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The Father Birth

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THE FATHER BIRTH

by

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Bachelor of Arts in English
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2002

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the

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Department of English
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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Alissa Nutting

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ABSTRACT

The Father Birth

by

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This creative dissertation is a fabulist and satirical novel. The book follows the story of main character and narrator Earleen, an atypical and hyper-intelligent sixteen-year-old who continues to be traumatized by her sociopathic father even after he dies. A self-taught bookworm born in the early 1980s, her formative years were spent trapped inside her parents' rural methamphetamine cookhouse. When her parents blow up inside their house during a drug-manufacturing incident on the eve of Earleen's early adolescence, she finds herself in the arms of an affluent adoptive couple (Dennis Stark, a fertility specialist, and his homemaker wife Beverly) who have been unable to conceive. Her presence is an unwelcome addition to Dennis's mother, who is a mute stroke victim and was formerly the couple's coddled center of attention.

Throughout her childhood, Earleen had a tumultuous relationship with her reckless father (known as "Pops"), whose drug-addled paranoia often resulted in her abuse and torture. Although Earleen's mother never reappears to haunt her after the explosion, Pops' spirit is determined to find a way to get back to Earth and rejoin the living. He frequently visits Earleen—his ghost can return through the medium of liquid, and he's convinced she's the only one who can help him get back.

Though no longer starved and stabbed, Earleen is still invisible and voiceless in her new home. Her adoptive mother Beverly values Earleen only as a path to grandchildren

and is disappointed Earleen doesn't share her obsession with outward beauty. Dennis and Beverly live in total ignorance of Earleen's hauntings, although Dennis' mother seems to detect something amiss.

Dismayed by the social aspects of school, Earleen graduates early in order to take on secretarial work at Dennis' fertility clinic. Her father's ghost, which is growing weaker but also more desperate and therefore dangerous, decides that this is his ticket back to life: he is convinced he can enter into a donor sample just as he can enter other liquid, and hypothesizes that if Earleen impregnates herself with the sample, he can be reborn. Although Earleen doesn't want to help him or to have him back among the living, she is afraid of him, and he threatens the safety of her new family if she doesn't obey. Earleen chooses a donor and successfully impregnates herself, but weeks later she runs into the unknowing donor at the store and agrees to go on a date with him.

A relationship begins, and Earleen finds herself in the precarious situation of carrying the baby of a man who doesn't know she's pregnant, doesn't know it's by his sperm, and has never slept with her. Worse yet, though Huckle soon shows himself to be self-absorbed and misogynistic, Earleen never seems to have a say in how quickly their relationship is moving forward.

Inside a barn during a storm, she gives birth to an inky creature that crawls into the rain. Yet once born, her father does not stay away and leave her alone as promised. His development is not going as planned, and each year of his new life seems to make him weaker rather than stronger. When Earleen becomes a young bride and gets pregnant, Pops returns wanting to overtake the fetus and be reborn once more in the hopes that the process will be more successful the second time around. She must find a way to protect herself from Pops and cut him off from the living world.

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"There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me."

Walt Whitman

PROLOGUE

Dear Huckle,

I have not been completely honest. Mostly in that I'm pregnant from your sperm. I stole them from the clinic prior to our relationship—I had already been pregnant for weeks on our first date. But how could I reveal this when we hadn't even done the facts of life (the sex), you know? No moment seemed opportune for breaking the news. And we kept on dating, and I kept on getting more pregnant. I got in deeper and deeper. It seems like something they warn people about in the bible.

Unfortunately it gets worse. There are grave complications with the fetus. To such an extreme that I must leave town. I do not think I will be able to keep the baby, regardless of whether or not it comes to term, but if it does and defies all expectation by being normal, at least outwardly I mean, I will send you a picture in a few months. This outcome is not anticipated. If it lives after the birth, in any truly human sense of the word, I expect the only opportunity you'll have to see this offspring is in a biology textbook. I feel I must protect you from it as a courtesy.

Please know that when I burgled the sperm, I never intended to hurt you, or thought that we would embark on a relationship of length. I suppose a request for no hard feelings is impractical. Maybe I will see you around.

Sincerely,

Earleen

CHAPTER 1

POPS GIVES AN ULTIMATUM

I turn off the power to Stark Reproductive's street sign. It's an animated neon logo that begins as a woman with a flat belly. Every three seconds, the stomach expands outwards to an orbicular compartment with a smiling baby inside that waves hello. Once its lights die, the street looks infinitely bleaker. Ours is the only competitor to the flashing BEER BEER BEER of Alcohol Depot at the end of the block.

"You are an angel of gawd," Candi says. She's rubbing the tops of her breasts with something that makes them look more tan and also smell like coconut.

"No problem," I say, by which I mean now I will be left all alone in the building so my dead father's ghost can show up and kill me or do me great harm or kill me on accident while meaning to only do me great harm. Pops is like one of those people who were very popular in high school: the moment he graduated he wanted to reenroll. Life was very good to him. He was a prominent methamphetamine kingpin in the southern region of North America. He did drugs all day and killed people, and he cannot do drugs or kill people in the afterplace where he now must hang out virtually all of the time, except for choice moments when he is able to come back to Earth to visit me.

I shut the lock behind Candi and wave at her the way the baby on our sign waves from inside its neon mother's belly, slowly back and forth in broad, vacant strokes. Her car stereo comes alive, followed by headlights and a large pendulum of Mardi Gras beads around her rearview mirror that appear to power her engine with their swinging motions. "You are incredibly stupid," I say. An onlooker might think I am voicing this about Candi, but I'm talking about myself for agreeing to stay.

Candi asked me to close up for her so she could attend an event with an open bar. “What is an open bar?” I had to ask. I’m advanced for a sixteen year old in some ways but completely naïve in others. When I said yes she gave me a long kiss on the lips that transferred makeup and made my mouth look like I’d just consumed a large amount of exotic glossy fruit.

To Candi’s credit, she asked Delores, the office pessimist and kleptomaniac, before coming to me. Sadly Delores’ theft of workplace coffee creamer/toilet tissue pales in comparison to my own dark secrets.

“Absolutely not,” Delores answered. “I’m at a point in life where my bunions and hemorrhoids are the same size.” She took a long drag from a refillable gas station soda mug and continued to scowl. “Like an equinox. And no one is gonna make me do something I don’t want to do.”

Delores is always scaring Candi and me with age-related ailments, and always stealing. This latter behavior we consider to be her tenured right. She has worked for my father ever since he started the practice. I’ve only been working here for over a year, and Dennis Stark has only been my adoptive father for four. On my first day of work when she looked up and realized I’d seen her place a bottle of Lysol in her handbag, she said, “He doesn’t pay me enough. I can index like the wind. So what if my ankles would make an elephant cry.”

I nodded and she and I have never had a problem.

I force myself to stare down to the bathroom at the end of the hallway. Tentacles of water may shoot from its door and grab me at any moment. They will look like water, but they will actually be Pops.

I came to reside with Dennis and his wife Beverly after my parents died when the home-cook drug lab, known in our house as the kitchen, went up in a blaze. Because he and Mother were down to only two working gas masks, I had started walking three miles away to the Torklesuns' house when Mother and Pops' meth production was in full swing. For this coincidental reason I'm alive, which would seem like my life was spared, but ironically this is not the case. Had Pops not accidentally melted a working portion of his mask a few months earlier and been forced to borrow mine, I would now be safely dead away from Pops like Mother is.

Instead when the explosion came I was over visiting our second amendment-minded neighbors. The Torklesuns didn't trust the government either, although they had different, more religious reasons for withholding their approval. More than once Mr. Torklesun had wondered over and tried to find a kindred spirit in Pops, and when a few off-color comments about a distrust of the law were successfully fielded, his talk soon turned to armament stockpiles, fielding new recruits, and the construction of a series of underground tunnels. All of these things were ideas that Pops could get on the bandwagon with in theory, so Mr. Torklesun kept coming around to try and actually move past hypothesis to labor. Pops' meth paranoia scared him off soon enough ("I do not have a single problem with letting you in my house today," Pops once told him, "provided you submit to a series of electrical pulses designed to measure whether your heart is organic or synthetic." The machine had been homemade that morning). But I continued to show up at their place on cook days. Perhaps they didn't notice me; they were a big group. Mrs. Torklesun walked slowly with open hips, prepared at any moment to either go into labor or submit to marital intercourse. I was jealous of her hair.

It nearly touched the floor; my own was brittle and only thrived in patches.

I tried to learn all their names, but the Torklesuns were too many. Several of the births were identical multiples, though distinction in their set of seven-year-old male twins was possible because Travis had been shot near the eye with a small training gun. Mr. Torklesun liked to point to this child and proudly declare Travis to be “seasoned in battle.” They did things our family never did, such as go to bed at night. All the Torklesuns slept together in one room. I wasn’t used to sleeping, which meant I caught all the couple’s breeding sounds. Mr. Torklesun’s orgasm was dependent on his storytelling of a revolutionary fantasy whereby he was lead commander of a powerful Christian militia. “This new leadership position may require me to take on other wives,” he’d explain to the Mrs., thrusting, “but know that as the eldest, you will have authority among them.”

These brief outings were my only time away from home back then. At home, if I wasn’t reading, my favorite thing to do was clean (although the kitchen was off-limits, being Pops’ *High Speed Chicken Feed Preparation Zone, Earleen!*). I used a yellow-colored cleaner that looked like lemon, and had the added bonus of making me feel not hungry when I smelled it. “Earleen,” Mother would ask, “do those cleaner fumes make you feel nice?” and she would sit on the side of the bathtub and breathe in and out very heavily. “No this is not doing anything,” she would finally say, and get up and go out into the living room where she’d sit in her recliner with her gasoline rag over her face. She mainly sat in that chair, whether she was nervous or calm. By the time of her death, the thin shape of her body was indented into it. Anytime she sat down she appeared to be returning to the mold of her origin.

“Anyone there?” I call out. Each of my steps makes an echo. I rise up on my toes and try to walk softly. Look at the light coming out from the door, I tell myself. The safe yellow light. My ear goes to the cold wood of the bathroom door. Do it. I think this five times in quick succession: *run now*.

My weight pushes the door open and I run to the trashcan, fumble off the lid and grab the bag. I have to empty it or else Candi could get in trouble. Delores would say something. A patient would say something. Female patients sometimes have to do horrible things in the bathroom at the fertility clinic; fertility treatments, successful pregnancies, and failed pregnancies all include horrible things. The bathroom trash is evidence of this and has to be emptied every day without fail.

I grab the bag but turn too fast and fall and its contents spill all over the bathroom’s hard tile floor, as does the bone of my jaw. A survey of its contents confirms I’ll need to go put on gloves to pick it all up. Will Pops have played a practical joke when I get back? Will the trash be afloat in a puddle of his inky filth and rearranged to spell out a lewd word? He has a taste for the comical. Back when he was alive, he once called me in to watch him unravel a man’s intestines, someone who owed him money I suppose; he pretended to be horrified that they went on and on, spilling out in an infinite way. *How* am I going to stuff all these back *in*? he asked me, unraveling faster and faster, pulling until finally, with his ankles surrounded by their yards of pink rope, he came upon the anchor of the stomach and said, *A-ha! Now we can get somewhere!* The man had swallowed a key to a safe deposit box, which Pops immediately went to work upon retrieving.

Our office’s rubber gloves are blue. When I put them on my hands feel prosthetic and

reassuringly unable to sense anything. I return to the trash scattered right where I left it and exhale. Thank you. I'm not in the mood for games. Everything gets picked up, a new liner goes into the can. I don't register the sound of the toilet flushing at first; instead I wipe down a used sink and turn towards the door. Then another toilet flushes. Then another.

I know what is happening; I even predicted it. But I nearly drop to my knees anyway because the truth is disturbing. There isn't anyone else in the office. It isn't three pm, no patients are in these stalls. Every door is closed. Not a single set of pregnant feet with swollen ankles hangs down behind them.

"Candi?" I whisper, replaying her drive away in my head. I picture Delores teetering down the hallway, *hemorrhoids*, she says, *bunions and hemorrhoids*, Lysol containers burst and spill out from her purse like popcorn rising from a kettle. I see the headlights of Candi's car, which have special bulbs that spill out pink light. The flushing sound continues, unnaturally long now. "Delores?" I call, my voice increasingly desperate. Toilet water splashes onto the floor and aggregates into a lifting puddle that spreads out beneath the door of the stall. It is currently still several feet away from me, but I step back anyway, as far as I can until I hit against up against a sink. *Open bar*, I hear Candi giggle. *Hemorrhoids* Delores' image says, her large clogged feet making beetle-like shuffles down the hallway, her finger atop a Lysol can's nozzle spraying everything she passes with a decontaminating mist, particularly the fake potted plants. Another flush and her image vanishes. I have no choice but to look down and confront it.

The water is creeping towards me with a conscious eagerness. Then the flushing stops. The large pool crawls across the floor and doesn't halt until it's just inches away

from my toes. I can feel the heat of it, a wrong heat.

Pops' clear hand emerges out from the puddle. Gaining height, it rises up into an arm and see-through fingers that flail outwards in the shape of a claw to grip the floor. When he gets leverage, another hand emerges, followed by his head and neck, one very circular bony shoulder. It takes a moment for the shape of the water to clarify into Pops' face. Far off, there is the dying sound of Delores' voice being sucked into a vacuum. *Hemorrhoids*, her voice fades, then he gasps loudly, sputtering; perhaps he's been holding his breath a long time. His clear eyes find my own, then transparent lips gave way to equally transparent teeth.

"I'll be, Earleen." He laughs a little. This gives way to coughing. Flecks of water fly from his lips. He tries to pull himself up the rest of the way, but his limbs are slippery against the tile. "Can't you give your old man a hand?"

It doesn't do well with him that I'm still alive.

When I returned from the Torklesuns' that morning and saw our former home reduced to a pile of glowing ash, it never occurred to me that Mother and Pops were dead. I figured Pops had finished his cook, smoked himself into a major spell, and hallucinated something that necessitated blowing the house. It was common for me to return home to him screaming about something that wasn't there and dragging the tip of a meat knife along the wall.

Since the house had all but evaporated, I'd passed that windy night in the shed. I could smell the remains of the house—the scent of collapsed oxygen and some peppery chemical—blowing in through the holes in the roof. Its dust was like a long low note that kept expanding. I kept waiting for Mother and Pops to pull up, honk the car horn. I

figured they'd have a camper in-tow (the Torklesuns had one), or some other temporary living shelter where we'd live for a time, me sandwiched between Pops' white lungfuls of speed and the gasoline rags that kept mother's face raw and fragrant, someplace so small that when he got suspicious I'd have nowhere to hide. Eventually thirst prompted me to hunt around in the sheds, then inside Pops' truck, which was frightening to touch any part of. It seemed like a representation of him, an animal he rode and had a connection with. I'd opened its door half expecting the engine to roar alive with his laughter when I pulled it back and climbed in amongst the empty bullet casings that littered the floor and seat cushions like lost quarters. In there the smell of the drug was overwhelming, to the point that all sensory information told me Pops was inside the truck with me: there were his odors, his possessions. On the floor amongst the empty shells, I spied an unopened can of warm beer and was so thirsty that I drank it down in just a few gulps. The sun poured in on my scalp through the bullet holes in the truck's roof. It grew warmer and warmer, the day beginning to stand on its legs, until finally it felt like Pops was holding a lighter up to my forehead. Soon the beer slowed me down; I hadn't been able to sleep in the shed. I slid over in the seat a bit and watched the dust dance in the spotlight of the bullet holes, then got only a few hours of sleep before waking up sweaty and seeing their old junk car sitting right where it had been sitting since Pops brought home the truck: out back behind the shed, filled with broken glass equipment that Pops thought he might be able to repair, he said in one of his less cohesive moments, "using lighting."

Then it hit me: I was sitting in the truck. Those were the two vehicles they owned, though the car didn't work anymore due to alternative fuel experiments á la Pops, who would counter Mother's rationalist comments with requests such as, "give me one good

reason why it *won't* run on chicken blood.” It was then I wondered what I’d been assuming—that he’d fixed the car and they’d taken it into town? I’d opened the truck door, threw up across my legs and shoes, and walked back to the Torklesun’s. They didn’t have a phone but they had a CB radio. Once the police were on their way, Mr. Torklesun and his oldest boys climbed up onto the roof of their home and took turns watching the road through binoculars and the scopes of various guns. Meanwhile, all female members of the Torklesun household were busy stashing away the illegal crown jewels of Mr. Torklesun’s arsenal.

Mrs. Torklesun had changed out my dirty pants for a long, shapeless skirt of brown tweed that fell below my ankles. This made it impossible to separate my legs more than a few inches when taking a step. My mind was racing over Mr. Torklesun’s reaction when I’d arrived back at their door and told them. Mrs. Torklesun had been holding a pan of cornbread and looking at the ground. The Mr. raised one eyebrow and let out a long exhale. “Did you see the house blow?” he asked. “Do you know what type of blow it was? Let me explain to you what a C4 blow looks like, and you tell me if any of this sounds familiar.”

“I didn’t see it,” I said. “I just went back and it was already gone.” Travis and some of his brothers immediately began imploring their father for a visitation to the blast site. “Lots of time for that,” he assured them. “Rodney, what will the combustion patterns tell us?”

“If it’s an amateur or professional job,” Rodney answered. “Sir.”

Mr. Torklesun stood and nodded. He walked over to a chest of drawers, opened the top, and took out an oversized American flag bandana that he began tying around his

head. “Well that’s for the best, Earleen. That you didn’t see it happen, or any of what happened after.” He paused for a moment. “Did you see the victims?”

After a moment of silence, he added, “The bodies.” I shook my head no.

“Doesn’t mean there aren’t any on the property. Even engulfed in flame, they may have tried to flee the burning house. You wouldn’t believe me—and you don’t have to—if I said how far a man can manage to run when covered with fire. Logic would say that once the brain as an organ’s been compromised, they’d drop then and there. But feet or even yards are still possible. Sometimes it takes the rest of the body awhile to get the message that the brain is no longer home. If you didn’t see anything, that likely means they didn’t get a chance to run. Cremated on the spot,” he said. His fingers snapped.

“Where you gonna live?” one of the girls asked. Her unfortunate ratio of adult to baby teeth kept me from ever memorizing her name. I was expecting that at any moment the woods would part and Pops would surge forth riding a large male deer like a racehorse, holding its antlers while he kicked its sides with spurs fashioned from who-knows-what. Mother would stumble through minutes later: disoriented, falling into trees, a stately birds nest upside-down and askew on her head.

“Earleen is welcome here,” Mr. Torklesun said. “Another soldier in our army.”

There was an aluminum crash as Mrs. Torklesun dropped the pan of cornbread she was holding. She held her back as she bent over her expectant belly to pick it up.

That’s when I excused myself outside to vomit. The fast, tiny swaddled steps I had to take due to the ankle-length skirt made it seem like I was walking in place. When I finally did get to the tree, I dug my nails into its bark and dry-heaved.

A great rumpus broke forth when the roof brigade spied the police cars en route. Mr.

Torklesun stood up onto the clay chimney and shot off a flare gun. All the children sprang into motion. They'd likely practiced drills for the day a police inspection of the compound might occur. The house became a Rube Goldberg machine whose end result was all of the Torklesuns standing in line from tallest to shortest, with the exception of Mr. Torklesun who assumed the spot of superlative height despite his small stature.

When the squad car crossed the lawn and parked, all the children raised their hands in a salute to greet the cop car I would soon enter. The plastic sheeting of its back seats was covered in bite marks.

The officer, a well-meaning woman with a severe braid and asymmetrical drawn-on eyebrows, had given me a teddy bear and I'd had no idea what to do with it. The teeth marks on the seats combined with the metal cage separating the back of the car from the front made me worry I was caught inside a trap; *They've got you good now, girl* I heard Pops saying in my mind. He'd told me before in no uncertain terms that if we were ever cornered by cops I should engage them in a shoot-out to avoid arrest. "Take as many bullets as you can. Holes like chicken pox, Earleen. Holes everywhere. Gotta be sure they've killed you before you hit the ground. One breath of life left in you and they'll call every doctor in the state over. Just to pump you back awake and lock you up."

Pops always has to have the last word. When he died, this instinct helped him hang on and stay in an in-between place. "I saw the train of death coming," he told me the first night he appeared, "so I planted myself down in its tracks and didn't get back up until everything stopped shaking." He's set on getting his life back somehow. Other in-betweeners have told him it can happen sometimes, but there's got to be an escort on the other side who's willing to help him out. Since I'm the only living person he can make

contact with, he's been sure to stay in close touch. These past few years, he's always claimed to be one or two souls away from figuring out the logistics of finding his way into the world again. "I've got some face time with a guy next week," he'll say, "a real head-honcho type. This is it Earleen. He'll be the last one I'll need to talk to." None of these meetings have ever amounted to anything, but lately he's put himself into a fever about the whole thing. He claims to have met the right people—to be on the trail of a real plan this time.

From where I am, I can see the bathroom door directly in front of me. Even though it's a bad idea, I want to run to it: it seems so simple that it can't be wrong. But if I did that, Pops' shape would just dissolve again and his water would coat the tile with an expanding glass-like slickness so that I'd fall. Water could pool around my head, just barely covering my nose and mouth, drowning me in a few inches of liquid. He started this process a few times already to remind me of the ways he's still in control. The water I breathed in smelled like him—that scent coated my nose and tongue immediately and didn't let go for days. It was like I was being swallowed and moving down his throat inside tissue walls of oil towards the source of his decay. There's nothing more dangerous than being helpless on the ground with Pops there; it gives him so many ways to torture or kill me.

"I'm fine right where I'm standing," I call to him. "I'll just stay put." I hate the shaky, fragile sound my voice takes on when he appears. The frequency of his hauntings—once or even twice a month—doesn't make them any less terrifying. If anything, the violence he's willing to use during them is getting worse. I can tell it's becoming harder and harder for him to break through whatever tunnels keep us apart and return and appear to

me. That means he's growing desperate.

