all the gin? What kind of sense does that make?”

You dump the gin and tea on the ground and she purses her lips at you.

“You give me the phone,” you say. “I can call them.”

“No one is giving anyone anything,” she says. “Not today. I made those amends and no one wanted them, so you can make your own amends. I tried to make amends to your mom and it was not enough. Because I don't have a time machine, I have no say in what happens to my grandchildren. Well, no one has a time machine. No one gets to go anywhere but the future.”

“I can call a taxi. We can go to a hotel.”

“What are you going to do,” she says peevishly, “dial TAXI? You don't even know where we are.”

“Fine,” you say. “I'll call the police. They'll know. If I say the fair, I *know* where we are, and I'll call the police and they'll call my dad.”

“Fucking Jim Blake,” she says. “What did he ever do to make him worth anything. Tell him I said. I saw right through him from the beginning. I can see right through his *bones*.”

“I don't care.”

“Yes you do. Why did he marry that woman with the brain tumor?”

“She doesn't have a brain tumor.”

“Brain cancer. Brain something.” The slur has left your grandma's voice and she is suddenly sharp, shrill as she has never been. “He didn't want your mom to get better,” she says.



“He wanted her to be his perfect fragile flower he could wrap up in bandages and take care of forever. He wanted her to be the patient. It's the same.”

“That's not true.”

“You were seven years old, babe. No offense, but you don't *know* what--”

“She loved him” you say. “They were in love.” Your chest feels choked with cold air and you grab for the purse and step backward, into the shadows where the lights of the goat pen have gone black over the quite shifting of legs and nodding heads. “I was there. You don't know what happened.”

The phone's brightness stings your eyes, the cat's glower and the time blinking. The guitars are louder now, long twangs stretched out over the fairgrounds.

“Give me that,” she says. “Don't call the police over something stupid.”

You tap the image of a phone and the bright numbers appear. 9.

“I went to that wedding,” she said. “I wasn't happy, but I was happy, because how do you say to someone, this is wrong? I thought, she'll figure it out. She's a smart girl.”

“I'm sorry,” you say. The 9 appears at the top of the screen, huge and white.

“It was all my fault. I did everything wrong. But that doesn't mean I didn't love her.”

One, one. The ringing is a wall. The dispatcher's voice sounds far away, pre-recorded, played back for the jury a dozen times as your dad caught coins that were prayers that were nothing but sound and light.

“Hello?”

“Location?” There is a whirring behind the voice, recording your words, preparing them for the future when they will be important.

“Hello. I was missing. Could someone please come pick me up?”

You take the gin bottle out of the purse. The right thing to do would be to throw it away, but you carry it and the purse back to the marked table and set them down before her, bottle and phone and heavy bag.

“Will it be better or worse if you drink the rest?” you ask.

She laughs, a different laugh from her usual dry scoff-- high and sudden and childlike. “I like you,” she says. “Are you sure you don't want to run off to Mexico? There's still time. We could make it back to the car. There's borders everywhere if you know where to find them.”

“I don't know Spanish.”

She waves her hand to show it doesn't matter.

“Think about it,” she says. “There's still time.”

The police are amused by your hair. They have been sent the photographs of your former self and speculate to one another how your dad will take the change. Grandma Wizeck interrupts them.

“It looks great,” she says. “I think it's a great look.”

Then they want to see Grandma Wizeck's driver's license, which the heavy officer hands to his partner, a small shovel-faced woman in a ponytail. He lifts the bottle of gin from her purse and passes that on, and the Amish shot glass for good measure. Their lights dance on the grass and bench and table and the plywood booths in Resurrection Day colors, candy-pink and blue. The Ferris wheel is still now, dark and tall against the curdled sky.

“Do you need my purse,” says Grandma Wizeck. “This is not a criminal situation.”

But he is going to have to ask you to wait here for a moment. And he is going to have to ask that you wait in his car while the lights go on flashing. “Why? What's the problem?” she says. But they have walked away, the two police officers, and the woman is making a call as the heavy man holds up Grandma Wizeck's driver's license. The way she twists her body as she speaks reminds you of Tina in the new house, whispering to Stacy Mcleod in her long buttoned skirt as the Living in Love videos played. She listened and bit her lip and listened, twisting the

yellow phone cord around her long body while you read the magazines on the end table and caught Sharon, caught Roo, pulling down books and videos from the pine shelves your dad was so proud of having bought secondhand. On the magazine covers: mothers and babies with creased small hands. The words: Are You an Empty Skin? The words: Where Does Your Heart Lie?

“Let me say something,” says Grandma Wizeck. “This is a simple trip, without intent to kidnap. She wanted to visit her mother. I want to make sure that happens. I was all set to take her home, although, you are aware or not, maybe, her father is a clinical narcissist. But that is beside the point.”

The officer nods as if he is used to people who talk this way. “Nevertheless,” he says. He has a voice like the close-up hum of power lines. “In this situation,” he says, “we are required to contact the parent with custody, and obtain consent for any visit toward the non-custodial parent.”

“We don't need that,” says Grandma Wizeck. “We just need to say one thing. She was a baby, and I didn't protect her. So which one of us should go to jail?”

“No one is going to jail,” says the female officer.

“She's going to be sick,” says Grandma Wizeck. “That's what comes from homeschooling.”

The lady policeman catches you in her arm as you stumble forward. Your stomach and throat heave and clench, but nothing comes up. She leads you to the back seat of the police car and tells you to lean out if you feel sick again.

“I have to see my mom,” you say. “I have to tell her something.”

“All right,” says the female officer. “Ok. We're sitting in the car right now, all right?”

“You are not listening to me,” says Grandma Wizeck. “I want you to listen for a second. Ok? My daughter Tina suffered for seven years from untreated living with crazy people,” says Grandma Wizeck. “This is not a grudge. This is a fact.”

In the treetop sway of nausea and lightness you recall the tow truck driver, the sad tilt of his head as he touched your face, and the trees breathe as you would if he were here, and the wind

in your loose thin clothes is longing. Blue and pink, blue and pink. The weeds are full of the trembling of insects. What will Janet hear in your voice when you come home? The heavy officer hands back her license and wallet and motions her into the car beside you, behind the heavy plastic that will prevent you both from hijacking the car with a surprise attack.

“You were a baby too,” Grandma Wizeck tells the officers. “I know because we all were. We just want to be forgiven.”

Then there is the slow queasy ride back to the police station, and the station with its dark wood paneling and posters of missing children. Some of them have been gone for years, last seen before you were born, gone now with the heavy-faced women and startled, sparsely mustached men they last were seen with. There is the female officer, Delao, twisting back and forth as she stops your dad's talk with patient monosyllables. There are the brown leather chairs, and the coarse patterned blankets heavy Officer Stern pulled from the trunk of his car and heated on the station radiators. They leave you to sleep in the armchair in the sheriff's office, under the aerial photograph of Priesthead, its long prison fences and its wide stretches of green.