Pops lets out a deep, guttural cough and wrenches his throat. A clear glob spits from his lips onto the tile. When it lands it immediately turns black and starts hissing with the sound of frying meat. "I see how it is," he says from inside his puddle. "You're just gonna watch on and let your old man drown?"

Occasionally his wrinkle lines crease up as he smiles and they press his layers of water together so tightly they shine for a moment like foil. I can see inside these wrinkled cracks on his face—around his eyes, around his mouth and upper neck, and they seem to lead to a deep mirror miles below. The water, I've realized, is like a reflective cloth thrown over the inky, boiling swamp of his core.

"You can't drown," I remind him. "You're already dead."

This causes his lips to recede back from his teeth. When bared, drops of water began to flow down them like hungry saliva. These are mostly clear, but occasionally a black drop disperses across their surface. "Your pretty mouth shouldn't be handling a nasty old word like 'dead,'" he says. "My kind don't enjoy that term at all." He straightens his hunch, takes on a self-righteous air. "'Dead' doesn't show me no manners." Heat begins to stem off his water's surface in tiny whispers of steam; his torso fills with microscopic bubbles that foretell a boil.

"If you're not dead then what are you?" Behind my back, my hands search the sink's countertop for a weapon. It's a doubly useless action; there is nothing there, and I'm standing in front of a mirror. He churns his palms together and reopens them to reveal a rolled cigarette. The water below him bursts into a frantic simmer. He bends his neck down to light the tip inside the hot water, and a single, perfect ring comes out when he

exhales. “I’d call myself a man in waiting.” The second ring he gently pushes out from his mouth, watching curiously as it spins into shape. When it stops expanding and stays, first rising then beginning the descent of densely weighted particles, he forcefully blows it right towards me.

For a moment I watch it coming and stand paralyzed; when I work up the courage to run it lurches overtop my head like a noose and its rancid hotness begins to tighten against my skin until I’m forced still. It feels as if he’s stretched his tongue around my entire neck, its wet flesh cracked and thick with a skein of rotting tobacco.

My breathing speeds up; I know I’m hyperventilating but cannot relax my lungs. “Let me go,” I manage. This is a gasp. In the mirror, I can see the redness of my face, the path of emerging veins signaling distress.

“Let you go, you say?” The rings of wet smoke Pops blew now float in the air above his head, rising and falling with a gentle movement like a swarm of jellyfish. In the light they are almost beautiful. When he walks, his camouflage of water rattles against his real frame, which isn’t something I can make out—it’s a nothingness, an absence that defines itself by the shape of the water sucked up into its gravity. “But I want you to have some idea of what it’s like to be *held*, Earleen. Truly restrained. It’s no way to be, is it? It’s like there’s a whole world just beyond your reach, but your leash doesn’t go that far—you can see, and maybe even scratch at the edge...can’t get to it though. That’s how the past four years have been for me. Horrible, ain’t it?” His smile widens to enclose his whole face in a convex grin. “Why, I wouldn’t wish such a fate on anyone.”

My lungs make a desperate straining noise the moment the ring around my neck loosens. Just when I think he’s released me, the noose’s liquid thickens into a precipitate

that starts running down my chest in heavy beads. I feel his rough touch as they move across my neck and collarbone: they are small liquid drops of his skin. Carefully, purposefully, the drops move beneath my shirt one by one, crawling like insects between my breasts. I squirm, pressing at them, but they don't flatten or absorb into my shirt—I always forget this of Pops; he gets inside water, but it's not water when he's there—it can do anything, be forgetful of gravity. Soon the beads of liquid move outward and up, creeping into the sides of my bra. I attack them with my fingernails and begin to cry, but they won't be stopped. He's using them to touch me.

“You know you've grown a whole bunch since I last dwelled on this planet.” I feel the water move onto my nipple and it begins to tighten its grip.

“Don't,” I whisper.

Pops snickers. “Or what? You'll cry out for help?” He tilts his head back with so much force his cheeks ripple and he gives off a long wolf cry. Emboldened, he lowers his chest down to the ground, bending his elbows with his hands flat along the floor, and does a slow push-up. His bent knees lift up out of the puddle, his feet immediately part to either side of the secret hole he arrived from. Standing, he reaches an arm towards me and points a single, watery finger. “If that's all I came for, we wouldn't be talking right now.” The rings of watersmoke Pops blew follow him across the room, pulled with the tow of his tide. They are a ghastly chorus to his preaching. “No, I'm not asking for your help in *that* way, Earleen. I've got other needs you can attend to, see. A modest favor.”

He leaps over to me, landing with his mouth so close to my face that I can see the stains on his teeth in differentiated clear textures. He spits out another clear wad from the side of his mouth. This one hits the ground perilously close to my feet. I can smell it

morph into a black steaming mess on impact.

When he appears to me in a room with a mirror, there's always a moment where I look to the glass hoping to see only my reflection looking back. I would rather accept the fact that I am crazy, that my mind was irreparably damaged during the horrors of my childhood, than know that Pops is really still here in some way. But my eye roves to see him right there, glistening, a reflection of the rules of another world.

He notices me looking and turns his head so we're both staring at the glass. This is somehow more comfortable for me. "What favor?" I ask.

Pops begins to sluggishly wade around the bathroom in wet thuds. His snakeskin boots are barely distinguishable from the larger mass of the puddle surrounding him. "This place," he says, gesturing around his body. "I could just skin myself for not realizing it sooner. This place is the answer to all my prayers."

I sit up on the floor and clutch my legs. In the mirror I see a mild burn has formed along my neck where his smoke ring choked me. "What place?"

"This *clinic*. When I told my newest buddies about your gig here, well. They just started shaking with laughs." Pops clenches his fists and holds his arms out to his sides, wagging them dramatically. "I mean falling on the floor. Per say. We're not real restrained, in a gravitational sense. What a pack we are. One guy, Big Louis, he don't even have a body anymore. Looks like a nickel-sized sun."

"They're excited about the clinic?"

"You could sure say that and not be lying. I didn't understand what the big deal was. Then they explained it to me, Earleen. The way good friends are wont to do."

I can feel my hair beginning to curl and stick, a dampness clutching my blouse. Pops'

unique humidity clings like a spider web. “So explain it to me,” I say.

His arms spread wide and he dons a theatrical grin. When I see him run a short sprint and jump onto the sink, a poisoned feeling hits me. This is his old energy, the kind he hasn’t had in years; he’s been fading since he died. Expending himself like this could only mean that he has genuine hope of renewal. “Let’s start with the punchline,” he says, jumping back down. His ribs bounce across his torso like bracelets sliding on an arm. “I’m coming back to Earth, darlin. You’re going to get me here.”

I can feel my head shaking but words won’t follow. Finally, I decide to ask the obvious. “How?”

“I didn’t get it either, for far too long. I felt downright silly when they told me. Earleen, you know that to come back and see you I get inside liquid. Just look at this water move.” He holds up a finger and squirts a thin stream of water out into the air, like a fountain. It rises several feet, then he grips his wrist and shoots it steadily higher until it reaches the ceiling. “Would you *look at that!*”

“But what do I do?”

“Straight to business! That’s my girl. Here’s the meat and potatoes of it: if I concentrate, Earleen—if I give it all I’ve got and don’t hold anything back, I can get into one of those little sample cups you fiddle with on a daily basis now. Of course that alone does me no good, so here’s the real point. Follow, now. When you give me the signal and I jump in, you’ve got to put the sample inside that young fertile body of yours. And then I can plant myself and grow like every other living person does. Nine months later, I’ll be born back onto solid ground.” His eyes move beneath my waist and he winks. “What you’ve got down there Earleen is a bona fide loophole.”

His gaze makes me feel naked. I want to go inside a stall and have the rest of the conversation behind its metal door. “Well nearly a hundred women a week come through the clinic. Experienced babymakers, Pops. You should find a pro and take your pick of any one of them. I wish you the best.”

“Darlin, you don’t seem to understand. You’re the most important part of this.”

One by one, the faucets in the bathroom’s row of sinks turn on. The water from each gradually lifts from its tap and these weightless arcs move through the air over towards Pops’ figure and merge into him. He begins to grow larger, taller. “I can’t just jump on any sperm comet and ride my way back to earth Earleen. There are some *technicalities*. Decorum, Earleen. It makes the world go ‘round. This planet isn’t presently my home, see. I can’t just barge into someone else’s house. I have to be invited.”

“Pops, any woman you appear to will agree to do it. You are incredibly persuasive. They’ll all be scared enough. Anyone would.”

“You know no one else is lucky enough to see me besides you Earleen. There’s a reason for that. I can’t be invited back by someone I didn’t know when I was actually alive. It goes beyond acquaintance, too. Believe me, I’d have hopped in Mrs. Torklesun’s oven long ago if that was the case. The door to that opens at least once a day! Busy bakery, she is. You ever talk to them? How many kids does she have now?” He laughs, kicking his cigarette to the floor where it sizzles upon contact with the puddle around his ankles. “No matter. It has to be someone I was real close to. Tight enough to have what they call a *tangible link*. You can guess the general idea of what that means, with your super-reader word knowledge and all, but they had to explain it to me. Did you know that everything we do sits in the air on some level? We can’t see it, but it’s like a kind of

string or something, this little map of everywhere we go in our lifetime. You have to pick someone whose strings are tangled up enough with yours that when you pull on your own, theirs moves as well. You and your mother are the only two people whose trails shake when I give my best tug. And well. She's already gone. That leaves you, sweet meat."

"I couldn't," I whisper. I can't sustain the thought of him beneath my flesh.

At this he stretches his shoulders and moves his neck from side to side until it lets out a loud crack. "Oh, but you could. Up until now, Earleen, I have been quite polite. When I want to, I can be downright gentlemanly." I don't mention the times in the past four years when he started to feel that getting back was useless and there was probably no reason to let me live. Each time he stopped when I was moments away from suffocation. *It will feel so good the day I kill you*, he'd scream. It was a sound only something no longer alive could make; it made me understand when he related death to a train. From inside his mouth came a gust of shadow with a crushing weight; the noise was like the arrival of something that had been sliding across metal since the beginning of time. *I will not shoot myself in the foot today*, he'd say, *but your soul is mine to eat*.

"Earleen." He comes down before me onto one knee, as if he's about to propose.

"This is my one chance, or I'm stuck in the void. Period. If you resist me on this, no good can come of it. I will say that right now." The definition of his shape increases to show strained muscle; he's holding back, trying to be civil. I watch the K-shaped scar rise up in a watery trail along his ribs.

"I don't think I could stand that."

He scratches his lower mouth and his fingers fall through his skin below his cheek. I

can see them worming around in the space under the surface of his flesh. “I won’t be any trouble in there at all, Earleen. I won’t make a peep. But if you won’t cooperate, I’ll have to kill you and try my best to stay with you while you die and then on after. Squatter’s rights. I’ll keep you with me and tug on all of your life strings. I bet you have strings to your precious new Mommy and Daddy. If you and I are tied together I can get to them and say a proper thank you for their good deed of taking you in. Quite a way to repay them, Earleen, by refusing to help your ‘ol Dad and forcing him to become your puppet master.”

“Don’t hurt them.” It has never occurred to me that he’d be able to get to someone else and cause chaos; I always figured that killing me was the best he could do.

“I thought you might say that. You sure have a caring heart. So let me tell you why this is win-win. You do this for me, I leave you alone. No more hauntings.”

“I thought you said you can’t haunt much longer anyway. That you’re losing strength.” He’d made the mistake of telling me this right from the beginning, mainly because he couldn’t hide his exhaustion: getting back is hard. Every time he appears, he looks like he’s just run a marathon. And he isn’t getting any less dead as the days pass.

“Now that is true. That is very true. But I’m one stubborn son of a bitch. How long do you think it’ll take the universe to weed me out for good, huh? Years? Decades? I could still be travelling in to say hello by the time you’re ninety. You could be long dead and I might still be coming around just to piss water on your grave. No telling. But what you can count on is what will happen if you don’t help me out. Darlin, don’t make me say those threats out loud. There’s something just...bestly about a father having to use such words with his one and only. No use saying them anyway. I’m more a man of action.”

Several minutes pass. The tentacles of water feeding into Pops from the sink pull into him like retracted cords as one by one, each of the faucets turns off. “I can see there’s a lot you want think about, Earleen, and I’ll leave you to it. But at least you don’t have a decision to make. Decisions come with options, and we’ve just got the one.”

With this, Pops backs against the wall facing the mirror. He stares deep into its reflection, contorting his face somewhat, almost like he’s daring himself. Then he runs full-speed into its glass.

There’s a hearty splash and his water falls everywhere, showering the room. Suddenly I’m covered with the smell of his oily sheen. The watery smoke rings that grew engorged with the room’s moisture fall to the ground and make the slopping sound of meat being thrown against a wall.

I stand for a moment, breathing the scent of him, the rain of his moldered body. Then, shaking, I go get the mop. He’s been dead for four years, but I’m still cleaning up Pops’ mess like always.

CHAPTER 2

A DONOR IS CHOSEN

Grans comes at me when I'm en route to the refrigerator; I see her too late in my left periphery and fail to leap from her path. She gets me on the back thigh, but the force of our collision redirects her trajectory towards the wooden cupboards. She crashes against them but remains undefeated, her battle cry the sound of the SpeedThrone's electric wheels impotently spinning in place.

I am not sure how to respond. Sometimes she will droop flaccid in her chair, pretending to be hurt or dazed, so that I will approach and get close enough for her to quickly drop it in reverse and hit me again.

Grans was not rife with joy at my adoption. Prior to my arrival, Doctor Dennis and Beverly had given up on children entirely. For Dennis it was the ultimate slap in the face: the fertility doctor couldn't get his wife pregnant. Not in a way that Beverly would accept at least—*I told him it's our embryo or bust*, she likes to recount, *I won't even take a sip of my best friend's margarita so if you think I'm stuffing a stranger's sex genes up hither-nither you have got another thing coming*.

When Dennis' mother had a stroke, they jumped upon the opportunity of a torpid human to infantilize. Grans moved in with them and they filled her room with pink bedding and stuffed bears. She'd lost a great deal of weight while in the hospital, and Beverly was delighted to find that Grans could fit into the 'husky' sizes of pre-teen clothing at the department store. She thus became Beverly's eighty-year-old live-in doll. For many elderly persons, this might have been a certain class of hell: paralyzed, helplessly trapped beneath straightjacket layers of ruffled garments and sequins trim,

serenaded each night by a twinkling light machine in the corner of the bedroom that played rhyming songs about hearts and tarts. But Grans loved it.

Then my story came on the news and ruined everything. I imagine they were all seated in front of the television together, Beverly spoon-feeding Grans blended peaches, when that terrible picture of me showed up alongside the blasted O-shape of charred earth where our house had been before it exploded. When her son and his wife began to talk around having me come stay with them, I expect Grans heartily filled her diaper in protest.

I pretend to think her constant attacks on me are an accident and I outwardly say very kind things, such as *you seem to have inadvertently accelerated into my kidneys Grans, oopsie daisy, my has anyone told you that your newest tube-fed liquid formula diet is making your eyebrow wisps look magnified and perseverant? I know it was prescribed with a goal of increasing your stool weight, but it irrefutably has had the secondary side effect of enhancing your beauty as well.* I don't bring the assaults up to Beverly or Dennis, who insist I call them Mom and Dad. If they thought Grans represented any type of danger to my physical person, they would likely send her away, and I've already displaced her enough. They gave me Grans' room, which is affectionately referred to within the house as "pink palace," and put her in an ancillary guest bedroom they've been meaning to redecorate since I arrived. Its current décor is stacked folios of tax paperwork from the past two and a half decades. *It's for the best,* Beverly told me. *She needs to be downstairs. Before Dennis carried her up each morning and down each night. It was so peculiar how she looked when he'd pick her up.* Beverly drooped her head and made all her arms go limp. *Like a human noodle. The way she'd hang it looked like she didn't*

have bones. You know that famous painting of those melting watches?

Grans backs up and starts towards me again. Her mouth widens with abandon. The stroke has placed her eyes permanently skyward, but she can see more than most—I don't know if it's something with the stroke, or her age, but she is wise to Pops' visits. Proximity to death has given her a receptor. Maybe she can see his eerie blue light pour out beneath my door when he comes, or hear his voice. I'm not sure how much she knows, but several times I've opened the door after his visit to see her sitting directly outside in the hallway, her limbs trembling with the suggestion of a seizure. On holidays she gets to have a few spoonfuls of buttermilk ranch dressing—it's her favorite, but health problems don't allow it. When she's shaking like this she lets me feed her some then put her to bed, our only moment of truce. I've tried this condiment bribery at other times but she'll merely swat her head to knock the spoon out of my hand, or receive it inside her mouth and spit it back out at me once it has warmed against the interior membranes of her cheeks.

Seconds from impact, Dr. Dennis enters and her knuckles drop from the control joystick. Her torso bounces against the seatbelt from the sudden stop.

“Hello Earleen, hello Mom,” Dennis says. “A good afternoon to both of you.” Dr. Dennis is a formal man who is not altogether comfortable with touch. He shook my hand each night before bed for the first six months I was here, until Beverly finally pushed us together and said, “Hug already, you two!” It felt off, like I was embracing a parking meter, even though physically embracing was new and mysterious to me also, as was most nonviolent human proximity. “I'd let you come closer,” Pops Jimbo used to say to me, “if I knew for sure you are who you say you are.” Pops and Mother's

methamphetamine habit made for a household rife with suspicion.

In many ways Dennis and I get along better than Beverly and I do. Like me, Dennis is cautious and practical. He's also easier to not disappoint. Beverly has a lot of expectations in regards to fashion and beauty, and my early life lacked a comprehensive education in both of these areas.

What I don't understand about Dennis is his profession. I appreciate the exacting science that attracts him, but he does not seem like the most natural choice to spelunk around inside humanity's pink caves all day with a headlamp.

The exhausted motor of Grans' chair begins to whirr. "Are you two hungry?" Dr. Dennis is best at inquiries regarding life's necessary physiological actions: eating, sleeping, the need for a bathroom. Since Pops' recent threat, I can't look Dennis in the eye; in fact it's been painful to be around both Beverly and Dennis. The morally apt thing to do, I fear, would be to leave their household and thereby remove any chance of Pops' danger affecting them. I imagine living in their household pregnant with Pops, all of us watching reruns of *Designing Women* together in the sitting room, my body and thin flesh the only thing caging his evil that lurks below while Beverly claps to the sound of prerecorded studio laughter. No one in the house would be safe.

"Just grabbing a drink," I say. I reach in for a soda and head back up to my room. Another similarity between Dennis and myself: when I'm home, I'm usually reading in my room. When he's home he's usually reading in his office. Beverly is most frequently out prowling around with other members of the town's mid-to-high society, who were all impressed by her adoption of me. *Acts of publicized philanthropy can launch you into a new orbit of social strata like nothing else can*, Beverly often says.

Grans likes to patrol the downstairs circle that extends from the kitchen to the dining room to the foyer, then to the living room and sitting room and back, at a crawling speed, waiting for me. It's somewhat of a game of shark and minnow when I have to go downstairs: I'll listen for the electric creeping of her motor and try to run for my destination when she's at the farthest point away from the stairs. But the instant she hears my footsteps the chase is on.

In my room, I turn back the pink comforter of my bed and settle in with a book. Instead of bookshelves, Beverly bought an extra dresser and paid to have it painted with roses and flowers. They recall feminine anatomy and refuse to compromise this artistic vision with subtlety. *You can tuck your books in here, and that way no one can see them when they walk in.* Her oversized pink lips smiled. *A shelf of books would just be an eyesore, don't you think? Wouldn't want to scare any delicious young boys off the path of dating you.*

When I open the soda can, its force throws me back into the wall. A stream of cola rushes up into the air; I grab my injured head and watch Pops' ghost emerge. His image is unnatural and projected. Bubbling particles gleam around his light like obedient stars.

Today he's taller than last time. "Earleen," he smiles. "I have been just itching to talk to you again." The blue light inside him flickers like a television with bad reception.

He floats towards me casually, the pointy toes of his snakeskin boots hovering centimeters above the ground. His clothes and hair are soaked through and dripping with cola. There's a faint pattering sound from beads of it dripping off him onto the wood floor.

"Back so soon," I say. It's only been a few days since he was last here; usually his

visits are at least a few weeks apart. He floats closer and that scent hits me, a worn-down adrenaline mixed with the worst parts of liquor. Pops' breath reeks of a cheap fermentation that aged sour then sharp. I back up further and the knots of my spine line up straight onto the wall behind me. Every time he appears I hope that his ghost will stop in front of me at a comfortable distance from my face; I'm always puzzled at how the hope never leaves. When the odor gets too strong, I plug my nose and start breathing through my mouth. Mother used to say Pops smelled like a car with its breaks burnt out.

“What?” He smiles his smile of jack o' lantern teeth. As far back as I can remember, his molars have been dissolving from his mouth in a way that looks like they're made of sugar. “Think being dead should've made me more handsome?” He laughs and sits next to my bed on the floor, strumming his fingers against his knees. Their black grease looks fresh and gummy, but most of his image is faded, like it's been copied too many times. Perhaps he's beaming himself in from a such a far away distance that his clarity is compromised.

“Would you like a towel,” I ask softly. “You've got a lot of grime on you.” My heart and lungs are breathing together as one hammering organ. I nod my head at his fingers. “Did you have to crawl through something to get here this time?”

He reaches into his greasy hair and takes out a cigarette, which comes alive with blue light the moment it reaches his mouth. “Tell you what, Earleen. Where there's a will there's a way.” He inhales and I watch the smoke dive down through his chest into his transparent belly, circling and churning before snaking its way back up out his mouth. The stale light from his blue skin reflects against the smoke particles—it's almost nice, divorced from the smell and the man, the way it makes the dust shimmer. “So when are

we knocking you up?” he asks. His eyebrows raise and he spits to the side; it hits the floor with the sound of a bug being smashed then instantly dries into blue steam.

“I can’t do it, Pops.”