## How Things Changed

At first it was exciting to have a sick mother, the way someone else's broken leg is exciting. There were bright scars on her arms and you weren't allowed to touch, with the suggestion that it was poisonous to people who were not already sick. You drew suns for her and huge flowers with many-colored petals and you drew her red heart visible and strong beneath her blouse and her hair longer and blacker than it was in life, dense spirals crashing over grass and stone and laughing black dog.

When she came home to the new house you made a welcome banner out of eighteen pieces of construction paper taped together. You helped your aunt and Grandma Blake put up all the pictures you had drawn of her good health in every room of the house. And when your dad carried her over the threshold in her sunken clothes you jumped up and cheered though he had warned you to be quiet. Later she was given a plate of apple cobbler with a pink candle in it, and blew out the flame with a mock curtsy. "The brains of the operation," said your dad, "has returned. And she promises--" he looked at her sideways, winking-- "it's for the last time." The happy smell of melted wax rose with the smoke. You thought it was strange that your dad asked her to promise.

Your mother had been sick, but she was better now, and in a few weeks, if you were good, she would be better still. Aimee Dove had just been born and for weeks your mom had been unable to take care of her, pacing around upstairs or soaking in the tub while your dad and Grandma Blake kept the house running. She had come back from the hospital bunched up and picking at her scalp, but now she was your real mother, busy and clear-skinned and patient. She had stayed up all night baking a cake for Sharon's birthday, determined not to miss any more daytime. The red gel letters were wobbly and the cake was dry and dense, but your dad had made sure that everyone knew to say it was perfect. She was quiet then except when she was teaching; then bright talk sparked from her and you were sure that everything had turned out for the best.

She had left the Mcleod curriculum on the stairs and hardly ever opened it now. "By our fruits they will know us," she liked to say. "What are our fruits? Who can tell me?"

"Apples," says Sharon, lifting her round pale face. "Strawberries, peaches."

"What are *our* fruits?"

"Watermelons! Nectarines!"

"Remember what Jesus said? He is the vine, and we---"

"The branches." Showoff Lily shouts the answer from outside the room.

"Our fruits are everything we bring forth into the world." Your mom opened her hands in the air like opening blossoms. "Just like the branches of a peach tree bring forth peaches."

"And leaves!" said Lily.

"Lily," said your mom, "if you want to help, you can come in and help us out."

"No thank you," said Lily."

She wanted to teach you and Lily how to change diapers so that you could help out around the house. If you could babysit, she would feel less overwhelmed, and Grandma Blake could go back to Irving and be done with chasing you out of the bathroom and away from the Oreos. But only Sharon wanted to learn, and she was too young. Lily refused to be in the same room as an open diaper. She runs out shrieking, holding her nose, but Sharon stays, picking anxiously at her eyes and Roo stays staring shyly through her wispy dark hair, and you stay because it would be immature to leave.

Your mom rubbed her nose nervously. "Shh," she told baby Aimee, squirming and whimpering under her hands. "Shh, it's ok. Not just what we *do*, but how we show Christ to the world. By our words, by our clothes, by how we act. Those are our fruits."

"Let me," says Sharon. So your mom showed her the disposable diapers, how they opened and closed with noisy tape, the wet wipes the whole house smelled like, swampy and soapy. She let Sharon take a clump of wipes in her tiny hand, and holding her hand guided it slowly through Aimee's bottom, dumped the wipe in the trash, grabbed another, until they came

out clean. She put powder in Sharon's small hand and let her pat it, giggling, into Aimee's skin. "This is what all of you will do someday," she said, "when you have children. This is what Jesus does for all his children. Do you know who Jesus' children are?"

"Me?"

"You, and me, and Cedar and Lily, and Jerusalem and Aimee. We're all Jesus' children, and we make a mess of ourselves sometimes, don't we? We come to him all yucky and stinky, and we don't even know how to clean ourselves up." She unfolded the clean diaper and lifted Aimee onto it, one hand under her soft wrinkled stomach, her red legs. "Anyone else who saw us like that would be grossed out! Ew! Look at all the sin!" She motioned holding her nose, pushing away an invisible version of herself, and Sharon laughs and claps, eyes wide.

"Ew, ew!"

"But Jesus doesn't mind. He cleans us right up, and tells us he loves us, and he gives us a kiss--" she kissed Aimee's tiny backside with a flourish-- "Mwah!"

"Mwah!" said Sharon, pushing her arms apart.

"He puts clean clothes on us, and tells us, 'Go and sin no more.'"

She pulled the tape taut for Sharon to grab and lay crookedly over the diaper. "All clean!" she said, and Sharon echoed her: "All clean!"

"Isn't Jesus good to us?" she said. She had her hand on Sharon's shoulder, but she was looking at you and at Lily who had crept back hoping for more showoff opportunities. "We come to him again and again, and it seems like every time he cleans us up, we go and make even more of a mess. But he always helps us out, if we ask him to. He never says, 'Go away, I cleaned you up enough times. You're gross!' He loves us enough to keep cleaning us up, as many times as we need him to."

In the mornings the Living in Love tapes played under the daily lessons from the Wisdom Booklets. and the clink of spoons in bowls. Their prayers for your mother's strength, for her

courage in the face of worldly temptation, followed you through the pages of Polished Cornerstones and Abeka: Long Division. As you wove unending decimal places around the borders of your dad's scrap paper (wasting paper, not following directions), Stacy and Doug Mcleod begged their listeners not to sacrifice their children's souls to the convenience of the moment, not to fall prey to the lies of the world. In the afternoons she pushed stray bread crusts from your lunches into her mouth and waited for Stacy to call. When she did, she carried the phone with her through all the rooms of the house, talking to you about planets, to wide-eyed Sharon and cautious, staring Roo about shapes and colors, but listening to Stacy's calm high voice. Changing diapers, running water over the breakfast and lunch dishes, correcting the bend of your S or the grip of Lily's hand on the pencil, she held the phone hunched between her bent head and her shoulder, turning from side to side as if to watery music.

She always hung up when your dad came home. Something was wrong. Something between your dad and the Mcleods, but no one would tell you what it was. On the phone she spoke so softly that you could barely hear what she was saying, a murmur low and continuous as hospital machines. It was you, you and Lily, growing crooked, learning wrong words and wanting the wrong foods, the wrong books to read. You were full of knots already, and gnawing bugs in your heart. In this ugly suburb by the freeway you would turn toward the ground, walking at a slump on the sides of your feet until you could no longer be straightened. "The bones fuse at eighteen, but the character of a child is set much sooner," Pastor Mcleod liked to say. Who will have the courage to teach their children moral posture? Who will train them up to grow straight and red and strong?

In the new house, hidden by walls and doors, your parents stopped whispering. Their voices flared in the dark beneath you and you lay awake above them. Something was dangerous. Something was killing her.

The children.

The children were killing her.



## Some of the Things He Believed

On the first day they met she said that she would disappoint him. And stupid with love he thought and said *never*, so sure he was that *he* was the missing piece, the medicine that would cure her without side effects, at no cost. The first time she said it, she only meant that she was clumsy with machines-- that she would fail despite his best efforts to Maximize Her Windows Software. Then she turned serious, warning him not to get so attached, not to idealize her, but he thought she was only asking him for praise. By the time they were married, she had said it so many times it lost all meaning and became a gesture, like tipping her head to one side to call him into her arms. But she went on saying it anyway as if it were true.