My words cause a rush of motion through his glowing veins. The neck of his ghost seems to thicken. “You can do anything you set your mind to, little girl. Didn’t your mother and I always tell you that?” His smile has disappeared and replaced itself with an expression that reminds me now of other tutelage, of something he actually did tell me the first time I saw all understanding drop from his eyes and his pupils darkened so flat that I could see myself reflected back inside them. The longest scar I have, a thick and jagged line from my shoulder to my wrist, is from that day.

“You listen good...”

Suddenly he starts to flicker and distort. It seems like a wind that’s larger and taller than the bedroom’s walls is trying to blow him out.

“Whoa there.” He pauses. “Earleen, quick now. I need you to get another soda. I’m losing power.”

My teeth find my lip and bite. I have that sink in my stomach that always comes when I’m without a choice and my survival depends on me doing what he wants me to.

“Honey.” This kind and gentle word bends his mouth to awkward angles; he pronounces it like a foreigner. Pops’ rage doesn’t take well to suppression. His smile fades and his lips struggle not to shake with tension. “Don’t go and get me angry now. You don’t want to send me away when I’m feeling mad. I don’t stay away, do I? If you make me come back mad, that’s when people will get hurt.” He swallows and his image stretches out; one of his legs disappears. “Innocent people, Earleen. Your new little happy

family.”

“That’s not necessary.” I slide across the bed then walk past his fluttering hologram towards the door. The metal doorknob is icy on my sweaty palms. When I turn my head, his unveiled broken teeth, fierce and blue, are the last thing I see. “Hurry,” he warns. Then the room falls dark.

Without thinking, I kneel to the floor and run my hand across the carpet just below where his image had been. Drops of cola beneath my fingers sizzle up with the sound of escaping steam.

For a moment I just stay there, crouching against the retreating vapors of his smell. Then I walk, and finally begin to run as quietly as I can, to the kitchen.

I hear Grans’ robotic advance coming from the foyer. What scares me the most is how she doesn’t just listen for noise, she listens for *my* noise: when Beverly or Dennis go downstairs, she doesn’t accelerate. She has tuned into the specific frequency of my footsteps like a new mother to the gurglings of her baby.

Reaching inside the refrigerator, I grab the entire box of cola and sprint towards the staircase, holding it in front of me like a battering ram. If she blocks my path I’ll be forced to give her a mouthful. She ends up reaching the stairs seconds after I do then stays at the bottom roaring her motor in defeat. It reminds me of the person trained to chase the crowd with a chainsaw at a haunted house.

“Can’t talk now Grans,” I yell back. “Is that a new blouse?”

This time I lock my bedroom door before pointing the can away and opening it. I don’t know what would happen if Beverly or Dennis ever walked in during one of Pops’ visits, but I doubt the proceedings would be genial. Pops isn’t the type to cower beneath

the bed if he hears a knock on the door. The best case scenario would be Pops scaring them so bad they'd faint, and when they woke up they wouldn't trust their memory.

An enormous cloud shoots out as soon as the tab punctures the layer of metal. My eyelids involuntarily clench shut. I wipe my nose; the room is a mist of bubbles that tickle my nostrils and sting. When the fog of airborne cola finally clears I see Pops on the other side of my room, looking out my window. He turns and gives me a relieved nod. The expression on his face seems like he's been waiting somewhere for hours, unsure as to whether I'd show up or not.

"There she is, ladies and gentlemen. Glad you made the right choice Earleen." The pupil of his left eye streams out light as though it's been punctured. "Dead time's different—hell, dead everything is different—but even by my clock you really hustled, and I thank you for that."

Just how long had those few minutes in my life been for him? He'd changed clothes; before he had on a thin tank top but now he's bare-chested in a leather vest that I remember from my childhood. Mother had used a hot knife to carve the outline of an eagle on the back of it, except she was pretty spun out at the time so it looked more like the shaky line drawing of a duck with the head of a cockatiel. Each talon has five toes.

"I can't help you, Pops. It just wouldn't work." I feel the skin of my throat pushing backwards; it's like his light is pressing me flat against the wall. "What would I tell everyone? What would I tell Dr. Dennis? A fertility doctor is not the most ideal person to smuggle a pregnancy past."

"Earleen, Earleen. Your young mind is spinning a hundred miles faster than it has to. First thing is, I'm sure not going to be any more trouble than I have to be." The latter part

of this sentence trails off in volume and Pops begins opening and closing his mouth desperately, like a suffocating fish. Seconds later he disappears. I open another can straight into the odd blue beam of light left by his body and watch his shape quickly reconstitute. “I’m getting a little seasick,” he chuckles.

“It won’t work. I probably can’t even have kids. Childhood really did a number on my body.” When my arms start trembling from the way he’s looking at me, I cross them over my chest to try to hold them still. “Like you said, you’re a fighter Pops. You can find another way.”

“You’re still sore about your early years. I can tell. But things are a lot clearer to me now. Can’t smoke that buzzard dust in the afterlife. If there were a way to get high after death, well, I’ll admit—I’d probably be off doing that and would’ve been too goofed up to visit in on you all these years. But I’ve turned things around. I’ve chosen to *apply* myself, Earleen. And let me tell you what this whole experience has taught me: we are resilient creatures. I shouldn’t have any mind left at all, but here I am outsmarting death himself.”

“Even if I can get pregnant, I don’t see how I can get pregnant with you. It’s too wrong. It doesn’t seem like the universe would let it happen.”

Pops lets out a whistle. “What about that pretty scar on your arm? Or any of the other ones? The universe sure let those happen, didn’t it? Listen to the mouth on you. Mankind’s parents aren’t home, Earleen. No one’s here to set rules or make sure we follow them.”

“There are rules. That’s why you can appear to me but not Beverly.”

Pops chuckles. “It’s in your blood to be stubborn...you get that from me, you know.

Yes there are a few rules, but those are more steps, see. How to get what you want. And I could appear to Beverly, darlin. She'd just see me a little differently than you is all. It wouldn't be as productive of a conversation." For a while he stands, taking in his cigarette, then his hands begin to talk and his mouth follows. "See eye-to-eye with me here Earleen—the beauty of it all is that you don't tell a soul. They've been trying to fatten you up since you got here. It will tickle these people pink if they see it's starting to work. You're a small girl, and I won't eat more than my fill." He flashes a grin. "You know I've never had much of an appetite."

This is true. In life, his habit made him paranoid instead of hungry—to Pops, food was nothing more than a clever vehicle for manslaughter. He'd remove a box of cereal from the cabinet, smell or stare at it without blinking for a good forty minutes, then say, *That is poison for sure*. The cereal went into the garbage can. After a minute he'd take the lid off the can to urinate inside and declare that *they will try, and they know who they are, to find you and exterminate your life, which is just another way of putting you in prison, do you understand me, if you think about it*. Spitting followed. *That's what you get when you try to outsmart me*, he'd begin to shout, *when you try to stop blood from flowing into my brain!*

Now his smile widens and his hands move towards my stomach; I have to suck in my abdomen as far as I can for his reach to fall short. "You wear the right clothes and put on weight over time, no one will be the wiser. But let me tell you about the best part."

Just when his fingers start to pierce through my shirt and stomach with their raw chill, something sucks him backwards. His feet and arms lurch forward as though he something is grabbing him by the seat of his pants; when he disappears, his fading expression is one

of surprise.

I spray another soda can forward. He reappears on the ground, panting and looking shipwrecked. “I hope I make this look easy.” Pops winks at me, panting. Despite his smile it’s clear that he’s in pain. Knowing he’s too weak to strike at me for a moment makes me bold.

“Maybe coming back hurts because you’re not supposed to.”

He gasps for a while, trying to get enough air to speak. Finally he swallows. “And the best part is, after you do this one little favor for me, I will leave you alone.” His voice is tiny now. For a moment I think of him trapped in the helpless package of an infant and want that—to look at Pops alive in the flesh and not be afraid. “I’ll be born already knowing everything I need to know, Earleen. I’ll be flexing muscles just as soon as my limbs form, before I’m even out of you. I’ll probably be born strong enough to walk and hold up my head.”

I let out a short, desperate laugh. Pops never can see when he isn’t making sense. “And you’ll survive how? As a baby alone in the world?”

He tries to talk for a moment then simply lies down, eventually drawing his bony legs to his ribs in a tight ball in the floor. His breathing is hard; one of his palms flattens out against his chest. The blue sweat beading up on his face makes his skin look like it might lose its shape and pour out onto the floor.

“The...beauty...of it is, Earleen...” He pauses, sucking in air. “You won’t need to worry about that.” He begins to fade from the toes up: his feet become a spiral of disappearing particles that begin to take his torso into their whirlpool. He reaches outwards, his arms flailing, but then his brow thickens and a steel cloud of moisture

makes his eyes look like flat coins. “Do it Earleen.” His voice is low, a terse growl of irrefutable sincerity. Soon his face is gone but a ringed cloud still hangs as an open portal; vacant blue light pulses from deep down inside it with the frequency of a rapid heartbeat. His voice sounds far away, like he’s talking to me on a distant payphone, but all the words are clear. “If I have to come back again, it’ll be to kill you and them both, and maybe even some others you and I have never met. Slow and fun. My final act. Yours and theirs too. I won’t disappoint. There’s no reason to hold back if there’s not gonna be a next time. I’ll take all my last wishes out on you.”

I jump when his blue stretched palm reaches out from down within the opening. It seems to hit up against a point it can’t pass, then it evaporates in layers. The thinnest and last one looks like a handprint made on a wet mirror.

There is one soda left and I open it. Nothing happens—it’s just soda. For a while I stare down into the can’s murky waters, sit it on the windowsill next to my bed. At some point I fall asleep listening to the sounds of its liquid turning flat.

But when I wake, I have a name and face in my mind front and center. It’s like my brain, knowing I have to do what Pops is asking, has spared me weeks of grief by taking the liberty to sort through the possibilities and pick out the least horrible one. That person’s name is Huckle Breedwell.

CHAPTER 3

A TIME AND A PLACE

Huckle was easy to remember because of his age. Plus he was alone. We mainly see couples at the clinic, to Candi's great chagrin. *We don't get no singles but the milktrolls.* Milktrolls are her name for the men who donate sperm in exchange for money.

When he walked in, he seemed nervous and a bit paranoid, like he thought we all knew why he was there. We all did know. He'd suffered a hit to the groin with a baseball and his GP wanted to make sure everything was working properly.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you," Candi said to Huckle. He'd picked up one of the magazines in the waiting area. "Semen gets on just about everything in here."

"Untrue," I said. "That's false."

Candi bobbed her head in my direction. "This one sees the world in rose-tinted glasses." Just then the nurse ushered him back with a plastic jar in her hands. He tipped the brim of his baseball hat down over his eyes and walked while looking at the ground.

When the door had closed behind him, I turned to Candi and said, "Don't be mean." Candi chewed her gum suggestively.

"I know men," she said. "He seemed like a shy little thing just then, but I bet he'll talk your ear off and then some if you get him alone."

This morning, Dr. Dennis sees me leaving early for the office. "Initiative," he says brightly, nodding in approval. One-word sentences are his preference. He prides himself on being an effective communicator.

All the way to work, I pray for the health of Huckle's sperm. Otherwise, my options are limited. *No milktrols*, I whisper softly. I put the words inside a melody and make a simple song that becomes my office mantra.

When Candi goes on her smoke break, I rush to the lab work printouts yet to be filed and find his name. 58 million per milliliter: a respectable bounty.

What I am about to do could not be explained if I got caught. "Please no one catch me," I say aloud to the empty office. "Please no milktrols." Both seem like reasonable requests.

It's common for me to get nervous on the phone, so last night I wrote down a sample conversation. The notepaper I used is a gift from one of the prescription companies Dr. Dennis frequently recommends to patients. The motto line across the top reads: INCREASE YOUR EJACULATE FLOW. I cross it out so I don't read it aloud in my nervousness.

"Huckle here," he says. "Speak to me."

"Mr. Breedwell?" I swallow. "This is Dr. Dennis's office. I fear I have troubling news in regards to your sample."

"Oh man," he says. "Are you about to ruin my life? Should I sit down? Should I *not* sit down? Will sitting down make whatever sperm problem I have that you're about to reveal even worse? Should I stand in front of a fan? Should I ice them? Should I put them into a bowl of hot water?"

"No, it's just that your sperm sample was contaminated."

There's a long silence. "You mean like a disease?" His voice lowers in volume but increases in pitch "Like an STD? I don't think you understand. I can't have STDs. I

mean, I take showers.”

“No, no. It was spilled.”

His lengthy silence makes me panic and I spontaneously depart from the script. “The employee was promptly fired for carelessness. I oversaw the matter personally.” When he’s still silent, I add, “He will never work with sperm again.”

Huckle says nothing, then, “Sounds like a tight ship you all run. I can appreciate that.”

“Unfortunately, we’ll need another sample from you.” My eyes check the clock. There are three minutes left on Candi’s smoke break with which to wrap up the conversation. I’m still running a risk, however: she often comes back inside early if a homeless person invades her personal space in the parking lot. “When can you return?”

“Today’s one of my days off. I was going to go fishing but my sperm are my top priority. Sperm *then* fishing. To some guys it’s the other way around and that is messed up.”

“Indeed,” I say. “We appreciate your cooperation and patience. Can you arrive at one pm?” One is Candi’s lunch hour. She usually goes across the street to The General’s to drink an oilcan of Fosters and eat fried mozzarella sticks.

“One’s good.”

Candi opens the outer door and yells from down the hallway. “The one who smells like pee and calls me a whore when I don’t give him change is out there. I’m calling the cops.” A moment later she hiccups and turns the corner. “Oh I didn’t know you were on the phone. Sorry!” She yells ‘sorry’ louder than the rest of the sentence; it is meant for the person on the other end of the phone.

“The parking lot resident she’s referring to will be gone by the time you arrive,” I say. Then I hang up.

I spend the rest of the morning helping Candi with the milktralls. This is another secret I keep from Dr. Dennis. The regular milktralls request extraction assistance, then they tip us for our cooperation. *You use your hand and nothing else*, Candi told me on my first day. *If they ask for anything else, you punch them between the legs and then come get me so I can punch them between the legs. Your punch would be too polite, I can tell you’re like that. Don’t look them in the eyes either. If you do they’ll show up in your nightmares.*

I never look even a little. I have enough on my plate already in the bad dream department.

Occasionally one of the blacklisted milktralls tries to return, often donning a disguise in order to do so. Candi will have none of it and is very good at detecting prosthetic beards and even in one case extreme elective facial recontouring surgery. She leaps out of her chair and starts spitting at them amidst a flurry of obscenities. Once Dr. Dennis came out to see what the commotion was; he had a blue paper apron on and was holding his sterile gloved hands out in the air in front of him.

Candi pointed an accusatory thumb at the banned milktroll. “Dr. Dennis, this man asked me to put his penis in my mouth.”

Dr. Dennis examined the floor for a few moments, then said “Continue,” to Candi from beneath his paper mask and returned to his work.

When I was about five Pops bought a Mohave rattler at a flea market. Their venom

has neurotoxins, as opposed to the hemotoxins present in most other American rattlesnakes that make victims bleed internally. If the tiniest amount of Mohave rattler venom is applied to the tongue—far less than a drop; Pops used to dip the tip of a toothpick in and then suck on it—one will experience abnormal brain functions for up to two days. Because the meth often made Pops shaky, he showed me how to extract the snake's venom for when he wanted one of his toothpicks while he had a case of the tremors. "Write this down in your brain and save it," Pops told me, "shakes and snakes don't mix."

Pops kept the creature out in the shed until Mother had a vision while huffing gas. "That snake will open the door and kill our entire family," she said. "I was lucky enough to see the future before it happened." She made Pops end its life.

"I will taxaderm the body," Pops said, "and look upon it for years." He brought its corpse into the house but never got around to readying it for preservall. It rotted until it looked like a spoiled vegetable of length. Mother's ultimatums for cleanup sparked argument; in Pops' mind, liquefaction did not preclude the snake's trophy status. To "shut her up" he finally chopped off the head and tossed the rest, though it was a symbolic tossing rather than an actual removal from the home. He put it inside the kitchen trash can and said, "That's all, folks."

I was afraid to throw anything else away while it was in the can. I imagined it finding and salvaging new parts within the garbage to rebuild its head—chicken bones for fangs, the stub of a carrot for an eye. Mother was finally the one to tie up the bag and take it outside to the backyard's big hole.

"You see," she asked me, "how I have to do everything, don't you Earleen?" I had

thought her very brave.

When Pops showed me how to extract the venom, he said, “Just hold the head and squeeze. It already wants to come out. All you have to do is tell it that the coast is clear.”

I find working with the milktrolls no different.

At quarter to one, I use the incident with the transient man to suggest to Candi that she deserves some extra time at lunch. “That hobo shook me up bad,” she nods.

I ready the lobby bathroom for Huckle. When he arrives, I give him a small slip of folded paper that reads: *Magazines are located in the cabinet beneath the sink for your convenience.* ‘Convenience’ is underlined. I hand him the jar, then nervously shake his hand, which is clammy. “Best of luck,” I say. “After you’re done, please bring the jar to me directly.”

When he does it is wrapped in several layers of toilet paper.

“I don’t mean to make it seem like a present,” he says. “I just feel better handing you this if we can’t see inside of it.”

With his hand on top of the jar, he slides it across the counter to me the way one might move a large chess piece. This is Pops taking my king, I think, and this is me letting him take it. I can almost feel the moist rot of his breath whispering in my ear. Checkmate.

“We’ll be in touch,” I say. My voice is barely audible.

I have a nightmare that Delores finds the sample inside the refrigerator and eats it on accident. When I wake it is four-thirty. The moon is trained on my face like a spotlight

that Pops is controlling: here is your cue. Enter stage left.

“You win,” I tell him. “I’ll try but nothing’s going to come of it.”

I get out of bed and drive the pre-dawn streets to work. When I enter and turn on the lights, they buzz to life with an artificial brightness. The air has a fresh, clinical taste to it. The custodial staff came last night and the entire place looks untouched but ready, like it was laid out and cleaned just for me.

I take a deep breath then sprint to the refrigerator. I suddenly feel that if I don’t move quickly, faster than the wave of doubt rising up in my chest, I might never do it. I am relieved in the most horrible way possible when I open the door and see the lunch bag sitting in the back undisturbed against the humming cold. Grabbing it, I take it back to the patient rooms and a gravity hits my stomach: suddenly I’m sitting on a table where hundreds of women before me have sat and become pregnant.

I put on the blue gloves and remove my pants. Alone and half-naked in the clinic, I have to wait until a suicidal resignation overtakes me before I unscrew the jar’s lid. I think about Beverly and Dr. Dennis, about me being the bars of Pops’ cage that keep him safely on the other side. Isn’t it better to be naked here, alone, doing this with a plastic tube than to risk Pops’ retaliation? He has no limits. I remember seeing him in the shed with a man he’d killed—a lost hitcher who wandered onto our property while Pops was on one of his benders. After cutting all the limbs and the body’s head and torso open, Pops explored every inch of them, seemingly searching for some trace of the life that had drained out. Pops’ violence rested atop a layer of curiosity: he’d do anything just to see what it felt like. Imagine him hurting me in front of Dr. Dennis in every way that he is able to. Imagine the catatonic pink place Beverly’s eyes would go.

No. If Pops has to get inside me, let it be when I'm the stronger one. Let him emerge from me helpless. The insertion tube feels fragile in my hands but it's a weapon, no different than a gun. Either I use it on myself or Pops will return to gobble me whole.

"Now or never, Pops." I take the sample into the lab, position it in the heater and stare intently at the mush, watching as it starts to change consistency. The fluid thermometer rises closer towards body temperature. "This is your shot." I pause as the liquid comes alive with a slight motion; the water bath begins to bob as though someone just pulled a tiny fish from it. A little more bouncing and the thermometer begins to beep. I look inside the tube for any sign of Pops, but I suppose if he is in there, he's too small for me to see now. I consider taking the sample over to the microscope but I'm too afraid of what I might see.

"I chose ignorance," I whisper, cleaning up and repositioning everything I touched. Then I grab an insertion tube, draw back the stopper, and let the liquid rise up inside. Holding the stick out and away from me, it feels like a magic wand: one touch and I could be pregnant and dead Pops could be alive again. I walk out of the lab and into one of the patient procedure rooms. There's a padded beige lounge chair and stirrups.

The chair's paper liner crinkles below my back as I lie down. It makes me remember when I'd first gone to the police station after our house blew up, the examination room the officer took me to that had cartoon smiley faces all over the ceiling. "It's okay," another female officer kept saying to me, as though I was actively insisting that it wasn't. "Think of it like you're going swimming," she said, "and we're going to change you into a bathing suit." I'd read about swimming but wasn't prepared for them removing my clothes to fit me inside a paper gown. Something about the crunching noises it made as I

slid against the paper cloth on the examination table frightened me. I kept thinking about how easily the paper would burn. The door had opened so many times and always a new person was there to look at my scars. The last woman who came in pointed to each one, asked me how I received it, and wrote down my answer. “Pops,” I told her, like I’d told everyone, “thought I was someone I wasn’t.”

“But how did this scar *happen*,” she asked again. And so we sat for hours. Wire, rock, shoe, fork, fist, bite, key, lye, brick, log, knife, glass, cigarette, table corner, screwdriver. And more questions. “The water was boiling?” “The nail gun was loaded?”

Today I choose to leave the lights off. It seems better that way, somehow—I feel like the ghost-imbued sperm in the tube has the same delicacy as exposed film. I’m superstitious that if I flip the switch on, Pops will be blanched from the tube entirely and come find me again, and I’ll have to repeat this whole horrendous process.

Putting in the tube is an uncomfortable and foreign sensation that immediately feels like the biggest mistake of my life. It’s difficult to reach low enough to push in the long handle that begins the injection by myself; I start with my foot and am able to push using my ankle until the stopper pushes in enough that my hand can grab its end. Shame floods through me like a toxin; I feel nearly paralyzed with the thought that I have done something so bad it’s unprecedented, that I am the worst human being to have ever lived.