“I’ll end up hurting you,” she said. “I won’t be able to stop myself.” And he said no, never. He didn’t think about what a strange thing it was to say. He thought all women were like that, full of threats and revelations it was his duty to disbelieve. He never thought to promise disappointment, or warn that he might hurt her, though of course in time he did.

In the weeks before the wedding, and as he stood with Doug Mcleod beside the church piano, he tried to imagine hardship, sickness, poverty, rehearsing all the ways in which it would not be easy, would not be what he imagined. In Tina’s sudden hopeful face he tried to summon car crashes, fights over his job or his habits, debt collectors-- the kitchen table piled with unpaid bills as in a cartoon. He pictured her in sickness, dying of cancer maybe, her eyes made bigger and more tender by suffering, the puckered skin on her chest where her breasts had been. More often it was himself he imagined in the hospital bed, holding her hand through a thicket of IVs and kissing the children-- there were three in his mind, solemn and blond-- on the forehead slowly, one by one. He imagined the children sick or dying, bodies weightless in his arms, before there were children. He even tried to imagine her affairs with faceless men impossible to picture-- always with one grotesque feature he had given them to force them into reality: red nose or beard or muscular arms-- and he imagined forgiving her with a strangled feeling in his throat and chest that would burst apart like a dandelion full of seeds, and her sobbing gratitude, and how they

would make love after. He was sure that knew what he was promising. He was twenty-seven years old, and he had been born again, and he knew that he and she would comfort one another, that even death would be a bond between them.

When the moon-faced lady doctor at Trinity Methodist said postpartum depression, Tina laughed right out loud like she wasn't in the same room. She knew better. It was faithlessness, it was fear. She had learned not to use words to hide her weakness. She had done that before, and she would not go back. When the doctor suggested birth control as a temporary measure, Tina looked at Randy and squeezed his hands. "We'll leave that up to God," she said.

How many times had he told you how proud he was of her bravery and her faith? "She's getting better for your sake," he liked to say. Even when he was afraid. he could not help but admire her strength, the ways she was unforgiving of herself, as he might be if he were better. "Maybe you'll have a little brother next," he said. "Wouldn't you like a little brother?"

He called it by the names the doctors used, and when the names changed, he moved from one to the other as if he had known the new one all along. He didn't know if those names were the right ones, but he would believe they were, to make it easier for everyone, to make getting better possible. He would nod his head rapidly as if he could help them come true, and return to the kitchen to make pancakes for his girls and wrap Tina in afghans, and say again, Mommy is sick. Mommy is getting better.

But she knew the right name and would not use another, not even for him, to make him feel safe. She resented him translating everything she said into the long syllables given him by the world. Doug and Stacy at least cared enough to be honest with her, to continue to hold her to God's standard. They had known from the beginning that the dangers were great, and they trusted her to overcome as he no longer did. She felt terribly sorry for Randy then, for his trust in the doctors, who were only guessing, and his obtuseness and his foolish love. He had always been weaker, more susceptible to comfort, and it would bring him now to grief. For in a fallen world,

who could escape the Enemy's voice? What drugs could wash away what was real and everywhere? It was foolish to say, "I shouldn't feel this way." Foolish not to name it what it was: Satan's hold on the world, Satan's hold on her heart. When she prayed she could feel his heavy arm around her, feel his breath. But she could not feel God at all anymore, not when she was walking and not when she was standing still.

He bought the house without telling her, while she was still at Trinity Methodist. He bought it without telling Doug, and though there were questions and angry prayers for his heart, it still came as a surprise. It was the first secret he had kept from Doug Mcleod since he was twenty-three, when they first met on the campus of Rice, in a high wind full of burning oil and the harbor. It had always felt *strong* and right to tell the truth, to be seen with Doug's terrible clarity. Now he was like the world—deceitful. But he could not blame her, could not blame Tina for his own failures. He would blame himself and soon she would be better and it wouldn't matter anymore. When she was better, they could think clearly about *vision* and *honesty* and *commitment to Christ*. Doug was a good Christian, the best he could imagine, but maybe because of his goodness he could not understand the seriousness of the situation. He hadn't stayed up with Tina night after night or watched her carry the baby restlessly from room to room like a poisoned thing. He could not imagine what it was like to feel dead, cast away in darkness, could not give it any name but disobedience.

It was over now. Doug was always telling him to be a decider, and he had decided. He would take control of his family. No more sitting silent under the rain of their questions, no more demands he couldn't answer. It would be better for Tina to have her own home, her own kitchen and backyard, and rooms with doors that close, better for her to heal in a normal place, like the place he grew up, without their closeness and their grisly metaphors-- all that empty skin, all that vomiting and whoredom and witchcraft-- making her nervous, confusing her. It was all right for most people-- some of his coworkers, for example, with their thousand-dollar stereo systems and

needy, destructive kids-- and maybe it would still be all right in the future, when Tina was healthy again. But it was all wrong now. She had become so sensitive, and little things stuck in her mind, trapped there like insects. She didn't need to be perfect right now. He didn't need for her to be, not now, on top of everything else. He could see right through her skin-- always had. Even on the first day. He remembered watching her face twitch and fall and break into a laugh in the huge cushioned booth of Lone Star Espresso. "What's the matter?" he said.

"Do you like coffee at all?" she said.

They would be better together, happier, when it was just them. He would read to her, and teach songs to the girls. He was always thinking of little songs as he walked from the car to the office, the distant hum of lights and the close hum of computers singing together beneath his lyrics. *I see the moon. The moon sees me. The moon sees someone I'd like to see.*

*I don't like coffee but I like tea*

*Don't you, won't you, come along with me.*

He would tell Doug and Stacy when the sale was complete. Then he would sell back the trailer and use the money to buy furniture-- maybe he would take the girls to garage sales and get couches, beds, a crib with animals painted on it. A rocking chair with a yellow cushion. Cubbyholes for all the markers and crayons and construction paper. Dr. Noonian was right-- it was a mistake to live in such a cramped space with so many kids, when he could easily afford a house. And they were married, after all. They needed space to themselves, to be husband and wife. It was not just the lack of physical space, but the whole cramped existence of Project Nathan with its endless cycle of confession and rebuke. Saints could live like that-- powerful good men like Doug and Tony Vogel and the disciples. But he couldn't preach sermons like Doug or quit his job to read the Bible eighty hours a week like Tony Vogel-- he might want to, but it was impossible. He didn't have the what was it called, the charisma. Tony kept a public journal of his Bible study, and readers paid him thousands of dollars a week in donations. But Randy couldn't do that-- couldn't even imagine doing it. Was that wrong?

*I don't like coffee, but I like you*

*How I hope you like me too*

Probably she would start to get better as soon as she saw the house. As soon as she had been living in it a few weeks, when she got used to the cupboards and the sink and the hot running water, and all of the doors and walls, the clouds would lift and she would realize that she was happy, that all along she had been happy, and she had only wanted room for her happiness to unfold and flourish. Bean plants, he thought, in little paper cups, roots meeting waxed paper and bending onto themselves and withering.

It wasn't a sin to provide for his family. It wasn't a sin to be ordinary-- or if it was, if it was, it was a sin he would have to be guilty of for now. For years he thought he wanted to escape his job, because he had always been told he wanted to escape. Not just Doug but every movie, every cartoon in the back pages of the Dallas Star had told of his meaninglessness, his half-aliveness, that he had turned from God's greatness into a tiny cubicle of worldly acquisition. Fifty or seventy years of collecting and sorting lines of code for someone else's data, equally small, days upon days in his box in a building made of thousands of tiny boxes— wasn't that meaningless in the face of eternity? But he couldn't believe it. He didn't, when it came down to it. He was crucial to the company— his boss had told him, over and over. He could have a promotion any time, if he were willing to put in the extra time. He was a cog, maybe, but cogs are important to a machine-- and none of his clients were meaningless. Some of his databases were for pharmacy records and medical charts-- the same things that were going to make Tina better-- and some of them were stores that sold useful things-- not useful for heaven, but useful for keeping the pipes working in the sink, for keeping houses warm in winter-- for feeding and clothing someone's children. For years he had pretended to agree with Doug that his work was meaningless and cowardly somehow, that he was only waiting for the chance to take off in his camper across the country-- but it was not true. It was not what he believed. God had made him

small, but he was not ashamed to be so. He would have gone on working if there had been no promise of promotion, no assurance of his usefulness. It was his love, it was the love he had to give-- to Tina, to his daughters, to God for the talents given him. These men he admired had something that was not in him. He was father to his girls, and he was Tina's husband; that was all.

He believed these things would sustain him and for a while they did. Between fits of stoniness and panic, Tina was gentler than she had ever been to him, misty and yielding, sleeping in his lap for hours while he watched *God's Amazing Universe* with the girls, and the children were worth the brittleness and exhaustion in her face. When he came home from work they ran to him, just like in a TV show. When they laughed everything difficult and heavy was dispelled as if by light, and their faces were bright and alive.

She found she could not pray with the medicine she had been given. There was a gauze around her mind, she said, a gauze around her tongue. When she tried to stop taking it he pleaded with her, because he believed it would save her. She tried to explain what she was afraid of, the addiction and nerve damage and the distance it put between her and all her thoughts, but it was the only way, he said, the only way back across the chasm between them and their real life. When their insurance ran out and the County Health Services doctor said he would prescribe something milder, he was glad. They were both glad that there was another option, a compromise. Give me your hand, he said. Do this for me. For the girls. He told her everything would be all right and she pretended to believe him, so as not to hurt him. All night he sat beside her with one cool hand on the back of her neck, and sang through her shivering as if she were one of his girls, his favorite girl-- shh. Don't tell.

*Coffee brewed fast and coffee brewed slow*

*What I would be without you, I don't know.*

When he drove her to the hospital for the last time, he left his mother with the girls and stopped at Arby's for the foods they had eaten when she was teaching and he was up all night finishing his degree at Rice, in the prehistory of their life together. He told her jokes from those

days, references to friends long fallen away, funny phrases and stories polished and worn with retelling. She ate the half sandwich and gritty milkshake as if she could return to Houston in summer, the roads all awash with stagnant water and the burnt smell of oil on the air; all these things remembered as if she had been a fool not to love them. He kissed the side of her head while she chewed, lay his hand against her bony neck. At the hospital, under the bright red emergency room sign, she would not leave the van. She sat with her seatbelt buckled, the milkshake melting in the cup holder. Because he loves her. Because her children are his children. He smoothed her violet skirt. He slid his hands beneath the sleeves of her sweater to touch the cool dry skin, the loved thin hairs of her arm. Rise up, my love, my fair one. “Come on, Tina,” he said. “We're here.”

She joked about the slowness the medicine gave her, the way it made her teeth click sometimes and her mouth move suddenly. She was not taking her treatment seriously. She was putting on a brave face for her kids. She chewed her lip in mockery of herself, and laughed as you laughed, tossing her head and letting her hair fall into her eyes, shaking it away.

For the children Tina could be calm and sweet, and for strangers, but never for him: for his eyes only she wailed and seethed, and swore it was all going to kill her, that she was going to dissolve and had already dissolved, that all her nerves were disintegrating under her skin and he could prove it by cutting her open, prove how she would feel nothing and was empty. A new intimacy to replace, to preclude, to eat up the old.

“You won't cure me,” she had said, long ago in the booths at Lone Star Espresso. She had smiled on it with her long fleshy mouth. “You don't want to know how messed up I am.”

Now she would prove it. She would watch him make the formula for Aimee, watch him drink it, because what was the difference between poisoning her mind with movies and music and poisoning the bottle with Raid? If he could do one he could do the other; if he could abandon Vinelands Fellowship he could do all kinds of things in the name of convenience. Hadn't he and

that doctor tried to keep Aimee from being born? What was the difference? Maybe he wanted to recall all of you, get rid of all his children, so he could be happy again. "Don't say that," he said. He gripped her wrists, one in each hand, and spilled the formula, and she went down to wipe it up, soaking through the paper towels that were printed with open-armed teddy bears and checkered blue-and-white bows. For a little while it looked like she would have to go back to the hospital, despite her promise. But Grandma Blake came grudgingly to the rescue, and things settled down. She came in the name of family peace and of demonstrating, in as Christian a way as possible, her opinion of Tina's mental state and Tina's lack of responsibility.

"I don't know what to say about a woman who can't keep it together for her children's sake," she said, when he came home after her first day babysitting.

"Shh," he said.

"Don't shush me. You think they don't know? Kids know when they're being cheated."

"It's not like that," he said. But he was at a loss to say what it was like. He sat at the table topped with glass and drank milk from a plastic cup with cartoon animals on it: bear, snake, tiger.

"What does she want from you," she said. "Another house?"

But Tina didn't have what he had. She had never been sure of things, not even as a child. He remembered what she had told him about her childhood, the TV always on and the dishes sticky, her hard indifferent mother and stained, bleary father barely civil for the wedding, the way nothing had ever been solid and certain until now and this, and of course she feels like her soul is in peril, of course she's afraid of being a bad mother. It isn't crazy, or hormonal. It's just the truth.

"You're a couple of babies," said his mother. "At least one of you should have bothered to grow up before you got married. Why don't people grow up like they used to?"

In the mornings, on his way to work, he felt clear-headed and broken, sharp-edged like the glass along I-35. He listened to Joy in the Morning host Donna Sanchez asking her questions of the ungrateful, the blighted, those of you who feel like all hope is lost. Do you know God has a



plan for you? But Donna, is it really that easy? When you tell people you're happily married, do you mean it? I say that all the time, and I'm not lying, but I don't know if it's true or not. Donna, I honestly don't know. Do you *really* feel blessed every minute of every day, or just when you know we're listening?