I finish and lie still with my legs bended and closed, clutched tightly to my chest, as I’ve heard the video instruct the female recipients to do so many times in the past. Walking by these procedure rooms, I’ve always felt sorry for them—the way their desperation unreasonably colors their hope. They’re a reminder of the sick and inequitable truth that wanting and deserving aren’t adequate means of obtaining.

How indecent for their wishes to be denied and Pops' granted.

When I stand, I no longer feel like I have blood. The veins beneath my skin seem like they're made of the same blue latex as our office gloves. Looking in the room's mirror, I am sure that if I screamed, the image of my face would not scream back. Instead it would open its mouth and show something dead and unrecognizable perched upon its tongue.

CHAPTER 4
MOTHERHOOD

I go on a mission to scout the most normal, generic pregnancy tests I can find. There are hordes of them at the clinic, but since that was the scene of the crime I'm afraid that Pops has somehow tampered with them, that I would pee on them all only to have each and every stick blink the phrase *If at first you don't succeed, try, try again* back at me. Fearful also that someone Beverly or Dennis knows will enter the store's pharmacy section and spy me scouring the fine print on incriminating boxes, I load up a shopping cart with nonessentials, position a box backside-up in the cart's basket so I can read while I push, and perform a slow ambulation around the store's exterior until I'm satisfied I understand the particular brand's time window and accuracy rate, then I repeat the process. It doesn't seem like a good idea to stand vulnerably in line with the box, so I loiter in front of the registers until an immediate opening becomes available, at which point I grab my selection (hidden inside the pages of a young adult celebrity magazine next to a horoscope chart that promises to successfully determine which heartthrob I'll marry), abandon my cart, and run it to the cashier.

“You want it to be yes or no?” the clerk asks, bagging the test up.

“It will be a heavy disappointment either way.”

She nods. “Ain't that life.”

I use a gas station bathroom. First I have to get the key, which the proprietors have secured to several inches of chain link in order to deter theft. Before peeing I stare at my reflection in the toilet's water. “Pops?” I call softly, expecting the water to ripple back in response. It's the first time I've ever said his name in an invocation. Right now I want

answers badly enough that it would be a relief to have him appear.

All stays quiet. I cover the toilet seat with paper, straddle it, then set the stick off to the side. Police sirens are sounding off in the distance; it seems like they're coming to arrest me. If I open the door and there are cops with drawn guns, I won't even ask why—I'll just understand they know I've committed a timeless act of evil and go wherever they take me.

I cover my eyes and begin to count to a hundred and twenty. *Leave the stall*, I think. *Leave the stick there and don't look at it and don't ever return.*

But before I can go, the what-if's start: what if I lift my hands from my eyes to see the stick smoldering, the stick's plastic blistered up with bubbles of black tar? What if there aren't two lines or one line in the viewing window, but a crude purple sketch of Pops' face with eyes that come alive and follow me the moment I see them? I lose my count and think about what this would all mean, knowing that it has been more than time. Then I stare at the two bright lines, refusing to translate them. Positive.

I do leave the stick. I drive straight back to the store, gather more tests than I can pay for into my arms, and go into the grocery store bathroom. I stingily pee only a bit on each one and watch their colors grow into a slow bouquet whose petals all tell the same story.

It is rare to get pregnant on the first injection. I hadn't shared this information with Pops—I hoped that if it didn't take, that would be the end of him—he'd be trapped in an expelled cell and die a microscopic death. But if it wasn't the end and he came back after it failed, he couldn't exactly blame me; there was no way to for me to force my body to accept the first attempt. This alone makes me certain that something more tenacious than Huckle's sperm has taken hold. I can picture Pops considering the various sperm writhing

in his midst the way he might a row of women lined before him in a brothel, examining each one's physique for signs of endurance. Then he'd jump atop and ride it like a dolphin through the wave of fluid, whooping and hollering and slapping its tail for speed, guiding its head exactly where it needed to go.

And did he have his usual weapons on his person, in there? Did he draw his Leatherman, slice into the egg, and burrow inside its surrounding warmth with a sense of victory? Is he hibernating now, so enveloped and secure that he hasn't even tossed in his sleep?

How long will his radio silence last, I wonder? When will Pops wake back up?

There is simply nothing to be done but wait.

Sometimes, for stretches of hours, occasionally, I forget that Pops is stowed away inside me. But when I do remember, my bones and throat go soft and I feel like an empty glove that he's slipped on. It seems like a matter of time before he grows exponentially—consuming my organs for food, plucking the strings in my throat to form his own words. He could overtake me, make me his puppet entirely, and who would know till it was too late? I think of the face Beverly would make when I come down the hall, teetering wildly, Pops driving my body for the first time and still getting used to the controls. *Earleen, have you seen how messy your hair looks? Are you feeling dizzy? Earleen, what's in your hands? What is the knife for?*

I have a vision of him inside my stomach, arched, full-grown yet miniature, curled into comfort despite his cramped position like a train jumper nestled into the corner of the car. "Welcome aboard," I say flatly, staring into the eye of my bellybutton. I never gave

much thought to my bellybutton, but now it seems to be a conceivable point of surveillance for Pops. I expect the squinting flesh of its wrinkle to open like the aperture of a camera and reveal his bloodshot eye peeking out.

What surprised me after I first did it was the lack of pain. I'd once read a tale of a Spartan soldier who stole a fox and hid it beneath his cloak. Rather than admit to the crime, he stood stoic as the fox bit through his stomach. I imagined Pops' implantation inside me would feel similar. But there was no physical discomfort to announce that he'd entered the building. So to speak. Instead I felt a type of eerie stillness inside.

Mother used to tell me that if I asked someone a question and they hesitated or didn't answer, I'd hit on something true. *Quiet's how people nod when they'd rather not say.* Maybe the lack of words was Pops' confirmation.

No one noticed any change in me at all, except Delores. "Your skin looks a little congested," she wheezed one morning. "Try an enema."

I began to look through Dr. Dennis' obstetrics books and read fervently on miscarriages. "So much can go wrong during the first trimester," I accidentally exclaimed in a very loud, excited voice overtop a book at my desk one morning to a very inappropriate waiting room audience.

But it doesn't seem too outlandish that my body could simply absorb his cells or flush them out. All day long I beg my body to reject him, to push and sweep and dislodge. I imagine him airborne inside me, passing through in a heavy gust, his hands roving for a small crevice to hook his fingers inside and catch onto. He's there no doubt, flapping but anchored, one lone flag in the harshest planet's atmosphere. At night in the dark, I play a game where I pull the tips of my fingers across my stomach like a tuning fork to see if I

can sense the exact spot where centimeters of flesh separate us.

Weekly, I allow myself one day of optimism where I go to the store and buy another test. Today is week four. If it says I'm still pregnant I have eight more weeks left in the first trimester—which some textbooks even call the “trimester of volatility”—before I have to yield a substantial amount of hope.

Today is optimism day. I grab a cart although the only thing I need is a small box lighter than most packages of gum.

The makeup aisle gives me pause—the lipstick in particular. It reminds me of my mother's mouth, which was always covered in a clownish epilepsy scribble of red, half-streaked across her teeth because she hadn't realized her mouth was open when she applied it. This lipstick liked to mix with her saliva, causing her to look like she'd just consumed blood.

“Hey. Hi I mean. Wow, do you believe in fate or what? Or are you stalking me? Ha ha. I'm kidding. What brings you to the store? Besides me I mean. Ha ha. There I go again.”

I turn to see Huckle Breedwell holding a large plastic container of blue hair gel filled with suspended bubbles. It takes me a moment to realize that I have not returned his hello with an answer, or blinked. My brow is lifted five inches skyward.

“Huckle,” I finally manage.

“Bingo! Right on the money. Good memory you've got.”

Easy to remember you. You impregnated me to serve as a fleshhost for my homicidal dead father.

“I wasn't sure how to address you,” I say. “I didn't want to cause a breach of medical

confidence.”

“Oh.” He blushes a little, like he only just remembered the reason behind our connection. “Yeah well, gotta look out for #1, right? The whole man zone I mean. Down there. Has anyone ever told you that you talk like a book or a pamphlet or something? I like that. Says something nice about you. You aren’t dredging around in alleyways after dark looking for mischief, am I right? Not with that proper speech.”

“Reading is my only hobby,” I say. I do not add that I taught myself via the newspaper and coupon ads my parents put down inside the dog kennel to catch my droppings when they’d skip town for days at a time.

He holds the jar of hair gel beneath his arm, drumming on its lid. His lips extend forward in pensive shifts that suggest cogitation.

“So let’s do something this weekend, huh? How about it? Saturday we’ll say. I’ll pick you up at seven. Just give me your address. A fine time will be had by all. Glad it worked out and we can do this.”

I accidentally emit a shrill shrieking noise, the kind bats use for echolocation. His pupils widen in alarm.

“I’m sorry,” I cough. “Something in my throat.”

“You okay? Need some water?” His large hand thumps across my back with pats of concern. Can he feel the scars on my back through my shirt?

“I’m fine.”

He feigns a hyperbolized expression of relief, putting his fist to his chest and exhaling, then winks at me. “You had me scared for a minute there. Thought we were going to have to have our first date in the emergency room. Ha! Get it?” Everything is

quiet, then a woman having her blood pressure taken by an automated machine begins screaming that the machine is pinching her, and another woman comes out from behind the pharmacy counter and presses an emergency release button.

“Here,” he says. “Go ahead and write your address on this dollar bill. We’re going to take it out of circulation. A forever-keepsake type of thing.”

Although I have the ejaculate increase advertisement notepad in my purse and could write my address on that instead, I do not bring this up. I begin to do the right thing, to tell him I can’t go on a date without insinuating that it has anything to do with having become pregnant due to his sperm. I know that I should avoid all additional sources of trauma and variables since I’m already tied up in a reincarnation project and cannot take on additional hobbies. Then I remember Dennis’ obstetrics books: *stress can adversely influence the pregnancy and is sometimes thought to be a contributing factor in a miscarriage*. Suddenly I’m nodding my head. Yes, yes, anything to harm the fetus. He gives a pleased nod back. After we rip the dollar bill in half and exchange contact information I quickly veer down the Cough & Cold aisle to get out of his sight; the array of colors is dizzying, the shiny bottled reds and greens and oranges; it feels like the shopping cart is fighting me. I’m having to push very hard and there’s a cold sweat breaking out across my chest and hands and they’re sliding across the cart’s push bar. I almost crash into an elder citizen whose eyeballs are magnified to a vulgar width behind her glasses. The trouble with the cart becomes clear; there is a large clump of hair caught in one of its wheels; I’m not sure if it’s real or if it’s fake. Suddenly I’m sitting down on the lowest shelf of the section exclusively devoted to mucal expectorants; I can feel the bottles crashing back against my back as I lean in further and further, I want to hide but I

know I cannot, the elder is bending down to inspect me and when I smell her expired talc sent I throw up all over, “Oh dear,” she says again and again, “will you look at that,” she is trying to enlist the attentions of passers-by and when a droning monotone voice comes over the loudspeaker and asks for a cleanup in aisle 8, I am hoping Huckle has left the building and does not wonder if I am perhaps in any way the root cause for this interruption to the shoppers.

CHAPTER 5

FIRST DATE

When I inform Beverly about my date she does the thing people do on television if they win millions of dollars. Leading me by the wrist, she takes me to the walk-in closet where she keeps all her old pageant livery, and I am soon wrangled inside a dress that looks like a vat of cotton candy with a zipper on the back.

“You’re lacking in the bosom,” she says, “but we can stuff that out.” Each shoulder is piled high with pink taffeta. Due to my petite stature, it gives me a stiff, militaristic look that suggests an orthotic backbrace beneath the mounds of tulle.

“I was considering a more subtle look.”

“Tsk,” Beverly says, beginning to sculpt a firm mammary shelf inside the dress using wads of tissue. Next come the heels. She has frequently made me practice walking in the confines of our home, but tonight is to be my public debut. I have a hard time balancing and not limping due to vertigo issues thought to derive from repeated childhood head trauma. “You’ll get it,” she says. “Every little bird falls a few times before it flies.”

I sprain my left ankle en route to Beverly’s “parlor,” her personal island of beautification within their bathroom that consists of stagelamp-grade light bulbs and mirrors that swivel and magnify. “I am so glad you are finally becoming a woman!” she shouts. A frightening device that curls and dries hair at the same time begins eating up my hair with hungry revolving fingers. Beverly maces my skull several times with aerosol hairspray and constructs a vertical superstructure of ringlets that leans slightly to the left in order to cover my burnt bald spot where hair doesn’t grow. I usually just comb my hair over it, but Beverly insists this will provide a greater level of theatrical

distraction. “Beauty is just special effects,” she says. “Make ‘em look where you want the eyes to go.”

I allow the blue shadow, rugburn blush, and glued eyelashes, but when she reaches for the lipstick I stop her. “I can’t wear that,” I say. “It’s too much like my old mother’s.” We’ve had this conversation before; she has predicted my resistance and is ready to bargain.

“A little Vaseline then? To make them shine?”

I consent. Huckle should arrive any moment. When I start to stand up she pushes my rock-hard tissue bosom back down. It is impressive how tightly she packed it. It seems like something that was done by a machine. “We wait right here until the young man arrives,” Beverly explains. “Then Dennis will call for us, and you can descend the staircase. Presentation is everything.”

My ankle has started to swell. By the time Huckle rings the doorbell, its flesh is mildly discolored. Beverly remedies this with pantyhose that are eighteen shades darker than my skin tone.

I avoid making eye contact with Huckle as I hobble town the stairs, using the banister as my primary weight-bearing device. Dennis begins with the flash photography. I’m forced to tightly squint both eyes until I’m deprived of sight as well as mobility. I look up to see Huckle’s slightly agape mouth. His expression is concomitant with shock and wonder. He looks as if he’s stumbled upon members of two very different zoological classes mating.

“Earleen?” he asks, trying to confirm my identity.

From the left, Grans whizzes in at top velocity. The SpeedThrone’s sharp turns cause

her flaccid body to wildly bounce against the chair's seatbelt. She is on a direct collision course with Huckle. "Watch out!" I call to him, my vision spotty from the flash, then amidst the black dots I see her remove her twisted fist from the acceleration stick at the last minute. Her chair skids several additional inches forward; its wheels lightly touch the tips of his shoes.

"Hi Mom," says Dennis. "We didn't know you were awake." He snaps a quick photo of Huckle and the back of Grans' chair. "This is Huckle, Earleen's date."

"Good evening, ma'am," Huckle says. His voice has the libretto of fear.

Although I cannot confirm, I am sure that Grans planted herself before Huckle to use whatever muscle control she still has on an odiferous bowel movement in her diaper. He is pinned between the front door and her chair.

"Let's give our guest of honor some space, Ma," Beverly says, dexterously wheeling her out of the way. She puts the breaks on Grans' chair, disabling the autodrive. Although futile, Grans repeatedly continues to push at the joystick. Each nudge is met with an impotent "click" noise.

Suddenly all eyes are on me. I let go of the banister and stagger across the room like a baby taking its first steps. My arms outstretch to Huckle as I feel my newly top-heavy frame begin a downward trajectory.

He steps forward and catches me in his arms. My lips find his ear in time for me to whisper, *We must leave immediately! Retreat! Retreat!*

Using him as a human crutch, I stand upright. "We won't be out too late," I say.

"Nonsense!" Beverly cries. "The night is young and so are you. Huckle, do you know how hard I've been trying to get this wallflower to go have some fun for the past few

years?”

“Well I am glad to be of service there, ma’am. Earleen is about to have a whole heap of fun whether she likes it or not.”

Dennis comes over and begins shooting us from every angle. He is hunched down, moving the camera like he’s a photographer in the Sahara taking pictures of a running gazelle herd. Beverly runs up to get in the picture with us. “Earleen,” she whispers loudly, a mock-secret, “he is one handsome little booger. You better sink your claws into him tight or I just might try to scoop him up!”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Dennis says, his voice filled with cartoon outrage. He shakes a finger at Beverly and they cackle. I give Huckle a modest pinch in the hopes it will goad him to employ an exit strategy.

“Well it sure was a pleasure to meet you both,” Huckle says.

“Don’t you want to sit and have some pâté?” Beatrice asks. I make a cumbersome swivel and transfer my weight to her in a makeshift hug, although the bosom-shelf prevents me from getting close enough to actually wrap my arms around her body.

“Thanks for everything, Mom,” I say. “I think we’re going to go eat dinner.”

Beverly smiles and nods as her eyes well up with tears. “I just wish all the society ladies who called you an ugly duckling could see you now. My how you’ve transformed. Dennis, would you take a good look at our swan.”

Dr. Dennis joins her, wrapping a sturdy hair-coated arm against her waist. They wave goodbye in perfect tandem like two mechanical units sharing a gear.

Huckle opens the door of his truck and helps foist me onto the passenger seat. My heavy faux breasts immediately cause me to topple forward, presenting him with multiple

pink layers of the dress's ass-ruffles. I have all lost sensation in my sprained ankle and accidentally shut the door on it a few times, confused as to why the door won't latch, before realizing its enjambment to be the culprit.

Closed, the truck's interior is a hermetic space where I'm finally able to speak freely. "I apologize. I would have warned you but I didn't know Beverly's makeover of me would be so profound." He nods, driving, but still seems afraid to look over at me. "They never were able to conceive children. Beverly wanted a daughter especially. They adopted me four years ago."

"Hey, I think the makeup is great, I really do. I like what you've done with the eyes, and it seems like you've gotten more sun than we last spoke. Did you know that's an indicator of health? The hair's a little tall but you know, *c'est la vie*. What's going on in the front of your dress? Is that new? It's a look I haven't seen before. Styles are always changing though. Fashion is a world in flux."

"I am not this endowed. I have moist towelettes to remove the makeup and a change of clothes and in my purse, and if we can go to an exterior gas station bathroom where no one has to see me I will happily change and give you a more realistic sense of my bodily shape. I do not have a contingency plan for the hair." I pull down the visor mirror for a look, but it's not very large and I can only see the hairstyle's most basic low-elevation areas.

"Hey, do you like chicken?" he asks. "I thought we could just go to Chicken Church and take a bucket out into the field. You know, get to know one another and everything." Huckle plays a bit with one of the curls. It's hard for me to be touched by others. I understand that Beverly and Dennis must embrace and kiss me from time to time, and

Candi is very expressive this way as well. But I only manage to get through these affectionate displays by breathing while counting to ten very slowly, the way a therapist taught me to do. I also try to initiate if I smell that a hug is on the horizon. It's better if I'm the one who moves forward towards the motion. Otherwise the arms can quickly turn into Pops' sinewy claws in my mind, to a time in my life when they would hover open around me for minutes on end and then suddenly, painfully snap together and clench my body while he screamed *BEARTRAP!*

"You know, I think the hair is cute," he says. "In a tall way." He knocks a fist on my chest shelf, which returns the sound of a wooden knocking echo. "What are those made of?"

"Toilet paper."

He nods appreciatively. "That's a pro job."

I feel the shoe pop off my right foot, which is expanding to look like a bowling ball bag. "I don't believe I can walk this evening." I have to use my hands to lift the foot into the air to show him.

"Christ almighty!"

"At least it's not broken."

"You sure about that?"

I am. I can tell immediately when a bone breaks. I've had more practice in this than in any other physical aspect of being alive. Some traumas—hunger, cold, the curious below-flesh search of a knife blade—I once learned to stop feeling with practice. But never the snap of a bone.

"I'm sure."

When we pull up at Chicken Church, I feel a warm relief flood through my stomach. Restaurants are very safe in terms of Pops' ghost: he's never visited me at one. Food is like his magnet's polar opposite; like a machine, he has to run on combustion. Organic matter doesn't allow him to go the speed he wants to go.

Chicken Church is a fast food chain that plays upon the intersection between Greek myth and Christianity. Each building has two sides and two cashiers, one being "Canaan Country" which has muraled walls of angels and light and items like mashed potatoes with Gabriel gravy and Seraphim sauce. The opposing side is the "Diablo Den." All Diablo combos cost \$6.66. The murals painted on the wall of this side of the building are of nude persons being burned and tortured alive. All of them are being tormented in ways that censor their reproductive areas. The painter was skilled in some areas; although the limbs are often disproportionate to the bodies, the faces of anguish have been depicted in amazing detail.

Some people take the dualism of Chicken Church very seriously and will glare over at the Diablo Den side of the dining room and remark that Satan is nothing to fool around with. Once when Dr. Dennis and I were eating there, a woman entered wearing what seemed to be her pajamas and walked straight up to a man eating a Spicy Stheno wing and spat on it, then said "May it turn to the corpse meat of human sinners in your mouth!" She had on steel toe boots and a hairnet. The manager grabbed a squirt bottle of cleaning fluid and heedfully advanced towards the woman.

"I was killing chickens when you were in diapers," the woman said. "You lily sprout, could you even slaughter the pagan beasts your wallet worships? Have you ever taken a hatchet to something's neck?"

When the police arrived, they received buckets of chicken for free. There's a big sign on the wall about how "Badges" never pay at Chicken Church and an essay by the CC founder which compares the economy to blood banks and chicken to O+. "Chicken is the universal donor," the essay concludes.

"Let's just drive-thru," I suggest.

Huckle makes a B-line to the Diablo window. Our order taker's hair is thinning in the front but its back is a curly nest of size. Diablo-side workers wear headbands with horns and clip-on gold septum nose rings. Huckle reaches into his pant pocket for his wallet, making a large show of moving aside the cellular phone strapped to his belt.

"First off, I am going to need a bucket of ice because we have a situation with a sprained foot that seriously looks like it needs to be amputated."

"We're not allowed to dispense ice on the Diablo side, sir. The fires of hell would melt it."

Huckle gives the worker a long look then drives forward and parks in front of the restaurant. "I'm just going to run in. Lock the doors because there are all sorts of jokers around here. I'd worry about you stealing my truck but that foot wouldn't work on a gas pedal. Ha. If you want to change in the truck the windows are tinted. Or are they. Just kidding. They are. Or are they."