He practiced the kind things he would say to Tina when he got home, how he would hold her shoulder and how his daughters would run to him with dolls and tracts in their hands, and maybe their fingers would be stained with paint, and how they would tip their heads back when he lifted them, hiccuping with laughter. Should he reject what he was given because it was difficult, because he wasn't strong enough for the difficult parts? Should he call it a mistake, when it was grace? He should never have gotten married. Maybe-- on the worst days he let himself think it-- he had married the wrong woman. But all the lives he could have made were not the one he had. And she was stable now-- not happy yet, but that would come with time.

She was awake when he left her, edgy and frightened as she often was now, but alert and solicitous. The children were still sleeping. "Let them sleep in," he told her. She had begun to pour their cereal, the flakes and almond slivers clinking in the bowls, but he stopped her, put the box and the milk away. He put his arms around her and touched the back of her neck, her snarled hair. "Give yourself a break today. It's all right if they miss a day of school."

Other people would have known better. Other people would have locked her away at Trinity Methodist, and said yes to electro-convulsion, yes to the medicine she didn't want and was afraid of. They would never have let her come home in the first place until they were *sure*. *They* would never, never have left her alone with the kids. But he could not have done those things. How could she get better if he didn't let her be herself again, if when she woke and yawned her long arms around him, he pushed her back into the dark?

He believed the dawn had come because he had to. He believed he knew her heart because he had to. He kissed his wife on the forehead, kissed the thin pink scars on her wrists, and drove the wide roads into Dallas on the wings of a song of praise.

## Morning and Garden

Officer Delao, the woman officer with the small face, brings you a white box of pastries from the Czech Point Bakery to eat on your way to pick up Grandma Wizeck's car. "What are you going to do?" you ask them.

"I don't think anyone's going to press charges," Officer Delao says. "This sort of thing happens all the time, when there's any kind of divorce." But you will go back with your dad until further notice, and he is flying down to meet you-- landing in Dallas, maybe, as you break the cream cheese donut in half and scrape the insides with your teeth.

After long conversations in the paneled room, away from you, they agree to drive you back to Summerview Special Care Facility for a supervised visit. At the front desk you are given the list of forbidden items. Razor blades, chains and strings of any length, shoelaces, pens, scissors, keys. You have none of them, only the knife in your bookbag which will stay with Grandma Wizeck and Officer Delao in the lobby, which today is playing violins and waterfalls but no birds. Officer Stern gives away his gun at the window and his belt full of weapons and jokes with the nurse in blackberry scrubs. "Don't haul off and shoot me now," he says.

The nurse takes Officer Stern's gun, his keys and handcuffs, and leads you through the common room with its ugly cartoon characters, painted on the wall in flat and bright acrylics, is a cartoon duck, a cat on its long hind legs, smiling with a human mouth, a cartoon dog in overalls with one withered leg, one inkblot stump for an arm. Grandma Wizeck complained about it on the way, saying it looks worse every time she goes in. But someone meant for it to be fun and happy, even if they made a few mistakes. For once you can take something as it was meant and not as a secret ugly message from the world to you.

She leads you through a door with a thick small window, and outside again, to a little garden with worn-looking bluebonnets and the bare stems of roses. There are small trees, oak trees, leaning over stone picnic tables and stone benches, some with mildewey angels pouting in the corners, and your mother is sitting at one of the far tables reading book with glistening cursive

title, laughing baby, Christmas tree. *The Billionaire's Baby*. Will she know what you have done? She always seemed to know your secrets: dark eyes bored into your brain and saw the electric flashes, the sin-centers lit and crackling. Now she will see your chopped hair and she will see that you have left the house, and she will understand that she has failed to save you. But what business is it of hers that you are lost? You do not want any of the things you are supposed to. Your dad was right. You are not ready.

Her hair has been cut close to her scalp but the angle of her head and long neck over the book is the same as it always was. She notices you or doesn't, recognizes your shadow or doesn't. She is no one you know now, a disease with your face. Is it better or worse if it's true?

"Excuse me," you say. But your mouth is dry, and it is the music in Officer Stern's phone that turns her head slowly toward you. The little notes rise and fall in circles, closer and louder until he hears them too and reaches in the wrong pocket to turn it off. The nurse shakes her by the shoulder.

"Tina, hey," she says. "Wake up. She gets stuck in those books of hers," she says. "Got you a sweater, ok? She loves those books of hers." The nurse ticks her head to one side to show her opinion of Tina's books. CEOs in love with hairdressers, women with expensive fingernails who marry contract laborers after pages of haughty rebuffs. When she first came to Summerview she read the Bible every day, but she has given that up. The flashes of light, the rebukes like heavy bells, have changed. They are not empty, but she can no longer enter them. They wait outside her, stolid and mute.

She is thinner than ever, a tower of long bones, and her face is blotched by small squints and tremors—side effects, she called them. She promised they would wear off when her brain got used to the medicine, when she was herself again. She would shake them from her head like a dog shakes drops of water. In a minute you will say, I didn't mean to give you that shirt, and as soon as you remember it the cat with its egg-shaped eyes hangs between you like an ugly sound.

You will tell a lie about what you meant to give her instead: a card lost at the dealership, a necklace the nurses took away. She tilts her heavy head at you, stricken and curious, and skin shivers along her yellow and purple jaw. Why bruises? Why short hair? Why parched lips sticking to each other as they open over perfect teeth? Someone else's disease can hurt you, but your mother never, and she is gone now anyway, because she can't be here. She touches the place on her neck where the scar would be, if she were you.

"I'm sorry," you start to say.

But the voice is someone else's, some child's.

"No, no," she says. Her voice is far away and dusty, stuck in a whisper at the back of her throat. "No, baby, no." She reaches for your hair, your forehead, and you flinch. On her white thermal sleeves, tiny roses. She will be angry that you don't move closer, and the anger will cross her face in a web of wrinkles and sink.

The nurse has draped the sweater over the bench and walked away, but one of the women from the common room is coming toward you now, thick-faced and curious, with a coloring book in her arms and a handful of markers.

"I know you," she says, turning her head over one shoulder like an owl. "You're Tina's little girl, Ceelie. I'm Bobbie. Tina's roommate?" She moves her head down and up as if she is trying to scoop the eye contact out of your face.

"Cedar," you say.

"I know. I'm just messing with you." She settles her things on a table by the bare roses. "Mind if I sit out here and color?" Her voice is loud and unfinished, a little-girl voice gone raspy. "Tina," she says. "You've got a visitor."

"She's not stupid."

"Tina and I are best friends," she says. "We know all about each other, don't we?"

"That's right," says Tina. She turns toward you away from the stems. "They told me you were missing," she says.

“I’m right here.”

“She don’t always see people,” says Bobbie. “Sometimes I have to say, Tina, the nurse is here. She gets all caught up in her stories. I tell her, I wish I could get caught up in a story like that.”

“Everything is under control,” says Officer Stern. “We had a miscommunication, but your daughter was just visiting her grandmother.”

“You said I should call her.”

“Everything is fine now,” he says.

“All right,” she says. “All right.” She bites her lips hard to hold them still. Bobbie leans close to her coloring book and scribbles hard. You could never like coloring books after you learned they had stunted your creativity. Those flat fields of blue and green made her afraid. What had she stunted? What had she not loved or punished enough? She took away the Bible Times coloring book and gave you stacks of paper to draw on. God doesn't want us just to color in the lines, she said. God wants us to think outside the lines of what the world finds acceptable. She put the coloring books in the garbage with the plastic shoes, the Barbie dolls, the wizard-school books Grandma Wizeck sent, all the things that turned you awry, bending you toward the earth. You tried to fix it, to draw flames and circles and bean-bodied elephants over the faces of Jacob and the angel, octopus arms rising from the waters where Jesus walked, but that was wrong, too. Then you could not even pretend to like coloring books to be polite, and when you found them at Aunt Angie’s house you drew black Xs through every page so they could not ruin your cousins. You can’t help feeling sorry for this woman, her face all pores and ashes, grown up and scraping the cheap paper with a desiccated marker.

“You should try coloring,” she says. “It takes the stress off you. I always tell people, try coloring. It helps.”

“I didn’t come here to talk to you,” you say.

You sit down on the flagstone path by Officer Stern's feet, and pick at the weeds growing over the border of white stones.

"We're just going to ask if you could give us some privacy," he says.

"Of course," says Bobbie, lifting her head in surprise. "Of course!"

Long ago, Annalise and Jessalyn showed you how to make a necklace by tying weeds together, but your hands have grown clumsy and you were never good at it, and it is too late to wear them now in your wrecked hair or around your neck. You will never grow into that clean shape, never smile wistfully from the Project Nathan home page, so radiantly sad for everyone else in the world.

"Your grandma was right about you," says Tina. "I thought she couldn't be. She wouldn't let me be worried. She kept saying, just let them grow up a little. The girls are fine, Tina, just let them grow up."

Red ants climb the ground, one and then two. You were supposed to say something, something about a shirt, but that couldn't be it. The shirt was a mistake, a wrong turn in a dream that made everything meaningless. Everything will go awry. The breath she draws is thin, blocked by something in her throat or chest. "You know there were demons with me then," she says. "It wasn't God at all."

"Tina, that is not true!" Bobbie drops her marker and her voice is sour, a scream. "Don't start that demon talk! You have a disease. There were never any demons and you know it."

"How do you know?" Bobbie looks at you like you have said something ridiculous. "You weren't there."

"Your mother has a disease," says Bobbie. "That's the disease talking. I had to learn for myself."

"Are you saying there's no such thing as demons?"

"Bobbie is right," says your mother. "It was a disease. That's what we call it."

“That’s right,” says Bobbie. “We keep each other on track. I tell her, you keep me on track and I’ll look out for you.”

“Are you a Christian?” Officer Stern’s hand falls on your shoulder, but it isn’t anything. You don’t even pull away. “Do you believe in the Bible?”

“Now listen. You do not get to say I’m not a Christian,” she says. “You have no right to say that.”

“Cedar,” says Tina. For a moment her voice is not distant, but the old low voice she would use when she is about to explain something that will give you back the hope of being good, the possibility of dinosaurs, whatever seemed lost for a moment brought back. “Bobbie is right.”

Bobbie’s small hands are shaking with the bare marker in them. “A lot of people are ignorant. I don’t blame people for being ignorant,” she says. “But I actually know what it’s like having a *physical disease*.” She leans hard on those two words, pushing the second through her small splayed teeth. “Maybe you’ve got your beliefs, and I respect that, but it doesn’t do anyone any good to start dwelling on that junk, all that hellfire and everything. It’s junk.”

The word *junk* stops your throat and sticks in your breath. A toehold, a door kicked open. *Junk*. Your mother would have seen the fear in your face and held her hands against your forehead. She would have prayed protection against the demons that would enter you on the tail of wrong words. But it was always too late for that, for as long as you can remember. She winces, but that might be only a side effect. Bobbie squirms upward with childish swagger and grins, proud babysitter.

“We don’t let the disease talk for us, do we, Tina?”

“No,” she says. She will not reach to cast out the word or the demon of the word, and her eyes are flat and black. She will not even stand up for the reality of hell.

“When you let the disease talk, it just brings everything down. I told her, just don’t let it say a single word. Just cross it out.” Bobbie makes an X in the air with her marker. “Cross it right out.”

Cast out the word *junk*, cast it away. Tina holds one hand in the other and glances at the book she has set down as if she wants to open it again. Maybe the book people have begun to populate her dreams. Maybe they walk past on the fragment of sidewalk in front of the house in Bent Lake, clean-shaven and proud, some pushing expensive strollers. The billionaire tycoons lean on edge of the old backyard, turning their cuff links to catch the light and glancing at watches so crowded with numbers and symbols that it is impossible to tell if she is late or early. The tall women with diamond earrings and resolute red mouths crouch at the foot of the stairs in silk nightshirts or period gowns, sheltering her children in their broad manes of changing hair-- now sunset russet, now glossy deep brown, now golden as a ratted, wispy halo. In time, they will absorb that day completely, and all her dreams will be about them. Then everything she was will return, the false futures and childhood crushes, the scratched and scribbled textbooks highlighted all the way down the page.

“You didn’t answer my question,” you say.

“Bobbie,” says Officer Stern. He stands heavily. “Let’s go for a walk. I want you to show me the kitchen. Will you take a walk with me?” He holds out his hand with its black hairs, and she scowls and sighs but takes it. “Don’t forget,” she says. She sets one of the white stones on her coloring book to keep it from blowing away. The thin paper flaps against its weight. Then you are alone with your head full of open doors and Tina with her hand over the book. She turns it over and back again as if she is trying to decide which side is least embarrassing.

“Bobbie doesn’t have any kids left,” she says. “She had two little boys and a baby girl, and she lost them all. But you.” She watches your clumsy fingers twist the grass. “You’ve been alive this whole time.”

“I didn’t mean to give you that shirt,” you say.

“Why not?” she says. “What’s wrong?”

“I wanted to give you something else, but I lost it.”



She sees the lie and nods anyway. Her dull skin ripples like wheat and soyleaf, a thousand small things turning. “It’s fine,” she says. “It’s a great shirt. Cattitude is an attitude.” The echo of a giggle in her tinny northern voice, the vowels still gnarled as you did not till now remember them. “Gratitude is a cattitude. Stacy used to say that. I don’t know what it meant, did you?” She squeezes one hand in the other and bites her lips still. “All the things I thought I knew were wrong. That medicine was God’s will. I was so afraid of it, but it was God’s will. God wanted to change me to make me better. I didn’t see.”

She sits beside you on the flagstones, long arms slow and shaky in their sleeves. “Look at your hair,” she says. “Look at your arm.” She reaches to touch it and this time you let her. Her fingers are too warm, a tremor in them like a gerbil’s heart.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s beautiful.”

You peel the blades of grass in half, threads to weave into clothing when the world begins again. There must be something for you to say, but all you can see are Janet’s calendars, their oily village scenes and wistful veiny wombs: red gaslight, red embryo. “You were right about me.” She straightens and the fear in her face is the same as it was. Nothing has changed. “I was defective. I did turn out wrong.”