Taking off the dress is like slipping out of a mold. I lay it perfectly flat on the ground of the truck, the sculpted bosom still firmly in place. Its tissue wall holds the slight indentation of my body.

When I unlock the door, Huckle has a large bucket of Beelzebub tenders with cloven-foot slaw, and a separate ice-filled bucket.

“Here, let me slide this on your foot like it’s a shoe. The whole Prince Charming glass slipper sort of thing. But with a chicken bucket. Are you sure the skin on that foot is still alive because it sure could fool me?”

We drive out towards the power plant where Huckle works, away from the lights of the city. “It’s real nice out here,” he says. “Miles and miles of sky. Some people call it ‘Makeout Point’ but I think that demeans its natural beauty.” Turning, we veer off the main road onto the makeshift path of a field. My heartbeat starts to get louder.

Not long before he died, Pops drafted me to go with him on a hunt. All his hunts were spontaneous trips whose preparations began and ended with grabbing a gun.

We’re sniffing out some rabbits today, Earleen. With the help of Big Red. He slapped his truck on the side, which was my command to enter. Perhaps it had once been as red as Mother’s lipstick, but by the time it fell under Pops’ ownership it was the sandblasted pink of a flesh wound. There were patches where its floor had rotted out; Pops had fixed these by taking a staple gun to cardboard beer boxes. I had to be careful not to put any weight on them or my foot would fall through.

His first words to me once we got in the truck were *Hunters don’t use seat belts*. I looked up and saw he’d cut them away with a knife since the last time I’d been in the vehicle.

We cut over the dirt road onto a green field and he pushed down the gas, driving into the woods until the trees got so thick that Big Red couldn’t fit between them, then he shut off the truck and got out. Pops grabbed the gun from the floor and told me not to move.

Say it back to me, Earleen.

“I won’t move.”

He jumped up onto the truck’s hood, then climbed the windshield onto the roof. His boots sounded like hooves. Then he shot his rifle off into the roof of the truck, straight down into the driver’s seat.

Smoke filled the cabin; my ears rang. When it cleared he closed one eye and peeked down at me through the hole.

I made the mistake of starting to cry.

Open your legs as wide as they go.

I did.

Can’t they go wider?

I tried.

Okay. Now say it back to me, Earleen.

I said it but was crying too hard.

Earleen! This is important! Say it back.

“I won’t move.”

His eye left the hole, and I heard his feet on the roof. The hole over the driver’s seat where he’d looked at me soon covered up with his boot.

The bullet grazed only the slightest skin of my thigh.

Then he jumped off the roof onto the ground and started running into the woods. I stayed in the truck and fell asleep counting the deep lines a knife had made in the dashboard. When I woke up it was dark. I tried to force myself back to sleep but I couldn’t; I could only keep my eyes closed.

Occasionally a bug would fly against the window. Each time this happened a part of

my brain thought I was about to die.

Pops returned in the morning with three rabbits, all shot beyond recognition. His hands and face were covered in blood and his right ear was bleeding. “Here,” he said, placing the rabbits into my lap.

Their lukewarm blood soaked through my pants right away.

A few days later after Pops came down a little, he apologized in his own way. It was nighttime; I was sitting in the dark on the floor in front of the couch. He set something down by my feet. I recognized what I thought was hair, and I immediately had to see it to make sure it wasn’t some part of Mother. I knew it was part of something.

I held it up to the window. He’d brought me the pelvis of a deer, still covered with meat and fur. Still warm with the strange heat of life.

Suddenly the truck jerks to a stop. We’ve parked in the field; stars are all around us. “And here we are. Lots of stars up there to wish for a second date with me on. You just roll down your window and look out and take your pick of one. Oops, forgot I have the child lock on. I have to open it for you. There you go. Man, a nice breeze and some chicken, am I right? Grab onto my back like a koala or something. Like *you’re* a koala. I would be a more masculine animal.”

He planted me on the hood of his truck then climbed up himself and we ate the chicken there. In the distance, blue exposed flames from the power plant shoot up into the sky. These attract me more than the stars. “Those fires are pretty,” I mention, and then, without thinking, “my real parents burned to death.”

“Man,” he says. Then, “If you don’t mind me asking, how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“I see. You look young but you don’t seem young. The way you talk and everything. I figured since you work at the clinic you were at least old enough that I wouldn’t seem like a pedophile asking you out. Are you in school?”

“I finished. I tried to go for awhile, but it didn’t work out so Dennis and Beverly just got me a tutor.” Back then the physical signs of my abuse and neglect were more prevalent. The kids called me “Holly” because they said I looked like a Holocaust victim. I started to hide in the library and read all day. They didn’t know exactly how to place me because I was advanced in some subjects, but others like math I’d never been introduced to at all. *School is a pain in the ass*, my mother once told me. She had several grievances regarding her own education. *Teachers don’t tell you what you really need to know. What would you do, Earleen, if for example someone put a gun to your head and told you to get in the back of his car?* This was how she met my father.

The older senior student whom Beverly paid to let me ride with her to school did not bend over backwards to roll out the welcome wagon. “I like to hear my songs,” she told me the first time I got into her car, “and I like to hear them loud, and if you do not appreciate Rock ‘n’ Roll, you are not even fit to live. In my book.” Then she started the engine and revved it. I would have been okay with the volume had it not been for my persisting ear infection. Beverly assured me school would get better if I stuck with it, but I’d come across the texts of *Lord of the Flies* and *Carrie* at the library and was not optimistic.

“Now I’m working at the clinic trying to get some social experience.”

“I’m twenty-three.”

“I know.”

“Oh, forgot. You read my chart. I bet you have all sorts of data memorized about me. You probably even know my social security number. That’s enough right there for you to commit identity fraud with. Ha. No, it doesn’t bother me that you have access to my information. I am more or less an open book. No secrets here. I get that from you too, got it the moment I saw you. You’re a straight shooter and I like that.”

That reminds me. “Refrain from telling Dennis you’re a patient. He’ll take a personal interest and insist upon retesting your sperm every three months for the next year, as a precautionary measure, to make sure everything is working properly. He’ll likely approach you for the samples at our home. He’s very comfortable with sperm. He’ll bring you a container from the kitchen. The additional tests are redundant but he’ll do it to show you he cares.” I turn my ankle over in the bucket of ice. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with your sperm.” I cough. “I know because saw the lab work, I mean.”

Looking up at every star, I wish to not be pregnant with Pops. I never thought that I’d wish for him to appear if weeks passed and he didn’t drop by. But now I just want any sign of what it all means. The disappearance of his ghost could have equal cause in success or failure of the procedure. If it went as planned and he’s in my body, perhaps that’s where he has to stay—as a nascent resident of earth, he’s no longer permitted to float through space and make appearances at will. But if it didn’t work? What did that mean, and where was he now? Had it almost, but not quite, killed him? I hope not. I shudder to imagine him out there somewhere, a bubbling mess that was percolating back to life meaner than ever. What a horrible reduction that would be, to have Pops burned down to his bare elements. Only the most cruelly poisonous parts.

“You have an unusual life,” Huckle says.

Like an answer, one of the blue flames in the distance hisses up larger than the rest.

Huckle begins talking about himself and continues to do so for a couple of hours.

When he decides we better head home, he jumps off the hood of the truck and says,

“Earleen, can I take you out again sometime?”

Before I can answer, I feel a pull in my stomach like the ends of a knot being snapped taut. I double over, and vomit. I expect to lift my head up to him staring at me, grossed out, but instead he’s talking.

“I just never really *got* the difference. Ape, monkey. Tomato, tomahto. Right? *Wrong*. Here, let me help you down. Watch your step, there’s a puddle of something right there. Apes don’t have *tails*. Suddenly everything’s clear, right?”

CHAPTER 6

MORNING SICKNESS

I was unprepared for the nausea. It's another physical reminder that makes this whole thing with Pops very real. I wonder, sometimes, whether the vomiting is actually hormones. It could just be me remembering that my father is growing inside my abdomen like a parasite.

Now that the pregnancy has happened, it's the birth I'm starting to fear. For the longest time I couldn't accept that he is *in there*—I still haven't, really, except to think of him as digesting food. I'm not showing much, so sometimes I pretend I've got it all wrong and nothing's the matter. But my stomach is firmer, hard and rubbery to the touch like a boiled egg. And there's the sickness.

Growing up I never got sick. I didn't have enough inside me to vomit. Sometimes Mother and Pops would smoke too much too fast and get the dry heaves, and watching this was an anticipatory kind of frightening—they'd start to shudder and undulate until it seemed like their jaws were going to unhinge and a giant snake would slither forth. But then when it actually happened it was nothing at all, just a thin string of something that caught the light and stayed hooked to their lip like a fishing wire. I had no idea that most people throw up a lot when they throw up, or that they do it in the bowl of a toilet.

At work it happens at inopportune times. Last week it came on just after a customer had requested sample assistance. I was halfway through helping him when I felt its arrival. I began to move my hand more intensely and furiously, trying to invoke his expulsion before my own.

“Where have you been all my life,” he bellowed. I could feel it rising up my throat

but had no idea what to do, so I clenched my lips down and held it in my mouth and gave him a final hearty tug. “I feel like I’m eighteen again,” the customer said. Then I ran to the trash can and fell to my knees to vomit, holding the sample cup safe high above my head all the while like it was a torch and I was the statue of liberty.

I stood and wiped my mouth with a Kleenex. The gentlemen zipped up his pants. “I never promised you a rose garden,” he said.

For the shared bathroom at work, I developed a system where I plant my feet around the toilet in a normal fashion, and bend down through my legs to retch. Nothing looks out of the ordinary to the outside observer. If someone happens to stroll in, I place both hands over my mouth the moment I hear the door and release them only when I’m once again alone. It is not pleasant, but it’s not one of the most uncomfortable things I’ve had to endure. Relatively speaking.

The worst part of it all for the time being has nothing to do with my physical body but everything to do with Pops—I can’t read anymore. I can look at the words, but the mind travel doesn’t happen. I don’t go anywhere. It’s like I’m a bug and I have a big long needle pinning me down to a board right through my stomach where Pops is growing. I’m just trapped: in reality and in my body.

My bedroom is not helpful in alleviating claustrophobia. My bed is Grans’ old bed, the one they bought for her back when Beverly was using her as a doll. The term “custom job,” does not accurately convey its unique nature. It’s massive in size, with curved-up edges designed to make it resemble a gigantic crib. There’s a large canopy overtop that drapes an overflow of jellyfish-tentacle mauve ribbons down from each side. When I lie down each night and look up at the canopy’s fabric, which is a ripe and fleshy pink, it

seems like I'm trapped inside a womb. Which is not that far off. I'm trapped by the womb inside me.

Ironically, this canopy was how Pops first appeared to me. I'd been at Dennis and Beverly's no more than a week. To my horror, they insisted upon placing a heart-shaped night light in my bedroom, which set the bottom walls ablaze like a low, heavy torch and reminded me of the house fire. I kept watching the glowing heart, sure that it was drawing in light and power in order to come alive thumping and lend a nightmarish beat to all my dreams.

But my fear was misdirected. It was the tall glass of water on the nightstand I should've been worried about. I'm not sure what made me look up at the canopy, or how long it had been there when I finally saw it: Right above my head, unmistakable, there was a face pushed taut against the canopy trying to break through. The fabric's tension pressed the nose and cheeks down flat to anonymity—it was the face of someone wearing a mask of pantyhose.

I screamed, but luckily I have a lot of scream training so my screams make no noise. Pops used to scare me all the time to make sure I could stay quiet if things ever got *critical* inside our house with the law or with his business associates. Pops said he had to be convinced I'd mastered the technique in order to let me stay, and when Pops says 'let you stay' he's talking about your life rather than your residence in his home. The skill involved in noiseless screaming is hard to explain, but is essentially a combination of letting your insides feel like they're liquefying while sucking inward on the roof of your mouth. Pops' pedagogical approach was a hands-on one: he hid behind doors with knives and sprang forward when I walked through; once he cut his forehead so blood would be

streaming down his face and it would take me longer to recognize him. But I eventually passed the test, learning to scream on the inside like a silent whistle, and he said this was very promising because “I used to think if lawmen or aggressive customers came to axe me, my first order of business would be coming at you with the chloroform. There is nothing like a screaming child to let the enemy know of your position. But now I could simply concentrate on disemboweling the trespassers. Maybe one day you’ll be able to help with that as well. Lesson #2, Earleen. To be continued.”

Inside the cradle bed each night, watching the heart glow on the wall, my dreams always began to swirl in and tell me that light was coming from the pupil of Mother’s one lye-scared eye that had been made powerful from dying and was glowing like a star to lead the way to the future.

The pressed-in face went away and was replaced by a faint rustle on the canopy’s canvas, like a raccoon was trying to get inside of it. I’m a light sleeper, and the giant rats of my previous home had put me on special alert for the sounds of tiny claws at an age that predated language. When I heard this noise, I was half afraid the pressed face would return and half afraid that it was indeed somehow giant rats that had followed me to Dennis and Beverly’s. This nightmare was longstanding: when I was young Pops would catch them and throw their squealing bodies into a burning steel barrel in the backyard. I often imagined a horde of them coming back half-charred, wheezing and hungry, needing my blood to refurbish their health.

Which was pretty close to being the case with Pops.

I sat up when the first drop hit my nose. Another fell, then another until a quick and isolated rain began to pour across my face and neck. It had a rancid, acrid smell that I’d

know anywhere—what’s funny is that my mind didn’t ask where the water was coming from. All it wanted to know was why it was smelling Pops’ smell. My eyes quickly clenched shut to keep the liquid out; it felt like it was burning them.

Then there was a quick splash. Water poured down onto my face like someone had poured a bucket over the canopy’s top. I was screaming again and again now, silently trilling, feeling the wet fabric of the sheets and my nightgown begin to move slowly across my skin in a terrifying independent way. I spat out the water that had gotten in my mouth; its overwhelming smell and triggered the memory of the night he brought a man’s corpse into the house slung over his shoulder while he whistled, the same way I’d seen Dennis do with his dry cleaning. The body’s eyes were missing. When Pops walked in with it, Mother put the gasoline rag over her face like a veil and checked out. I both knew what the body was and didn’t know; I wasn’t certain. Pops dropped it onto the floor and its mouth dropped open and its fat purple tongue hung out and up to the side like it was getting ready to lick its lips and eat a soul.

He needs some eyes, Earleen. Be a sport and give him yours. The next moment I was suspended overtop the dead body by my feet, Pops cackling and shaking me harder and harder. *Are they coming loose?* The harder he shook, the more my body swung up and down, my face at times slapping into the dead man’s. I tried to escape by closing my eyes, but when I shut them the body was still the only thing I saw. *At least give him one, Earleen! Be your mother’s daughter now. One good eye is all you need. Don’t make me lecture on the depravity of greed and selfishness.* When Pops dropped me I landed a little on the body. *You see? He doesn’t bite. Make nice now. He won’t be with us much longer.* Pops made me watch as he sat and lit a box of matches one by one, dropping each match

into one of the man's eye cavities, *Eenie, meenie, miney, moe*. They all one extinguished with a quiet sizzle and their smoke hung low and close to the corpse's face like a fog of soul leaving the body.

So in bed that night at Dennis and Beverly's, now fully drenched and stinking, I coughed out the drops at the back of my throat that clung to my tonsils knowing fully well that they smelled like burning corpse but also like Pops. At that point I was still more confused than anything—the water, Pops' odor, an insistent reek of burning flesh—these three things weren't related to me yet. I put my head down on the wet pillow and told myself that I was dreaming. Then the water particalized and rose.

Each bit was so small that it lifted from the sheets and my face and hair in a trail of illuminated light. Together the mist swirled up around the top of the canopy then made calculated movements into formation like members of a marching band. I didn't recognize him until all the motion stopped and he seemed to harden—shadows began to drop here and there; the light reflected by some of the particles grew brighter while the gleam of others dimmed. I felt the hot pour of urine warming between my legs, then this puddle also lifted up from the sheets, creating his neck and the pointing shapes of a sallow collar bone. "Pops," I whispered. It was the worst thing I'd ever seen, yet I had the urge to touch his face—he'd disappear then, I figured. I'd realize him as a figment.

Instead he exhaled, and his eyes seemed to peel back a layer like a crocodile's. I looked at him and felt the primal terror of discovery—like a photo of a deep sea creature or the belly of an ancient cave, it was clear that looking Pops was to glance at something always meant to stay hidden. His eyes looked boiled and glassed over; they were milky and rolling and filled with a curling steam. His lips formed a drooping barrier around his

teeth that rippled and contracted to change shape. Each tooth looked especially wet; Pops' thin bluelit tongue searched around, seemingly to stroke his teeth, but it could not find them. The image depicted his skin burned away to the bone in places. On his left cheek, it looked like the bone had been rubbed up to the surface and polished. Fire-eaten patches settled across his skin in a camouflage pattern and had a clotty, sopped look about them. His hair was gone except the few strands delineating the sharp widow's peak at the top of his forehead.

The revolutions of his marble-steam eyes slowed to a stop, the smoke inside them curling to form pupils and a rough iris. He looked around the room a bit, as if lost, and then finally focused on me. "Well there she is," he rumbled. His voice was throaty and frogged. The strain in his voice reminded me of the choked sound Grans' SpeedThrone motor makes when pushed to its maximum velocity.

"Are you alive?" I whispered. When he didn't answer, I decided he wasn't real and I reached my hand forward. It was able to pass through the neck of his image, but inside it was very hot, almost searing.

"Might burn yourself there," he smiled. "I haven't quite cooled down yet." He exhaled and smoke poured uniformly from his two nostrils in a thick and steady stream that broke into two separate columns when it reached the glittering pink of the bedspread.

When I tasted the smoke, I felt my stomach turn. It was him alright. The smell he'd always had but even worse, half-rotting and half-alive.

"Where's Mother?" I looked up at the canopy hesitantly, expecting a gasoline-scented rain.

"Long gone, beauty. Spirit in the sky. That fire hit the house like a tornado. After the

blow the whole world turned vacuum on me. All I could think about was that saying, ‘I fought the law and the law won.’ Not on my watch, I thought. I could feel myself getting sucked up but I fought back. You know I can fight. Eventually it stopped pulling and let me fall down right where we were. Which is closer to the world than where your mother went. Turns out, I’m so close that from time to time, I can even manage to stop by.”

The burnt patches of his skin kept shifting. Occasionally they would eclipse a large part of his face so that his words seemed to come from nowhere, his eyes floating and buoyant and without lids to blink.

“It gets harder each time though, they say. From what I’m hearing. My intel, you know. You ask me they’re a bunch of pussies. It wasn’t too bad of a trail to crawl through. Bit of a bumpy ride, takes a few minutes to catch your breath afterwards, but I’ve never been one to need pampering. I think I’ll be making this trip pretty often.”

His figure began to move down from the ceiling of the canopy, sinking, almost imperceptibly, towards my face—I knew this first from the feel of it; his great heat began to get hotter and hotter, uncomfortably so until I had to put my hands up on my cheeks.

“You know they warn that a soul’s liable to get trapped where I’m staying. Happened to most all the old timers there. Visiting in on Earth just got more and more difficult till they couldn’t leave at all. Imagine that—me, stuck somewhere. Inside the little holding-pen in outer space where I’m cooped up now. They’re an interesting bunch of folk, don’t get me wrong. But there’s not much opportunity in that place for a maverick like myself. For someone who wants a bigger piece of the pie.” The water of his lower jaw and lips grew heavy and began to sag, fully exposing his teeth and their corrupted roots and gums. All his teeth were shifting slightly when he talked, like grains of rice settling in a bag.

He had now moved in so close that his warm heat forced me to lie flat; my hair whipped up into its hot wind. It seemed like he was moving in to hurt me, to stick out his tongue and lick a long burn across my face. “You know what they tell me up there Earleen? If I want to get back for good in any real sense of the word, I need the help of someone on the other side. That would be you, see.”

His feet began to curl first, as if he were a genie returning to his lamp. “Guess visiting hours are over,” he said. The lower part of his body tightened and shrank, twisting down into a thin worm. “I’ll have to learn how to make these chats last longer. You and I have strategizing to talk about.” His torso elongated next. I could tell he was straining against it; suddenly his shoulders whipped around and made his head spin a few revolutions. He gave a short laugh and nodded down at his body as if acknowledging a formidable opponent. “I woulda given anything to be able to do this when I was kicking and breathing.” The tail end of his worm started slipping out through a liminal opening in the middle of the room, but his head remained the same size; when his shoulders finally compacted, he looked mythic—the face of a man on the body of a snake. “Soon,” he said, “I’ll be back in the flesh and we can curl up together in this big pretty bed of yours.”

One side of his face drooped and sucked backwards. The corners of his mouth widened into a long and spreading grin, obscene and then disfiguring, each corner finally lifting off the side of his cheek and back behind his head, which began to spin. His face grew longer with each rotation and the skin beneath his eyes pulled down until the slimy pits under each of them sagged down longer than the length of his eyes themselves. “Don’t get too comfortable.” His long mouth flopped and muttered over his words, but I understood him. “Don’t forget who your real family is.”

When the last particle of him moved out and away, a thin circle of light continued spinning in the air like a whirlpool, smaller than smaller until it finally cannibalized itself. In the end it was just a spark of light that streaked downwards, like a photograph of a moving headlight smearing into thin air.

If I were able to read, it would be easier for me to ignore the pregnancy. But all I can do is look over the words—I keep getting that feeling, like I’m going to start moving any second, but the images never come. It’s like sitting in a car with my seat buckled but never moving. Lately if I’m not at work I’m either looking at a book or just lying in bed analyzing every feeling my body makes. It’s a mouth for Pops’ language now. If he wants to, he can speak to me through a twitch or a cramp and there’s nothing I can do about it.

Other times I’m looking in the mirror, trying to figure out if my stomach is growing. It seems to be fossilizing instead of getting bigger. I can push on it with my finger and the skin doesn’t sink in at all.