“No,” she says. Wrong books and wrong nightgowns, all the doors in your heart, the wrong water rushing in, a bad old story with the wrong ending stuck on. “Cedar, no. You turned out fine. You turned out just fine.” But she has no way of knowing if it is true or not.

“I ran away. It wasn’t a miscommunication. I stole money so I could take the bus. I—” The memory of the tow truck driver rises like gin-sickness. “I did bad things on purpose. I lied to Grandma Wizeck so she’d take me here. I only got this temporary tattoo because I thought it had drugs in it.” She smiles and the smile fades in one shiver. “I’m not *joking*.”

“I know,” she says.

“Praying doesn’t work because I don’t want it to. I don’t *want* Jesus watching me.” She flinches. “There’s nowhere. Dad took the door off my room. I want to go away, but I can’t.”

“No,” she says softly. “You can’t.”

She puts her hand on yours and takes it away, uncertain.

“You must be born again,” she says. “But that’s so scary. You don’t remember what being born is like, do you?” She takes the grass from you and rolls it between her fingers.

“They always say babies can’t focus on anything when they’re first born? But the first time I saw you, you looked right at me. I saw it. Big, bright eyes. What have you done? they said. What is all this?” Her long chapped mouth shivers open, shatters into a smile. “Everything they tell you about babies is wrong.”

The nurse is coming back with Officer Stern, and Officer Stern is holding the phone against his head, and your mother leans over to pick up the markers that have rolled off Bobbie’s table. She stands and picks up the stone and the coloring book, and confusion falls on her with her arms full, something she should say now that there is no time. The nurse takes the coloring book and the markers and tosses the stone in the grass without asking what it was, and in a moment the schedule will begin again: group therapy, art therapy, *The Billionaire’s Baby*.

Your mother stands with the torn grass in her hands and you step toward her knowing she will close her arms around you. In the first breath an old memory pours in, popcorn and skin, the pink and white couch in Bent Lake. You are watching Stacy’s new video with her arm around your neck, her skin as soft as wet paper. You feel the giddy pride and fear of being chosen, the end times closing in like sad and perfect music. Then old death folds over you in waves black and cold as water, and she thinks your panic is forgiveness and holds your head against her chest.

Then the ground under your feet, flagstone and grass, concrete, linoleum, and the cartoon animals leaping the walls with their taffy-pulled and tumorous limbs, and there is your family in the Welcome Center, Micah and Amos and Janet and your dad, crowding the metal detector with your clothes in a College Plus tote bag, as if they had been walking just behind you all this time.

## V

### A Flight

They've brought the clothes you wear in their daydreams of your better future: yogurt-pink blouse with little flowers, the khaki skirt that pinches your stomach and will stop pinching when you lose a little weight, white camisole with sleeves, white ankle socks. Janet has even brought one of her scarves and extra hairpins in case your experience has convicted you to cover. They have brought a bottle of water and the passports your dad ordered during the year he got caught up in the Hearts for Haiti project at Janet's cousins church. "We're just glad you're all right," she says, in her voice that makes it clear you are not all right and will never be again outside of the Lord's direct intervention. The miracle was wasted on you, as seed and water are wasted on the parking lot at Meijer. Unless a grain of wheat shall die, what good is it to anyone?

Time took you back with dumb forbearance, the way Janet will, with a pinched small smile of sainthood, the way your dad will, tight-lipped and swaying with sadness. He will know better now that to trust you, and he will tell you quietly and often how much better he knows.

"Don't get me wrong," he says. "You're not being rewarded for this. Why didn't you tell us you— Why didn't you tell us?"

"We're just glad you're safe," says Janet.

"I think we all deserve an explanation," he says. "I assume." He picks up Amos who is hitting the skirt and your leg with small flailing swats. "Let's go outside."

Micah jumps in circles around you, pushes open the door, and comes back in again. Your grandmother who has been averting her eyes says, "Jim."

That smile again, twitching open, that same struck face as always. Already the days have collapsed when you were away from him, and everything is the same. "Jim's my dad, Diane," he says. "I'd like to think you'd ask me before you kidnap my daughter."

"I told her not to," you say. "Let's go. It was my fault."

“Cedar,” says Janet.

“I did all the things. It was my idea. I thought I had to forgive her.”

Amos leans out of your dad’s arms, reaching for your short hair. “All gone,” says Janet.

“All her pretty hair.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me?”

You shake your head.

“She’s afraid of you, Jim. Why can’t you see that?”

“I’m not afraid.” As you say it, it begins to be true. “You don’t have to talk for me.”

Your dad should put on his condescending face, and speak to her as to a parking lot beggar, but he doesn’t, or he tries to and can’t, as Amos hits the air in front of him like a drum and squirms. Instead, he seems grateful for Grandma Wizeck’s anger; he steps in front of it like a beam that shows him clearly, pores and eye wrinkles, and he straightens and shifts his shoulders back as if seeing himself in a screen. Everything will be recorded. When the Judgment comes, you will all have to look and listen. The stray hairs under your nose you pretend no one can see, the voice on the answering machine that can’t possibly sound that much like a cartoon duck, the way the face you make when you talk about your redemption always looks like you are faking, even when you aren’t. You think of the youth group leaders— Mark with his ruby skull ring, Leslie with her stubby bangs and mascara, Chad whose voice was like a radio announcer’s, even when he whispered— and how they tried so hard not to sound like commercials, and you shut doors against them and made fun of them in your head. But they were trying. They were doing better than you.

“There you go,” says Grandma Wizeck. “She doesn’t need me to talk for her. What would you have done, Jim, if she told you what she was thinking? What if she said, Hey, I still have a grandmother I’d like to see sometimes?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “You’re right. I don’t know.”

She looks down at her phone and puts it away again. “I don’t know either,” she says. “I

guess you're going home."

"I can come back with you if you want."

"We're flying back tonight," says your dad. "No one's driving back with anyone." Amos sneezes. "I don't think that's a good idea at all."

"God bless you!" shouts Micah, and Janet says, "Shh, shh."

"I'll see you, then. I hope?"

You can't see what face your dad is making because you aren't going to look at him. You look at the trees instead, the barely-visible barbed wire among the new leaves. "Ok," you say.

"Ok, ok," she says. "Always ok. I'm going to call you," she says. "Tell your dad to get you a damn phone already. Tell him we already had a nineteenth century."

Your dad could say something about cancer and white noise but she shoulders her purse as a goodbye and opens her hand on air. She squeezes your arm and looks up at Janet and then she lifts all her fingers at once for a second, a relinquishment. "Thanks for the trip," she says. "I'll see you around."

In the strange clean rental car Janet explains that she is praying for you and then falls silent. Your dad nods and looks in the rearview mirror and doesn't say anything. The letter is still in your bookbag, in the tow truck driver's New Testament. You could open the window now and push it out into the wind, where it would be safe. The oil pumps nod in the red fields, and all along the roadside bright flowers are waving. But you don't. The wind roars through the child-safe half-inch opening and your dad is so folded into himself that he doesn't even ask you what you're doing. Janet turns around in the seat.

"Do you want the air conditioning on?" she says.