After I puked the second time on our first date, I thought it was over for sure. The first one he didn’t notice, but the second was into an empty chicken bucket in his truck on the way home and though he didn’t stop talking, he did digress from the conversation to say, “Barbeque glaze not your thing? You should’ve said so. Hey, why don’t you turn your head and throw up on that dress you wore too so you’ll remember not to wear it again. Ha.” When we got back to Dennis and Beverly’s, he helped me limp back up to the door and then he took my hand and kissed it. “This night has truly been unforgettable,” he said. “Wait, what did we do? Ha.”

But then the next day he called and talked for quite a bit, and we went out several more times. The nice thing about talking to Huckle on the phone, or in person, is not having to listen. There is never any test such as, “But what do you think?”

Occasionally on our dates I’ll look at him and feel the urge to admit I let his seed be corrupted and used as a vehicle for necromancy. I say it sometimes when we’re in his truck and the music is very loud and the windows are all down, in a very quiet whisper: “I’m pregnant and it would be yours if it wasn’t his.”

Making out is also complicated. I’ve never had sex, but I especially can’t imagine it while Pops is inside. The other evening Huckle’s fingers began to graze the inside of my thigh, and I had to put my hand on top of his to keep them from going any further. I can only imagine him sliding a furtive finger below my skirt only to suddenly pull back and see half his digit missing.

This is the birth fear as well. I still have the hope that I will die in labor, or before it. That would be the best-case scenario that I could give to Dennis and Beverly as a thankful return for the home they’ve given me. It’s not something I think I could bear—feeling him slide forward inside of me then out, forever a part of me and not at all of me at the same time. If I have to remember that feeling, his movement against the vulnerable interior of my flesh, I’ll be driven crazy in a matter of weeks. I’ll have to kill myself in some manner that involves being bisected at the waist in the hopes that only the top half of me, the part whose caves do not have Pops’ drawings on their walls, can greet the afterlife. The rest I want to escape from.

Tonight, Huckle greets me with a kiss. Part of me wonders if he can somehow sense the cells inside me that are his own, and that he’s drawn towards me in an act of self-

attraction. Perhaps there's a part of him that smells and understands I'm carrying his seed in a way that he's powerless over.

“If you're going to make a habit of these, you'll have to carry toothpaste and mouthwash on every date because I do not like kissing girls who taste like ashtrays. I get the whole sexy mystique thing, but if you're going for that, you really shouldn't. It's just not your appeal. I mean think of you dressed up in red and black lingerie for example. It would be *laughable*, am I right? You're a cotton panty girl. Don't think cigarettes for sexy, think little gingham dresses. Like that girl who was in charge of all those sheep in that story? I'm blanking on her name.”

Tonight we're at the park. My cravings for cigarettes have become untenable; I had to have Huckle buy me a carton since I'm underage. Smoking them doesn't feel like enough; I have the urge to open the package and empty them into my mouth, chew rabidly and proceed to another.

“It will be temporary. It's somewhat of an experiment.”

I smoke one after the other down to the filter. I know this is exactly what Pops wants and I'm strengthening him, but the craving was so bad that I had to give in. I tried going to a small bar restaurant near work where men bet on horses and they serve fried game meat. Candi often goes there and I've heard her complain that it makes her hair smell like smoke. No matter how much of the air I sucked in though, it wasn't the same. I had to get some of my own.

Then it happens: when I exhale, I blow a perfect ring. Then another. Then another. This is Pops too. I've never smoked in my life.

Huckle's face lights up. “You are a bag of mysteries. Look at that. I had you all

wrong. So how experienced are you? In other aspects of life I mean? Should you have some blood work done before we take this to the next level?"

"It's my old Pops' trick. I only know it because of him."

"Now I *know* you're not talking about *Dennis*. Ha. So what was the old man like? Were you a Daddy's Girl? Before he blew up and everything I mean?"

I slide up the sleeve of my arm and look down at the scar that runs along it, the entire length, like an outline of the bone beneath.

Huckle jumps a little and leans in. "Now that is a *scar*! What happened? Did you have an accident somewhere remote where your father had to do primitive surgery?"

I have the urge to put the cigarette out right in the scar's middle. That's Pops too. When I swallow, the cigarettes hit my head for a moment. He's growing bigger and getting stronger. I have to figure out how to separate his wants and urges from my own, or else I'll end up hurting someone.

"Something like that."

"Boy oh boy. I did a lot of camping as a kid. 'Roughing it' as they say. Once we were out of toilet paper and I had to use a *pinecone*. Hey why is it the length of your whole arm? What's that carved into your wrist?"

I lift up the sleeve of my other arm just enough so he can see all the indentions made by the nails and tongs. There's a stillness and the discomfort that invariably comes when my body is the subject of conversation follows. I exhale and then look at the cigarette, the red destructive glow on the tip. I smoke cigarette after cigarette.

Finally he nods. The sun has gone down and we're the last two people in the park. He is shaking his head. "I get it. He's one of those abusers. Likely he raped you repeatedly

over the years as well and perhaps let his friends rape you or made you take suggestive photographs for him to sell or maybe he even sold you freely to strange men for their pleasure. Now I do not mean to scare you Earleen, but it is a good thing that guy's dead, let me tell you that. If he were not already six feet under, when I got through with him he'd kill *himself*. First off, I'd introduce him to my Louisville slugger. I know what you're thinking—baseball bat, child's play. Think again. More like one of the finest wooden weapons ever made. It's the official bat of Major League Baseball. Just like any other living organism, it has responded to its environment and evolved. Over a century of performance technology in every swing. Not all bats are created equal. Do you know what scandium is? When it comes to metallic transition metals..."

Huckle's speech is turning my uterus into maelstrom of cramps. I hunch over; my passenger is not one to take a verbal challenge lying down. *For Christ sakes Pops, I think, take a few months off to grow arms some arms before you get charged up to fight.* We stand up to leave and I look down at the picnic table, hoping Huckle's words made Pops rage himself into a miscarriage—rip the lining down, push his nascent fists into it the way he used to punch through dry wall. There's nothing though. I sigh audibly. "I was hoping there'd be a lot of blood," I whisper.

"Because hollow chamber and empty chamber are not the same thing. Having a helium or nitrogen-filled core dramatically enhances what is called the *trampoline effect*. You move into slow-pitch and a world of inner socket and disc options present themselves. In combination with the carbon sleeve..."

I keep retaking tests. In my dreams I use them as cigarettes, lighting the end that would be urinated on then tucking them between my lips to draw in slow sucks. At times

I swear I fail to feel him; I delude myself with the hope that he has reabsorbed.

He cannot be in there. Or let me rephrase: he can be in there, but he cannot come out. I can accustom myself well enough to the physical symptoms. I can carry him around like he's a surgical instrument that was accidentally left behind inside me during a procedure and has embedded and integrated itself within my soft tissue, he can stay inside me and even set off the metal detector at the airport, *No need to worry, boys—it's just my calcified father hitching a ride in my ladyparts. Good one, you're right, that clown needs to pay me some gas money already*, he can significantly expand outwards in any direction, I'll wear capes and sashes and sandwich boards or whatever is needed to cloak the eccentric physical shape of my body after his sprawl, he can make me engage him in lengthy confrontational dialogues in public places so it seems like I'm schizophrenic and fighting with myself, to such an extent that I am forcefully escorted off the premises of upscale grocery stores, nutritional smoothie establishments, all four local branches of the public library due to audible disturbance and public spectacle, all these punishments and more I would accept readily and instantly if it just meant that he didn't have to come out and be external proof that he was once actually inside.

CHAPTER 7

A NEW SURPRISE

Beverly's bathroom scale talks. HELLO, it says, when I place a toe onto its mat. The voice is that of a robotic female. Occasionally I will tap it with my toe repeatedly so that her words echo inside the bathroom like an android parrot.

"HELLO." *Hello, there is something wrong with you.* "Your weight is, one hundred eight pounds, two ounces. Your weight is, one hundred eight pounds, two—"

The problem is that I'm not gaining weight. I'm losing it.

I step off.

"GOODBYE," it says. "BE WELL."

Not likely.

I strip down and look into the mirror. Most of it is old news: sunken chest, protruding ribs, stove burner scar, socket wrench scar, penknife scar, cheese grater scar, bolt-cutter scar, scissor blade scar, blow torch scar, handsaw scar, innie scar, outie scar, abstract scars that (with imagination) can be interpreted to look like crosses or cat's heads or wilting flower buds, the gang's all here except the absence of my stomach is missing. It isn't protruding, but it also isn't *not there* the way it's been my whole life. It's like each area of my body is a low-balance bank account and I withdrew every branch's deposits and placed the total meager sum into my belly.

Just then the door flies open and Grans wheels in. My nudity and the unusual landscape of my flesh intensify her primitive rage against me. I see this happen in her eyes.

The chair spins in threatening circles; she's so angry she's lost control. She crashes

first into Beverly's vanity. Innumerable bottles of chemical potions hit the tile floor and roll chaotically in all directions, these are new obstacles on Grans' course for revenge, the tires hit and fight them and she plots on in jarring motions, erratic and monomaniacal, I am her white whale.

I must attempt to dress while running towards the door. I get one leg into a pant and sling my shirt across my chest when I see her approaching from five o'clock at full speed and I make a split-second decision without even realizing how dearly I might pay if my greatest hopes come true: I stop and turn towards her belly-first, closing my eyes for courage.

The SpeedThrone is an iron gladiator. It hits me and I'm propelled backwards onto the tile, my head and neck crashing through Beverly's faux-Italian statue of two nude cherubs kissing one another on the cheek. I can hear the echocardiogram beeps of Grans' chair reversing direction so she can come back for more.

From the ground angle, my stomach is directly aligned with her chair's left wheel, which inches forward slightly, stops, adjusts, and repeatedly grabs at the floor like a bull's hoof then begins to charge. It feels like I'm salivating between my legs, I'm so ready to feel the blood from Pops burst and explode out of me. For a moment I swear I can smell the rubber of the approaching tires, a sweet harbinger odor of Pops' fetal death.

"NNNNNN!"

I open an eye. Grans' head is engaged in violent and graceless motion. Frail drips of saliva burble from the corners of her mouth. "NNNNNN!" A prehistoric vocal noise leaves her lips. Her claw is wildly waving; it looks as though she's operating an invisible hand-held flag with vehement patriotism. The chair's left wheel is so close to my

stomach that it casts a drop-shadow overtop my ribs like a seatbelt. Then I lift up my head and see it: my belly, alive with chaotic movement. Pops is engaging in a performance of struggle beneath my skin. It looks like twelve starving mice were given hallucinogens and testosterone and placed together into a bag made of flesh.

Grans has now correctly deduced that I am hiding something in my stomach.

“NNNNNNNN!” She’s trying so hard to scream and report the danger to the rest of the household that she is indeed making an audible utterance. Her eyes keep rolling back into her head then down again like an animated clock that’s just struck midnight.

“NNNNAAAHH! NAAAAHH!”

I attempt to stand but my stomach’s movements are knocking me off-kilter. Crawling, I sling on my clothes and move towards the door. “Grans, there is no cause for alarm,” I say. “My biological father’s here for a brief visit and then he’s going to leave. He’s excitable you might say. A handful. Perhaps Dennis was similarly active as a youngster.”

The door bursts open and Beverly enters, panting. Her sunglasses are askew, her arms are filled with shopping bags, her forehead and cheeks are a grid of small red injection sites from the med-spa. My stomach immediately quiets.

Unfortunately Grans does not do the same. With the addition of an audience member Grans’ clenched-toothed cries take on a new immediacy.

My eyes widen to say *Please shut up immediately. He will sneak out of my stomach when I fall asleep, he will do so in a slithering, shape-shifted manner that ensures I will not even wake up to notice; he might creep out of me every night like a leech just to inch across my toothbrush in the bathroom, who knows, he would think that kind of thing is funny though not as funny as he’d find asphyxiating you with a pillow in your sleep. If*

you think a fetus the size of a grape or however big he is now can't lift a pillow and press it forcefully over your nose and mouth, well, you haven't met Pops. He is the poster child for overcoming adversity. For example he was blown up. He is not one to let instantaneous cremation cramp his style. If he thinks you might talk you are dead. Now is no time for logic or skepticism. Fear is the only thing that can be of use.

Beverly's bags hit the floor. Though her face is paralyzed from the botulism shots, the width of her open mouth is telling. "Mom!" she says, then she spots me on the ground. "Earleen!"

Now Grans is trying to speak but air is simply passing through her and being forcefully expelled. She's making the sound of a broken wind instrument. Beverly runs to some of the more valuable cosmetic fluid bottles strewn upon the tile floor and hurriedly begins picking them up at any cost, squatting down into positions well-associated with acts of vulnerable bodily humiliation. The greed in her eyes is that of a corpulent youngster spotting multiple chocolate filled eggs upon the grass at a low-difficulty Easter egg hunt.

"My beauty elixirs! Come here now. Come here." Some roll slightly away at the initial touch of her fingertips. "Look at that one hiding under the desk, Earleen." She calls to them like they're runaway kittens who've been terrified by a recent thunderstorm. Only when they are all safe once more upon the vanity does she look at me and smile then walk behind Grans' chair and mimic the motion of choking her from behind. There's a brief second when I think that Pops has received remote control of Beverly's limbs and is using them to enact Grans' immediate murder and I will have to lie on the floor and watch my adoptive mother snap Grans' spinal cord and windpipe only to regain

consciousness and limb control after Grans is clearly dead and Grans' head is hanging down at a right angle to her shoulder and when Beverly realizes that Grans' neck is broken and her hands are on Grans' neck and she starts to scream, she won't even be able to change her facial expression because of the Botox and it really will seem to be a world gone wildly mad as she cries and wails and asks me, "What have I done?" all with an exceptionally placid forehead. I do not want to recount this for the police and then Dennis; I do not want to have to sit in the courtroom and have reporters ask me if I believe in the assertion of Beverly's legal defense team that she went momentarily crazy due to med-spa negligence for they most certainly must've inserted the viral paralytic into Beverly's forehead in such a way that made some go straight to her brain and start pulling the ordered grey tulips of her cerebral flowerbed up by the roots.

But Beverly just places her hands onto Grans' shoulders and leans in and says "How many times have we told you never to use the stair lift on your own?" She points a finger at Grans and turns to me and says, "She's worse than toddler! Are you okay, Earleen? Did you trip over the mess she made? Goodness, Grans, I think we're going to have to take away your chair license, you know that? Earleen come look at the shoes I bought. Rosettes, Earleen. Rosettes and rhinestones. Do these things make me feel like a woman. Putting these on your feet is like getting a second pair of breasts. Look at the way they shine! Hello, four-breasted woman coming through, lock up your sons aged eighteen to twenty-nine. I don't know if I'm going to even be able to find a wig glamorous enough to match them. That's the best kind of problem to have, isn't it?"

Grans sputters, attempting more sounds. "Grans was trying to talk," I say. But in my head, I follow up with *Is this possible, Beverly? Can you reach deep and let me know if*

you think Grans could eventually be successful at talking if she devoted every waking moment of her life to it with absolute concentration the way she currently pours herself into hatred of me and colliding with my physical person at max speed?

“Yes I heard that horrible noise she made. Momma listen,” Beverly calls, her voice rising to a patronizing volume, “that moan does not become you. Earleen, I got the only pair of ten’s left. I can’t wait for Debbie Barlow to see them. Her jealousy will just get furious. I love nothing more than making that hag’s synthetic estrogen boil in her veins.”

I leave because I need a cigarette or twenty. The urge is so deep that I try smoking two at once and when that works out okay three at once and finally a row of four at once which I have to hold onto from both sides like a pan flute. No matter how many I smoke the cravings don’t stop. It seems like I should lift up my shirt and hold my belly button open and blow the smoke into it even though that doesn’t make sense. I have the horrifying feeling that if I put the end of the cigarette into my belly button, its edges would tighten in around the cigarette like tiny lips and the end of the cigarette would glow increasingly bright red until it finally turned blue and then suddenly I’d look down and see smoke rings coming out from between my legs. I refuse to test this theory, though. I’m too certain that it would work.

The other night when I was on a date with Huckle he wouldn’t stop making out with me and then he started talking about what a beautiful physical expression of love sexual intercourse is, and he told me that when we kiss I should try to imagine that he and I are on a tropical island together and while we are watching the sunset two dolphins jump out of the water and into the air. It seemed like he was trying to take the moment into a

territory of my body that Pops might currently share a fence with and Pops is not a gracious neighbor. So I unbuttoned Huckle's pants and put my job experience to work. He lay down in the backseat of the truck and closed his eyes, "The dolphins," he said, "you and I are drinking frozen strawberry daiquiris on the shore and the dolphins jump up from the water and then they shoot water out of the tiny holes on their head, ohhh, God Earleen, wait is it just whales that do that or do dolphins shoot head water too, oh God well these dolphins do they're like a different island type of dolphin, oh God oh God Earleen" and when it was finished he zipped up and gave me Chicken Church napkins from the glove box to wipe my hands on.

"You're smart Earleen," he said, "I was about to let my passion get the best of me, I'm not one to let the law rule my actions but I guess it is better to play it safe, imagine what a travesty that would be, me going to jail despite the sex being consensual. Basically the law is taking away *your* voice, you know what I mean? Uncle Sam is like 'Hey Earleen, your body is not your own,' right? 'I am Uncle Sam and I own your body and what you want doesn't matter.' You don't even get to say yes or no, essentially, you do not have a say and I don't support that one bit. I'm a man of my principles of course and I'd go to jail for them if it would change something, you know what I mean. Can you believe that in this modern age the law does not make any kind of distinction between me and some drug addict who corners and rapes you at knifepoint? Then I go to prison and get raped too, for real raped though, and when I get out I have to go door to door for the rest of my life and announce to everyone in a ten-mile radius that I am some kind of child-loving pervert all because you wanted me to have sex with you? We should keep it external till you're seventeen, yeah, certainly."

But the act was nevertheless a new zenith in our sexual history and Huckle insisted that he couldn't hold off taking me to meet his family any longer, so we're headed forty-five minutes outside of town to where they live. While Huckle is telling me about them I look out the window and daydream about abortion. I can hear the crinkle of the table's white sanitary paper lining as I lie down, feel the warmth of the doctor's headlamp focus between my thighs. But just as the doctor reaches for his scalpel, just as he readies to move in and find the small cocoon of ectoplasm that Pops' specter is transforming inside, the doctor spots something unusual and leans in to further inspect. The warmth of his lamp draws in on the most interior parts of me, and for a moment it seems like I've never felt the sun's light until right now, I've never been allowed to experience its white heat until this moment. Then the doctor falls back and hits the ground, impaled clean through the eye to the brain with one of the speculum's wishbone edges.

Any attempt at ditching Pops would be useless. Even if I found a way to shake him out, he'd just return again. But the next time he'd probably break the news that he doesn't need my living body to gestate in—my corpse will be more than sufficient.

We pull up and there's a brief moment of silence as Huckle steps out of the truck and shuts the door before he reaches my door and opens it for me and I'm plugged back in to what he's saying mid-sentence. I use it to make a request. *Pops, please don't pull any romper room antics like the ones you showed off for Grans. Huckle donated your DNA, after all. I'm a guest in their house and you're a guest in his sperm and you're both a guest in my body so let's all please be on our best civil behavior.*

"There she is!" Huckle's mother opens the door and stands with her arms outstretched wide. Her eyes are cast off into the distance overtop my head. Huckle takes her arms and

places them onto my shoulders. “Aha,” his mother says. “Sorry dear I am going blind. I was headed this way my whole life but now the lights are truly dim.” Her hands squeeze into my shoulder bones. “You are a feeble thing. Enter, please. Have a seat at the table. Now Huckle has told me all about your struggle with anorexia and not to take it personally if you don’t clean your plate. Just relax. We’re not force-feeders here.” Huckle sits down at the table with his father, a thin man wearing a shirt that features a cartoon animal smoking a marijuana joint. A long and graying braid hangs from his chin like a lengthy wick to something explosive. His fingers lift in a hello but he seems disoriented.

“Earleen, Huckle tells me you’re in the baby-making business,” his mother says. At the stove, She’s pouring something into a pan and largely missing. When she reaches up to the spice rack a bottle of capsicum rolls down onto the gas stove’s range and catches on fire.

“Fertility treatment center, Mom. It’s amazing who can become pregnant nowadays. In fact,” he stands and grabs a small fire extinguisher from the wall and douses the stove and pot in a thick cloud, “you yourself could probably shoot out a set of quadruplets if that’s what you wanted. Menopause is not the roadblock it used to be.”

His mom makes a delighted chuckle. “Imagine that,” she says. “Me with four new babies.”

Huckle’s father walks to the record player and puts on a classical music compilation record that begins to play “Fight of the Bumblebee.” On quiet feet, he tiptoes to the refrigerator and takes out a tall bucket of drumsticks from Chicken Church, then tiptoes to the kitchen table and sets it down in the middle. I’m worried about having to eat the soup that was doused in flame retardant, but when his mother spoons it out to us with the

ladle, it gets sloshed onto the table and we retract our empty bowls saying, “Thank you.”

His mother looks down at the empty end of the table and smiles. “We’re so excited that you and Huckle are getting married, Earleen.”

I immediately begin to choke on my bite of chicken. The drumsticks are Exodus 34:6 flavor, honey ranch.

“Thanks, Ma. Your support has always meant the world to me. We’re going to wait a little while on the ring and formal proposal but it’s been an understanding between us nearly from day one, hasn’t it Earleen. One of those things that’s never even had to be spoken. I’d say her birthday’s the day to do it. Seventeen years old. That’s the magic age.” He nudges me with an elbow meant to be an insider acknowledgement that this is also the age when he no longer needs to worry about looking over his shoulder for the law while we copulate.

I am not sure if I am receiving oxygen. At first I think it’s shock from the announcement, but then I realize I’m choking. I can see my convex, large-foreheaded reflection in the upturned soup spoon and I appear to be bluer than usual. Huckle’s father leans forward and thrusts a sideways hand-chop straight into my diaphragm. The stuck piece of chicken flies from my mouth and lands into Huckle’s mother’s hair. “Magic in a few different ways.” Huckle nudges me again with his elbow. I loudly gasp in oxygen, feeling the blood return to my cheeks, and cough a few more times. “What I’m getting at though is that at seventeen she can marry me without her father’s signature. Not that I won’t ask his permission as a courtesy. You brought me up better than that.” Huckle’s mother beams. A fly lands on the piece of chicken in her hair.