"It's not warm enough for air conditioning," says your dad.

You push the window up again and let the pages cover the envelope and the dense green letters. One of the verses has been underlined in pencil, and beside it, a note— a name or email

address. You close the book.

“Hey Micah,” you say. “What Bible verses do you know?”

“We learned a new one this week,” says Janet, eager for a reason to speak again. “What did we learn?”

“Thy world have I hid,” he says.

“Shh, shh,” says Janet. “Where are we? Inside. Book first.”

“Psalms,” he says. He looks at you expectantly.

“Which psalm?”

“One hundred nineteen!”

“That's good,” you say. He giggles, his goodness a secret joke.

“You didn't wait for me to ask,” says Janet. “Now you say the verse. What is it you hide in your heart?”

“World,” he says, bouncing forward under his seatbelt. “ThatImightnotsin. . .”

“Word,” says Janet. “Thy *word* have I *hid*.”

“Why world have I hid,” he says. “In my heart that I might not sin against the.”

“Wow,” you say. “You're a Bible verse champion.”

“Eleven verses,” he says.

“Not until you get this one right,” says Janet.

Soon there are buildings among the fields, and then the fields are parking lots and stores, and rows of trucks beneath the dealerships' huge flags, America and Texas, the only state flag that looks real to you, all the real places falling past.

At the airport there are more metal detectors, and tired women in ponytails and men with small eyes who open each of the stack of passports your dad hands to them and stamp the tickets without looking at your faces. In line ahead of the metal detectors, people are undressing as if for bed, shrugging off thin jackets and gauzy long sweaters, undoing the straps on their sandals while standing: one foot first, then the other, the ones with bare feet pushing up uneasily on their toes.

Everything is scanned, white images of teddy bear, clothing and nail scissors on the screens above each conveyor belt, and the people ahead of you are sent back to remove belts and earrings, shoes and sweaters, carrying their clothes in bundles, handfuls of coins and keys, phones watched anxiously as they disappear into the x-ray chamber.

When you pass through the metal detector for the last time, the airport worker waves you aside and a short woman with distant face thinks of her real life as she lifts your arms in the shape of the cross, places her hands parallel to each other on your body: one arm, other arm, chest, back, legs, indifferently squeezing. This perfect numbness is knowledge, what you wanted. She turns you around and pushes one flat hand each under your breasts, one each under your armpits, then waves across the security line to her co-worker her assurance that you will not explode, and you are set free to collect your bag and your shoes from the end of the conveyor belt.

Your dad and Janet are busy with their own shoes and Micah's and the stroller they have brought for Amos. They don't see you drop your loafers, pennies and all, into the black garbage can just outside the row of conveyor belts, where they fall with a shush and disappear in billows of plastic. They will not notice until it is too late to go back for them, maybe until the plane takes off. The ridges of the escalator are sharp through your thin socks, and the moving sidewalk that carries you past the frozen-yogurt stands is sticky and soft. You can feel the motor humming beneath it.

No one ever told you that flying was a sin, and if you had thought about it at all you might have come to the conclusion that it wasn't. But even in his foreign missions period your dad never mentioned it to you, and you realize now that you have always felt something suspect about it. A dangerous place, a prideful place, like walking on the moon, to go above the clouds where no angels are singing. The childishness of the image surprises you. You wish your dad would say something, even if it is only how immature you are, how unready for life in the world, but he speaks to Amos in a soft high voice about the stuffed otter in his arms, and does not look at you even to show that he is angry. On the moving sidewalks and in the wide corridors between

them, everyone is walking fast, looking away or down, speaking to someone far away and more important.

Hours pass before you can board the plane, and when you do the strange false air surrounds you, a drone that reminds you of swimming, of memories that might not be your own at all. Is the laughing woman your mother, her huge belly bright as a sun in its green suit? Is she lifting one of your sisters above her head, out of the flashing water? It must have been long ago, when you still wore swimsuits, in the condo in Irving you don't remember. The underwater air closes around you loud as music, and now the wheels are spinning against the ground. Janet leans close to Micah, bunched up on the seat beside you. "Are we taking off?" she says. "Hold on tight." He grips both armrests and leans back in his seat. A bell, the huge plane moving forward, a heaviness gone in a breath, and you have left the ground, the wheels hovering above the pavement. The parking lots and the buildings, the lakes and subdivisions fall away and all the water flashes in the evening light.

"Look," you tell Micah. "Look."

Now the city is gone, shrunk to a snarl of light on the edge of fields and then to nothing, and time stretches out beneath you, circles of wheat or corn like huge clocks, patches of green and yellow and green bordered by trees, empty as it must have been in the past. Micah watches until the land stops changing and hands you the books he has brought for you to read: *The Very First Easter, Dragons and Dinosaurs, Noah's Wonderful Ark*. "This one again?" you say. Yes, always. All that land was water once, and before the water, something else. A long time ago, people were very bad. God made the world good, but sin had come into it. There were angels in those days, and miracles, but somehow it was not enough. So God said, what will I do with these people? How can I let them worship false gods, and hurt each other, and steal each other's cows? What will I do with this world I made?"

The picture of their wickedness shows children pulling a cat's tail, a man running toward you with a chicken in his arms, two men drawing a dagger, swaggering women winking with



their skirts hitched up over their legs. In the center of the town, men in robes are bowing in front of a smug-looking cow, some with bunches of grapes and stacks of pancakes to lay at its jeweled hooves. Was it all so much worse than what came after? But Micah's favorite pages are still ahead. When the animals come to the ark, he wants you to name them for him. Emu, locust, alligator. Giraffe and stegosaurus, giant South American sloth. Some of them he knows: dog, cat, T-Rex, trilobite. Some of them he wants to hear you say. By the time the last pair of weasels enters the ark, it has already been raining for days. The wicked watch the sky curiously, hold up their hands to see if it has stopped. Most of them have come out anyway to do the work that needs to be done, to milk the goats and keep the roofs thatched, to press the olives and dig furrows in the ground for planting. Only the women who do laundry for the village have begun to worry, their wicker baskets full of wet clothes waiting for the sun.

The land moves under you as slowly as if you were fixed above it: hill and valley, rich soil churned up by the floodgates, the world the waters made. You tuck your feet under your skirt to keep them warm. When the world ends you will rise from yourself and see everything that was hidden, everything small and far below you. All the terrible things that God has kept for you will be let go into the open air, and you will see and hear as God does: all at once and clearly. Then you will know how foolish it was to hide anything, to have been afraid so long.

The waves swallow everything. The world is changed. Silt and debris fall in layers, are stirred up and driven down, millions of years in a day. When night falls you are far above the clouds, but the only lights you can see are other airplanes blinking far away. Everyone around you is sleeping, some with blankets draped around them. "Can you see any stars?" you ask Micah. All he can see is his face in the window. He tilts it back and forth to watch it tilt, and then he falls asleep with his heavy head on your shoulder. Bells sound in the dark in the rushing air, and the plane turns and descends. Then there are the clouds to pass through, white and white, and then the sparse lights of the airport gather and spread across the pavement as it falls up to meet you and the wheels touch down in the dark.

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