“You’re my sweet boy. Even when—”

“I think that’s important for Earleen as well, I mean. She’s the one who said yes I want to be your wife forever, without having to say it of course, not her dad. Sure I’m all for tradition and nothing would make me happier than his blessing, yours certainly means the world to me mom, and I mean no offense by this, but if for some reason say you didn’t like Earleen, assume you were prejudiced against people with eating disorders for example, I think any couple worth their salt should counter that by saying, ‘Go to hell Ma; I asked Earleen to marry me in an unspoken proposal and her consent is implied by our deep love and you can take or leave my sweet bride’s decision.’ Now if I’d say that to you but then tell her father, ‘Yes okay, you’re withholding permission for Earleen’s hand in marriage from me so I guess we won’t get married,’ that would be me valuing his opinion over yours just because he’s a man, and I don’t want to scare you Ma, or you Earleen,” he lifts my hand off my chest, where I’m resting it to reassuringly feel the air sweep back into my lungs, and he kisses my fingers. The chicken grease from his lips make my knuckles glisten in the light. “But there are some jughead guys out there who seriously feel like what they think is more important than what women think, if you can believe that. I know it for a fact: I work with them and went to school with them and everything. Locker room talk, it’s sometimes called. I can blend in with the best of them when it comes to that, let me tell you. I’ve got everyone at my job fooled that I’m one of them. But while I’m saying something like, ‘You’re right Leroy, if your wife didn’t want you to cheat on her and take out a second mortgage behind her back in order to settle things up with your friends at the track, she wouldn’t have let her waistline go the way she has. What you’ve got there is thirty pounds of permission to make your Friday nights your own,’ what I’m *thinking* is ‘Leroy, you should just tell your wife to go on a diet and

show her some pictures of women in magazines so she understands what her body's supposed to look like, you should not go off on some fornication spree you damn pig, a quiet affair is one thing but what you're doing is quite another." He squeezes my hand tenderly.

"Well you don't have to worry about Earleen blowing up like a blimp after she gets a ring do you?" his mother says. "She'd sooner starve herself to death than get fat." Both she and Huckle let out a deep laugh.

"I'm a lucky man," he admits. "Besides, her father isn't actually even her real father, so that guy's permission is extra useless."

His mother nods and lifts the iced tea pitcher to refill her glass except she overshoots and begins to fill up the chicken bucket. "Earleen your secret is safe with me. And I want to say for the record that I do not believe in the word 'bastard.' God's mistakes are like baseball cards, even the so-so ones are still worth something."

"She's no bastard; her real dad is just dead," Huckle says.

"Actually my parents weren't married. He accosted my mother to use as leverage, should a hostage situation prove necessary for him to escape charges of car theft and grand larceny, but even though he ended up having no trouble crossing the state border, he decided to use a combination of weapons, threats, and sheer physical force to insist upon her continued company. He also introduced her to heavy drug use. At first she would only accept illicit drugs into her body at gunpoint, but before long she readily turned to them of her own volition in an attempt to escape the horrors of her daily reality. These ultimately included her pregnancy with me and then motherhood in an environment where she had to accept my repeated abuse as one of the few constants in

her otherwise chaotic existence.”

“Did your parents die while serving in the Peace Corps?” Huckle’s mother asks.

“There was something on television about that the other day, this man and his wife were at an African orphanage for kids with cleft palates and AIDS and this gang of natives came in and shot the couple dead to steal the orphanage’s pharmacy supplies, both the man and his wife, and I remember thinking that if those two had any children back home in America they’d be left without *any parents*. Can you believe? Did something like that happen to you? I don’t care how crazy or ethnic a gunman is, he should still be enough of a human being to say, ‘Wait, before I shoot you, do you have a sweet white daughter at home?’”

“I bet he raped some of those orphans after shooting the couple,” Huckle says.

“Orphans that were not yet seventeen years of age.”

“No, my parents blew up.”

“A victim of the terrorists,” his mother says, her head shaking. There’s a brief moment of silence and Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro Overture* comes on.

“I guess I could ask your real dad’s permission over a Ouija board or in a séance or something,” Huckle grins. “But what’s he gonna say if he doesn’t want us to? ‘Over my *dead* body?’ Well sure, I’d love to do it over your dead body but you didn’t even leave a body behind! Ha!”

With that my stomach kicks forward. I hunch over, trying to ensure that my belly stays shielded beneath the table.

“Earleen could you pass the salt?” his mother asks. It’s sitting right next to her. I try to grab one of the fetus’ miniature punching limbs that’s flying out and bouncing beneath

my stomach, but they are moving at the speed of irradiated electrons. Suddenly my belly springs up in a unified mass and hits the table's underside with such force that the tea-filled bucket of chicken and the pot of soup that's covered in a white veil of flame retardant and all our empty bowls and glasses and silverware and the iced tea picture lift a full three inches up into the air and crash back down again, sloshing. His mother hiccups.

“Excuse me. Well Earleen I'm sure your father will be watching down from heaven with his full blessing on your wedding day.”

Wedding. I suddenly see myself walking down the aisle in a chapel. Beverly is weeping and leaning backwards from the front row to peer at me. Grans is in her wheelchair in the aisle, her strapped-in body is having a seizure, her mouth is leaking foam and her right claw hand, which has a bouquet tucked inside and secured upright with clear packaging tape, occasionally brushes her chair's control joystick and inches it forward. On the other side is Huckle's father, his beard braid drawn back up to his chin and secured with a barrette, the wedding bands dangling from the bottom of the braid's loop where they hang in safekeeping until the ceremony requires them, Huckle's mother is sitting at the organ on the altar playing the Bridal Chorus. Delores and Candi wait near the altar in bridesmaid dresses. Candi's has been custom shortened to accentuate her legs and bust; Delores has forgone dress shoes in favor of orthopedic clogs due to a bunion flare-up. Dennis is walking me up to the altar but something is wrong: beneath his tuxedo jacket he's wearing a blue surgical scrub, there are also blue rubber gloves on his hands. I feel a wetness around the waist of my dress and look down to realize it has a hole right over my belly button and black ink is intermittently spurting out as if the tear in the dress is a slit artery. When I stop walking and look behind me, I see I've left a long black trail

drizzled out onto the floor. Then I notice all the guests sitting in the full pews, they are looking back and forth between the trail and my leaking stomach and seem disgusted. When the pain comes, I double down and Pops leaps from the stomach of my dress with a great rip. People scream and begin to stand and run but the chapel is filling with smoke—an acrid, chemical smell, the byproduct of cooking meth. It is too thick, choking, everyone is blindly racing through the heavy clouds and crawling on the ground seeking escape. Ink is now pouring forth from my stomach with the gushing pressure of an enormous burst pipe; people are sliding and falling and dragging themselves through the muck trying to reach a door when the walls begin to run thick with black ink as well. It pours to the ground and soon begins to pool, sinking in around the guests' ankles and palms. It's a deep sludge that limbs cannot be pulled out of, it holds everyone screaming in place until it fills the chapel from roof to bottom. Huckle's mother continues to smile and play the organ until her arms are fully submerged, then the music keeps coming from some place warped and muffled until her head finally goes under. At the front of the church hangs an enormous crucifix illuminated by spotlights from the ceiling, and after everyone is drowned, a small, misshapen arm emerges from the swamp of oil, grabs the bottom of the cross and pulls itself up, climbing. Pops's ink-covered body leaves small hand and footprints all over Christ's torso; he sits atop Jesus' crown of thorns and surveys the room, the sole survivor, reaches into his pocket and pulls out an ink-covered cigarette and lighter and begins smoking from his perch.

Involuntarily, I emit a large burp then run to the bathroom; I do not even have time to close the door before the violent waves of retching overtake me. I can hear Huckle talking back in the kitchen, "That's what they do when they're afraid they've eaten too

many calories,” he explains to his parents.

CHAPTER 8

DESTRUCTION OF EVIDENCE

My long weekend of nausea turns out to be a mild prelude compared to what happens when I go into work on Monday and find the clinic teeming with officers of the law. I look around for Candi, hoping she can give me an appraisal of the situation, but when I find her she's busy flirting with a mustached highway patrolman. "The more tickets you clear up for me," she says, "the better our party can get."

A cop next to me picks up a walkie-talkie and I zero in on two words: sperm theft. When I look up Dennis is walking towards me at a furious clip. "All employees to the lounge, *now*," he says. He gives me no eye contact.

I cannot have the baby in prison. Pops will come out into the stainless steel wall-mounted toilet and wait there, hidden beneath the rim with pressed tiny fingers, then brutally murder my unsuspecting cellmate when she sits down to have a peaceful midnight urination. Manslaughter will be added to my charges and I'll never get out. That or he would ooze from me in order to walk out from our cell between two of the bars each night, then he'd somehow take shape enough to go propagate with every female inmate and create an army of inky half-Pops and the entire world would be lost. I turn and start towards the front door, not sure what my plan is when a cop stops me. "To the lounge," he says. "You heard the man. We're going to need to speak with you anyway."

I take a seat next to Candi. In a matter of minutes, a threatened Pops could be outside of my body and dragging me up to the roof of the building by the umbilical cord like I'm a dogsled. Dennis is pacing, his network of strong facial veins quite perceptible to the naked eye. When he finally stops he closes his eyes to compose himself before he begins

speaking.

“Desperate people come to us and entrust us with their seeds of human life. These are the cellular keys to our species’ kingdom. They are part of our *bodies*. Stealing them is like stealing someone else’s *arm*.” He sits and puts his head down between his legs. “I am literally sick. I feel like I’m going to faint.”

Candi’s bubble gum pops at an inopportune moment.

“I consider this office a family,” he continues.

The rainbow cats covering his surgical scrubs have always seemed comically alert to me. But now, in this moment, they instead resemble a Roman chorus echoing Dennis’ fright and terror, their cat mouths forming a perfect “O,” their drawn-on eyebrows lifted up to a steep angle of ‘how could you?’

Now his eyes meet mine. “Just like I consider...you...family, Earleen.” He sighs with the weight of unwanted knowledge.

I feel like I am going to pee my pants and never stop peeing. After I have peed out all the pee, then I will pee out all my blood, then my liquefied bones and organs and hair and teeth and nails until the only thing remaining on my chair is Pops’ wet and shining inky fetus, the wrinkled pit of my body’s fruit.

Now an officer speaks. “This would be an arrestable offense even if it were just the sperm alone. But add in the embryos and we’ve got all kinds of new issues.”

My hands absentmindedly clutch onto Candi’s arm; she gives me a puzzled look when my nails sink into the top dermal layer of her wrist. Embryos? What had Pops done? Why and how had he done it?

“It’s hard to believe, especially since she’s been here since the office first opened.

Who knows how much reproductive...material she's taken home over the years."

"Delores?" I ask out loud.

The policeman lifts an empty soda bottle to his mouth and spits out tobacco juice.

"We had a search warrant for her home on account of her stealing porcelain bird figurines from Cross's Pharmacy." His tongue itches a canine tooth. "Then we found a whole mess of sperm jars in her closet, along with some jars containing fertilized embryo samples. Just letting them stay in there at room temperature. She was hoarding the stuff, amongst other things. Sure liked her some novelty soaps."

Candi is disgusted. "What was she doing with a closet full of sperm and test tube babies and stuff?"

The cop's head tilts to the side. "Ma'am, I'm not sure you want me to answer that."

"Oh my God," says Candi. "Tell us."

The cop looks at Dennis, who gives an acquiescent nod then buries his face back into his hands.

"She was feeding it to her cats." He spits a larger mouthful of tobacco into the bottle. "Good for their coats, she said."

All I can think about is jumping out of my chair, grabbing the cops' bottle of tobacco juice, and chugging it.

"Does cat food taste like sperm?" Candi asks.

The cop stares at a painting on the lounge wall of a clown watering a ficus. "Now ma'am I do not know the answer to that."

Occupied with the fallout of Delores' crime, Dennis hasn't noticed that weight is

falling off me like crazy. My ankles, which I know by seven months of pregnancy should likely be swollen, are roughly the size of my wrists. More troublesome still is my stomach, which looks like a giant wound. Roughly the size of a cantaloupe, my belly is now a red dome poking out of my skin, and the aura of flesh surrounding my stomach, reaching from my lower torso down to my crotch and thighs, has taken on a grey-black reticulated coloring. I have cravings, but not for food. Today after three packs of cigarettes for breakfast, I drank a bottle of cough syrup. With a reddish-pink mustache I then explored the backyard shed, at one point spraying an objectionable amount of aerosol wood sealant into the air in a continual stream in order to breathe it in.

Beverly, too, is fully distracted from my condition due to her planning of the upcoming Southern Sisters cotillion, an annual celebration of plantations and the confederacy that is scheduled to be held at our home. My costume for the event includes a gigantic hoop-skirt replica and auspiciously provides ample camouflage for my stomach.

With any luck, however, I will not be around for the festivities. The cotillion is just days before my seventeenth birthday, and I think it best to avoid a formal marriage proposal from Huckle, for a variety of reasons not exclusive to the fact that I used his DNA to help clone my father's conflagrated body into an otherworldly frankenfetus.

I'm convinced that boarding a Greyhound bus is the answer to all my sorrows. Its symbol of a canine commonly used in monetary betting is perhaps a fitting metaphor for the gamble I have taken upon entering into an otherworldly pregnancy with Pops. Although Beverly and Dennis would have initial feelings of despair surrounding my disappearance, were I to explain to them that I'd gone north in order to seek a liberal arts

education and attend nonviolent political protest rallies, I feel they would be able to forgive me in roughly a decade.

Beverly is upset she cannot find any black waiters and waitresses who are willing to work the event. “It’s just not *authentic* if the help is white. I might as well give the fête a Boston tea party theme or serve lobster. How can it be glorifying slavery when I’d be paying each worker at least minimum wage?”

I decide that I will leave both Huckle and my parents a note. At one point I consider being candid with Beverly and Dennis, but after Delores’ embryo pet food scandal I feel I should treat at least Dennis with kid gloves. First I write Dennis and Beverly’s. Its topmost portion both thanks them for everything and apologizes using gleaned sentences from *Gone With the Wind* and *Anne of Green Gables*:

But after all, I am nothing but a child. I do not wish to compound my initial error of birth. I should cry into my pillow every night. I shall ache just to see you, to hold onto Beverly’s skirt, to pour out the whole story of my life into her lap. I’m sorry I’ve upset you so. I could never express all my sorrow, no, not if I used up a whole dictionary. You’ve been so good to me. How wonderful to live with you and belong to you. I’m a dreadfully wicked and ungrateful girl and deserve to be punished and cast out by respectable people forever. I am dreadful thin, ain’t I? What a starved, unloved life I had had. There isn’t a pick on my bones. I’m so homely nobody will ever want to marry me. I have looked on so many unlovely places in my life, but your home was as lovely as anything I’d ever dreamed. There is no use in loving things if you have to be torn from them, is there?

Nausea and cramps have hit full-force by the time I begin in on Huckle’s goodbye. I

throw up four times inside the pink unicorn-covered storage lap desk I'm writing on and continue undaunted. I know what Pops is trying to do: he wants me to stay put just where I am so there aren't any variables. He never did trust unfamiliar places, particularly cities. I'm sure he fears that if I step onto a bus I'll end up birthing him in the back alleyway of a restaurant district where a host of feral raccoons will immediately pounce upon his natal flesh and devour him whole.

The bodily violence of Pops' protest is so great that I have to cut Huckle's letter short. I'm barely able to crawl from the desk to my dresser to begin packing essentials. If his physical tirade continues, I won't be able to walk to the train station. *I'll steal Grans' Speed Throne and drive it to the bus depot, I think. Beverly will appreciate Grans' newfound lack of mobility.*

Then I feel a terrible pull and a wetness between my legs. When I take down my pants to inspect, I find the crotch of my underwear covered in black ink. It's too early. I even say this out loud, "It's *too early*, Pops." But I suppose he isn't a slave to suggested schedules of fetal development.

I take the scalpel I stole from the clinic years ago on one of my first tours of it from its dollhouse hiding place. Though I knew it was useless against Pops, knowing it was there sometimes made me feel slightly better about his hauntings, if only because I knew I could use it to slit my own wrists if things got too bad to take. I slide up my shirt and position the knife just beneath my bellybutton. "We need to talk, Pops," I say. "I know you like surprises but I need to be in the know. You have to tell me what's going on here. When you unzip yourself from my body I'd like to have already traveled far away from Beverly and Dennis and distractions like proposals regarding the institute of marriage.

I'm not messing around; we really need to talk."

When nothing happens, I delve the tip of the knife just slightly into my skin. *You had to feel that*, I think. "I'm not kidding around," I stress. "I'll go deeper."

Nothing. Is he testing me, or is he just not able to show himself beyond creating a tornado in my stomach or releasing the ink of his blood? "Are you going to make me do it?" I ask. He should know, having been either directly or indirectly responsible for creating all my scars, that I am no stranger to the pain of cutting. I made a room in my mind to go during those times. I haven't been there for quite awhile, not since Pops died, but I steeled its walls for too many years for it to ever go away—for a moment, I feel a near-nostalgic pride at this talent for being able to check out of my physical body when I want to. Closing my eyes, I push the blade in deeper. In my head a door opens and there it is: a room that looks like a wing of a library but larger, infinite. I begin to run my finger down a row of the books' spines. The first set I come across is red and ancient, something I dreamed up from an illustration. I exhale and a puff of glistening dust lifts from the shelves into the air, twirling. It is the second book I always chose to look at here, the largest and the heaviest. So heavy that when I was younger I couldn't even lift it. It would drop to the floor and the pages would spin open; I'd have to quickly stick my hands in between two of them, like they were blades of a fan, in order to get them to still. Perhaps now that I'm older, I'll be strong enough to pick it up.

My hand moves towards it but the book jumps slightly to the left, just out of my reach. The rows of shelving on each side began to slide steadily forward and pick up speed like a moving train. The door bangs open and my feet lift from the ground: life is pulling me back, which can only mean one thing.

I open my eyes to find I can't breathe. My hands fly to my neck to try and loosen his string, but the cold gives such a strong burn that I can't touch it for more than a second. I lurch towards the mirror to see what I'm up against: he's coiled around my throat, holding the scalpel at a threatening angle just above my eye.

"Pops," I try to say. I have no air to form the words with. Yet his breath is loud and labored, something riled up behind bars at the zoo.

"You've lost your mind, little girl."

The room begins to blanch in small spots. A blinding whiteness is pouring into my vision at the edges. "I just want to talk," I mouth. He's choking me out of consciousness. But he must get dizzy when I do; if he's depriving me of oxygen he's also depriving himself.

The coils of string slightly loosen and their cold eats into my collarbone. The new intake of air makes me tremble. "I just want to talk," I repeat, panting.

"You best tell me what the hell you're playing at right now, before my temper gets away from me."

"I've got to leave." I crawl to the floral lounge chair. "Dennis and Beverly are distracted. It's the perfect time. If I don't go now everyone will start to get involved."

"Do you understand that I am *growing*? I cannot be woken up for your craziness. You're going to have me close to home, where there are lots of helping hands and supplies if we need them. Any problems come up, you deal with them. We don't run."

"But say I can't hide it and Dennis and Beverly find out? He'll want to look in on you day and night and deliver you himself. Beverly will be there too, at the birth."

"You better hide it. If we involve them, I'll have to kill him when we're done. You

know that and I know that.”

“No.” I say it more forcefully than I mean to. “What I mean is that won’t be necessary. Especially not if I skip town.”

“It isn’t up for discussion.” The string and the scalpel slowly lower down to rest on the dollhouse roof. “And this marriage thing. What the hell are you doing drawing someone into our business close enough to talk marriage?”

“All I did was go on a date. It took on a life of its own.”

Pops’ string moves around my back and lands on my shoulder. “And just how much...fun...do you plan on having with this beau while I’m on board?” His voice takes on a confidential tone.

“Nothing like that, Pops. Just innocent stuff.”

“Think that’s what’s on his mind, too?”

I turn to face the bulbed end of the string. “I don’t know what’s on his mind.”

Pops gives a hollow laugh. “Let me tell you about the river of stink running through every man ever born, Earleen. Every man has an animal inside him that will come out when he wants what he wants for long enough and gets close enough to taste it. My question to you is, how are you going to keep that animal far away from me.”

“It won’t happen. He’s afraid of the law. But if it starts to go that way, I’ll call it off.”

“Damn right you will. My house. I won’t be kind to any trespassers banging at the cellar door.”

“That won’t happen.”

Pops starts to retract inside my belly button, but he stops halfway then comes back out in a mad rush. The string’s tip is in front of my face in the blink of an eye.

“You try to skip town again? I’ll cut your tongue out. Now I know where you keep your little knife.”

I swallow. “I’ll stay put.”

“Ditto if you pull this scalpel trick one more time to draw me out. I come up on my own terms. We’ll leave it at that. I need my rest.”

“Yes sir.”

“It’s sir now, is it. I’ll be going. I think you have a wound to attend to. Don’t you dare allow that to get infected and put my growing body in peril.”

I wait until he’s completely gone to look down at the cut. I always did it this way back when he was alive; I’d just be still and then the moment he left the room I’d start taking inventory and surveying the damage. I preferred to lick my wounds in private.

It’s deeper than I meant it to be. Of course it is; Pops can’t be conjured for anything less than true harm. Mother showed me a method long ago to avoid having to go to the hospital for stitches: super glue. I place the stained black panties over the wound and tiptoe out to Dennis’ toolbox in the shed, careful to avoid Grans in my injured state.

I suppose I won’t be going anywhere after all.

After I glue myself back together, I burn the panties in Beverly and Dennis’ outdoor gas fire pit. If Beverly were to see them, disaster would ensue—a mandatory physical would only be the tip of the iceberg.

Beverly pays great attention to panties. When I arrived at their house at age thirteen, I’d never gotten a period because of my low weight. Beverly ascertained this through questioning less than a minute after meeting me. My second day at the house, about fifteen menstruation-related books, all with pink covers, several of them illustrated, had

appeared in my room on a pink hanging shelf that sat on the wall right in front of my bed. The first thing I saw when I woke up and went to sleep each night was this chorus of book spines bearing titles like *Strange Things Are Happening to You Down There*. Beverly referred to the event as “when the woman fairy visits your girl body” and insisted I tell her the moment it happened, but when it did happen seven months later, talking about it in any manner seemed awkward. What I didn’t know was that Beverly had asked one of the housekeepers to scrutinize my underwear as she did the laundry each week. When the discovery was made, I was on the living room couch watching *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. At the exact moment that the staff employee who’d unwrapped countless chocolate bars finally found a golden ticket for Veruca Salt, the housekeeper came running down the stairs yelling for Beverly and waving what I looked up and recognized to be my slightly soiled panties over her head, “Meeses Stark, Meeses Stark,” she was calling, her outstretched arm pumping the evidence victoriously, on television the worker was crying, “I found it, I found it!” and running up to Mr. Salt with the golden ticket, and Beverly ran in shrieking and cried, “Oh lemme see, thank goodness, lemme see,” and then she took the panties and clutched them to her chest and ran to me with happy tears soaking her face and blouse, so many that it looked like she’d just gone swimming. “You can give me grandbabies,” she squealed, forcing me to look at the underwear with the embarrassing stain as though it was actually an adorable baby itself; she just held out the underwear, smiling and crying and staring at it, and the housekeeper was smiling and staring at it, and Beverly locked me to her side with a bone-crunching hug and said “I knew you’d be too shy to brag about your good news” and then she went to the kitchen and when she came out I saw she’d placed the underwear inside a

Ziploc bag for posterity and was taking it upstairs to stow it inside one of her multiple pink memory boxes but I purposely looked away because this knowledge disturbed me, and my distress was compounded by the fact that I had thrown that pair of underwear away, meaning the housekeeper must've dug through the garbage to find them. Beverly gave one of her gold necklaces to the housekeeper the next week for her diligence. "I bet you've thought about stealing this one from my jewelry cabinet before, haven't you? It's beautiful. Don't tell me it never crossed your mind. Well, now you don't have to. Isn't that nice?"

From this event I learned that throwing away is not enough. If I want to be sure that panties never come to Beverly's attention, I have to burn them. Though Pops is convincing testimony that even burning is not foolproof.

CHAPTER 9

A SUMMER NATIVITY

“Earleen, come quick! Doesn’t Grans look cute as a button?”

Today is the big day of the Southern Sisters cotillion. Beverly hired a stylist who did my hair to look exactly like Shirley Temple’s. Grans has been fitted with a voluminous red wig secured beneath a tiered yellow bonnet with lace trim. This matches her dress and also the open parasol that has been wired to the back of her chair and covers half of her face in a sinister chiaroscuro. To give the impression of unclenched hands, Beverly has stuffed out each finger and hand in a long pair of yellow satin gloves and put these overtop Grans’ clenched fists. On the left glove, she’s placed a giant faux ruby ring onto the second stuffed finger.

In the past few weeks I’ve begun to develop a smell. His smell, more specifically. Every drop of my sweat has Pops’ reek—a ripe decay plus a chemical stench not unlike burning tar. I’ve tried many products in an attempt to mask the scent and found the notable winner to be my off-label use of one of Beverly’s aerosol cans of feminine odor spray, in particular the one called Tropical Typhoon that warns aggressive dermal irritation is not unlikely. I spray this beneath my armpits and all over my hair and forehead and chest each day. Today, of course, I sprayed extra.

Dennis is dressed as a high-ranking confederate soldier, a costume Beverly chose to enhance with a period-replica beard appliqué. He has been scolded twice in the past hour for not being able to leave the cheese dip alone, but he would not dare perform the ultimate transgression: premature removal of a cupcake. Their multicolored frosting makes up a replica of the confederate flag.

My energy is completely sapped. This morning when I woke up, two four-inch arms were stretching themselves fully upright against the skin of my stomach, roving, seemingly feeling the uterine walls for a secret passageway out. “Hey,” I called, tapping at them. “The approved exit is likely the best route for both our survival.”

My dress is long and pink with gigantic three-dimensional fabric roses sewn all over it. On my head there’s a large white hat, purposefully pinned in a leftward tilt that makes me think of the ringed planets in solar system replicas. When I walk to the ice-cream punch bowl, the congealed foam migrates to the edge and in the middle of the liquid I swear for a moment I see Mother’s face. *I remember that time I died*, her lips mouth; they’re covered in the waxy red lipstick that gave her mouth a scribbled-on look. *Why can’t I remember being alive?*

“Earleen, this is Mrs. Tannenbaum. She and her husband own the Chicken Churches on Clark and Decatur.” I extend a gloved hand and shake. The first half of the day, Beverly explained to me, will be meet and greets; in the second half I will be formerly introduced to society, then there’s going to be—in Beverly’s words—a “small backyard reenactment” of a battle in the Great War of the Confederacy. I plan to get through the activities by playing a series of mental games with myself, for example counting the number of attendees whose hair has been styled via permanents.

“Oh yes,” Mrs. Tannenbaum is saying, “my Sasha just loves it. Would you like that, Earleen? I can give you our instructor’s number. There is something so... whimsical about learning to play the harpsichord.”

I can’t help but look down at my wrist; something is happening to my corsage, whose elastic feels like it’s just turned to ice. Then my eyes widen. Its petals are growing black

at the tips.

The first contraction hits just as Beverly approaches with a photographer. “Earleen, come quick; Mrs. Janie brought an armadillo sculpture that’s made out of *magnolias*! You kiss it on one cheek while I kiss it on the other! Won’t that make a cute picture?”

“So stinkin’ cute,” a large group of women standing around us agree. There is one dissenting woman not shaking her head who I recognize to be Debbie Barlow.

“I’ll be right back,” I nod, “just a moment.” The sweat pouring off me is testing Tropical Typhoon’s odor-block capabilities to the brink. I hear water splash onto the wooden floor beneath my giant hoop skirt but I cannot pause to worry about this. “I need to freshen my sweet tea,” I explain.

When I reach the hallway something has shifted and it’s harder to walk; I have to hunch over and grip the wall. “No slouching, young lady,” Beverly calls from behind.

I will never make it far enough away from the house on foot. My eyes are beginning to cross with pain when I spot Grans in her SpeedThrone and shove her from the chair off onto the loveseat containing Beverly’s substantial Raggedy Ann doll collection as gently as I can. “I need to borrow your wheels for a quick drive down Hell’s highway.” Grans’ mouth is hungrily opening and closing in an attempt to bite me; I deftly keep my flesh from her head.

Motoring away from the house, I cut out of the yard and begin an uncleared path through the adjacent field. My legs have forcibly separated now; something crucial in my hips is no longer connected. “Would you hurry it up Pops,” I scream, pounding my fist against the SpeedThrone’s armrest. I reach down and rip open the crotch of my tights; bending over is cumbersome although my stomach isn’t that large—it feels like it extends

outward far more than it does. There's a brief sound of thunder and a light rain begins a downpour that soon turns heavy. The SpeedThrone's tires fight against the soft, wet dirt and until I appear to be stuck.

I continue on foot against the rain. Progress is slow; at times I trip across the lace of my dress and fall down into the wet mud. Each time I hear a fracturous sound on impact and think it's my bones or Pops' new baby ones, but it's just another wooden rib of my hoop skirt snapping.

When I finally see a wooden barn in the distance and make it inside, I'm greeted by a mirror and a reflection of myself where, covered in wet black soil, I look like Pops' inky ghost. When I enter the animals all take a few steps back.

Water is pouring through holes in the barn's ceiling. The part of me that's screaming and using all my muscles to bear down is the same part of me that never expected this to happen, that thought I'd have to harbor him forever and that his ghastly gestation would span my lifetime. Now that there's a promise of truly being rid of him for the first time ever, in all my years of living, I hold nothing back—every inch of me becomes a muscle fighting to be done with Pops. The pain is awful but that isn't why I'm screaming. I cannot stop screaming.

The barn is dank and moldy and my cries are upsetting to the animals. The lambs move in nervously close to their mothers, who drift across the periphery of my vision like woolly clouds. There's an open stall right next to an ox; dropping to my knees I crawl inside and press my cheek to the floor, pushing harder than ever. I'm surprised that I can still feel little things, like the sweat on my face picking up the dust of hay off the ground, amidst everything else. The ox trains his fear-wide eye upon me and I yell and slap on the

floor but his eye doesn't look away; instead it gets wider still, a slick black eye whose pupil seems to be expanding just as I am, dilating to the full size of its eye and then to the size of the ox's black head, fully becoming its black coarse hair; the ox is now all-eye, an ox-shaped eye that seems to also be a shadowy hole I might crawl into and escape the pain, but I cannot move except to push and run my hands over the barn's gravelly floor. Occasionally a sheep or goat comes up to smell at my airward posterior and give a disapproving snort; blackened blood and fluid is dripping to the ground behind me and hissing with heat; it isn't liquid but it's not solid either, the long tar-like strands that lengthen and stretch down with gravity. Eventually they coil to the floor, find enough weight to break off and drop and send the tops of their strands bouncing back up to wave and dangle.

It has been four years, nearly five, since I last had contact with Pops' skin—although he's been inside me these past few months, it's been muffled and impersonal even at its most violent, even at his ghosted scalpel threat. Each day he and I have been communicating through opaque windows of skin and vein, but now I feel the glass between us lift, and there is the unmistakable feel of contact with monstrosity.

My eyes clench shut, and in the dark mental room that is the act of his birth, I know his danger has entered the world on quiet paws. I cannot hear or smell his breath; I cannot sense his temperature, but I know he's here now just as any blind and trapped mouse can feel with certainty when something has arrived to devour it.

Reaching down between my legs, I feel the tarry, wet ridge of crowning hair. There is no one here to help me. A flash of hope that I know is fantasy rises up and turns into a contraction—maybe it will be a real baby, simply covered in Pops' spent muck; maybe

Pops just encased the baby like a swampy bubble that my contractions broke and now is draining—perhaps Pops will simply be washed away, licked clean from the infant’s healthy cheeks by one of the braying donkeys. There is another warm slip; I want to reach beneath and pull at him but I cannot balance. Beside me, the ox begins hitting its head up against the wall of the barn, steady at first, then a ferocity overtakes the rhythm and my stomach sickens with the sound of its skull against wood; it could turn around and exit its stall, but it seems to want to run straight forward at any cost. I beg it to stop; the noise is maddening, like a pack of drummers, like stretched hide being struck again and again. A growing stain of its blood has appeared on the barn’s wall.

After a breath, I draw backwards into a deep crouch that opens me to a point of violation. His touch is there, pressed firm to my inside skin, moving in a thick and hot slide that can only be felt as an open rape. An indefinite rape whose border keeps widening. The more he leaves me, the more I have to unseal myself; all I want to do is draw shut and crush the bulb of his head with my legs. I strain back with my hand and my fingertips push through sticky layers to feel the loose give of rubber bone, perhaps a shoulder. I’m shaking so hard that I can only push in sputters and breaths. Inhale. The too-full mouth between my legs gagging up a meal that refused digestion. Exhale. My inner sex a long tongue forced to taste the putrid skin creeping across it. Overhead a new sheet of rain makes the sounds of a cracking whip; a wind seems to rise and the floor of the barn comes alive with swirling hay. From the corner of my eye I see the ox backing up; his walk looks irregular, it seems I’m watching a film of him walking forward that was manipulated so his body moves in reverse. He continues backing up until I lose sight of him, there is only wind and pieces of hay that dance up on their tip ends in the wind

like long needles rising in response to a magnet. When I hear the trot of oncoming hooves I try to look back beneath my legs; I place my head onto the floor so my scalp is pushing into the ground and look beneath the dangling inky baby head and shoulders. The ox is running straight towards me but its face is frightened instead of frightening, its eyes are wide in a terrible and unblinking gaze. It occurs to me that the ox has been sent here to save me; it will deliver me before I can deliver Pops. I blink and see Grans' atrophied body with the head of an ox motoring towards me in the SpeedThrone. The running ox lowers its head and I am ready to feel its horn impale the soft spot of the baby's head, bisect its half-submerged body and cut clean through me, the baby ripped in two, the horns pushing through my intestines and stomach with an anticlimactic pop that happens too quickly to audibly hear.

In an instant the baby's newly emerged head begins to wail; the startled beast rears up and jumps forward into the barn wall. The ox's body and the baby's body both fall to the floor in a simultaneous bang that is not dissimilar to thunder.

All I can hear for a moment is the ring of my ears. Then the receding sound of rain melts into an influx of buzzing flies. They are coming in from everywhere; each board in the barn seems to have a cracked opening where they enter. They start buzzing around the hot open wound of my crotch. When I slap them away one becomes stuck in a sticky black stain of ooze upon my thigh; its wings beat violently attempting to free itself. I have the irrational fear that it is going to fly straight up inside me and I swat down on it, accidentally crushing its body against my leg.

The flies are congregating on the ground behind me, where I know the baby's body now lies. I grope for the umbilical cord—it cannot have the chance to tug at me and pull

me back with it, straight into a lake of insects. Its rope is fiery hot; I burn my fingertips holding it taut while my fingernails pinch steadily together like the teeth of a rat to sever it. Free, I crawl over to the stall of the ox and collapse next to the beast, my arm falling across the warm dome of its stomach. It is motionless. When I gain a bit of strength I nudge the animal, hoping to see its side balloon up to draw breath.

There's a moment when my eyes, following its chest upwards and not seeing any forward shadow of a skull, think it has been decapitated. But when I sit up on my knees, its head is visible. Its congealed eyes are a glassed-over marzipan. Its broken neck is twisted so completely that the creature's head looks like it was placed onto its body backwards. I give it a forceful, absurd shake, as if to prompt it to unwind its neck and remember to live. Its mouth falls open and its heavy tongue emerges. It is coated with a patent leather black film. It's the same ink that dripped out of my body across the hay, like the beast had died after drinking from the river between my legs.

The pain in my breasts is sharp as flesh being cut. It returns me to the threat of the creature I dropped onto the floor. "You're here now, just like you wanted," I say. "Now you're free to go." I don't turn my head. My fingers stroke at the glossy hair of the ox's face; I run them up along the smooth horn's bone and tap my burnt fingertips on their sharp pointed ends. My eyes meet a rusty scythe hung upon the barn wall.

"I'm not going to feed you," I say.

There's no answer. I know I cannot look; I refuse to see what he made me make. If I looked upon his face now, even when it's translated into the flat and round harmless features of a newborn, I would try to kick it in. And then he would kill me, or the abject violence of the act would open a portal between us. My display of murder would be a

warm light that siphons out the evil in him and draws it straight up into me, and in me is where it would live like a silent tumor. That evil would continue to control me just as Pops had, only worse since I let it in through my violence; I would believe its cells to be my body and its thoughts to be my own.

But there might not be any baby behind me on the floor at all. There could just be a mass of rejected flesh, something nature refused to animate except for its one death wail. A worming mass that my body passed out like a stone. This was new territory, even for Pops—I'd been assuming he'd succeed all along, but where is the guarantee of that now? Not in the silence ringing through the barn, or the still-placid lump I dropped out into in the hay.

I crawl forward only enough to get a better look at its outline. There's motion, but the body isn't traveling. It takes me a moment to realize that it's only surface movement. The baby is covered with flies. Each one is enormous and shining, the size of a bee. Their bodies seem fat with rancid juice and have the plumpness of ticks or ripe berries; their expanded look begs me to burst them between my fingers and squeeze their bodies into airborne shots of ink.

Standing is difficult; my legs will not quit shaking. I manage to walk around the great mass of the ox, step over to the wall holding the rusted scythe and take it down into my hands. I'll simply cut the baby's lifeless body up, just as Pops had cut up any body that inconveniently chose to die after his torture, and then I will dispose of it piece by piece. I imagine carrying a jar of his cubed pieces around in my purse for weeks, plunking a grape-sized chunk of flesh down into the toilet each time I visit the bathroom then flushing it away.

It is only when the sky shoots bright with a cough of lightening that the baby begins to move, first just squirming. Then, with the urgent shake of a wet dog, it rattles the bugs up into a hovering cloud of noise that soon flattens out into an organized layer in the air, each fly wavering in place in a square formation to form a private sky overtop the baby's head.

He begins to move across the floor with the sound of a snake, inching at first in my direction. I back up and hit the blade of the scythe down on the floor as hard as I can manage; the birth took most of my energy and I know if he challenges me now he will easily kill me. But I feel the need to show him I want to try to fight him—I have the desire, if not the strength. It's terrible to think of my body being found among the animals and the individual ways that Beverly and Dennis would mourn their one chance at parenthood severed and dead in a barn.

I could see their future, if they were exposed to my rough end: Dennis would fully lose himself within his work, the macrocosm of his world shrinking down to the Petri dishes beneath the microscopes and the dark openings of women that his gloved fingers and sterilized instruments tried to tuck babies inside, the fertile universe he could only garden. Beverly would be sucked into the darker undertow of plastic surgery—pinched facelifts, breast implants of cartoonish size and perk, liposuctions that never seem to make her feel empty or hollow enough—she'd be forever in-between procedures, partly for the pain, partly for the painkillers, until she finally died upon the table. But for months afterwards things she bought off the television and from catalogues in the weeks before her death would continue to arrive to the house, and instead of sending them back Dennis would open them, expecting, even though her ashes were safe within the urn on

his nightstand, to open the box and have a bone from her body be inside, a femur or an ulna he would recognize immediately as hers, the structure beneath the shape of the limb he knew so well; he would never fail to think this as he opened the boxes simply because her name was on the label even though she was dead. This alone would seem like magic and be both a curse and a comfort—and what great relief, he would think without understanding what he was thinking, that it bore Beverly's name instead of mine, that he was being contacted by the dead instead of the murdered.

Then again, Pops killing me right now would also mean Dennis and Beverly might be able to get as close to the truth of my situation as they possibly could—police would probably suppose, and they would not be incorrect, that something had happened to me involving a horrible man, involving the worst part of my body for a horrible man to access. Hopefully Pops would kill me in a way that concealed the birth and the pregnancy, but if not my death and the baby's absence would at least prompt them to know I hadn't died needlessly in childbirth as a result of hiding the pregnancy from them. Beverly would never be able to understand me hiding a pregnancy.

Instead Pops' body reverses direction and begins to slide towards the barn door and the rain. When the door creaks and the outside grey light shines in, I see a long black slug trail leading from his birth puddle to outside.

And then I can't feel him, or anything. Pops is gone.

CHAPTER 10

A MEMORABLE PARTY

For a while I rest in the hay next to the dead ox. When the afterbirth comes out, it looks like a burnt omelet. I imagine everything inside me now is a scarred, charred black. The additional fluids that run out act differently after Pops is gone—they bead up on my skin and quickly run off of it, like my skin is weatherproofed against them.

By the time I leave the barn, the rain has completely lifted. Part of me is ready for Pops to be waiting directly outside of the door in ambush, just like one of the old scream tests he'd do with me. I'm equally prepared for him to be swimming among the puddles of the grass field, soaking up all the rain's moisture and incorporating it into himself to grow taller and strong and reconstitute through water into an adult-sized fleshghost. But the sun is a soothing heat on my shoulders and the ground seems to be drying up at an accelerated rate. How long has it been since I left the party? I've lost track; it seems like days.

When I reach the SpeedThrone, the muddy soil around it has dried. It's a relief, in my exhausted state, to sit down and be able to finish the trek home without walking. I fear that I'll arrive back to Beverly and Dennis fraught with worry and searching for me, perhaps quite angry; my disappearance may have ruined the cotillion.

I'm not sure how to explain my absence. Perhaps I'll say that I fell and hit my head on something, and that my actions after that point are not accessible to memory.

Gingerly, I wheel in the back door expecting to be met with silence, or in the worst case, the conversational sounds of Beverly and Dennis filing a missing persons report with officers of the law. The party, however, is in full swing. At the end of the hallway, I

see Beverly's giant white straw hat with Dixie trim careening across her head as she convulses with laughter. Perhaps the chaos will allow me to slip upstairs and change. I chart a tentative course for the stair lift when she turns and spots me.

“Good God Earleen, where have you been? Get on in here, let's get this show on the road! Did you spill something on your dress? You have got to try the pecan pie Donna brought, I would just cut off my *leg* for a piece of that pie.”

I accelerate the SpeedThrone forward to follow her; various guests part around me to make way. “I never realized they adopted a handicapped,” one says to another, who agrees it is both valiant and Christian to feed/clothe one of society's undesirables.

It is at this point that a waiter bends down to my chair's height with a tray and offers me a glass of champagne. My eyes widen in surprise then look around to confirm that it's not just this waiter but all the party's help. Beverly has done them up in blackface.

She rings a large bell. “Alright now, everyone quiet down. We planned this party with a twofold purpose of course: to keep southern tradition alive, and to show off our beautiful-in-spirit daughter Earleen. But I am very pleased to say that we're going to be able to do even better than that. Let's all please make a circle around Earleen, shall we? Look at her in that chair. What a hoot! We are having fun here today am I right?”

Everyone lines in around me and gives a thunderous applause. A young white boy with black gloves and a painted black face then enters the circle, walks up to me, and bends down.

“Mistress Earleen, my name is Henry and I am the property of Master Huckle Breedwell. My good owner asked me to bring this token of his affection to you.” He reaches into his pocket and opens a box with a ring inside. The room's lights dim and a

spotlight falls upon my body; when I squint upwards I see the vague shape of someone in blackface operating it from the stairs.

The light draws attention to some blemishes on the dress, including a black stain that emanates outward from my crotch in every direction as well as the colostrum that has leaked out of my breasts and made a large wet circle overtop each nipple.

The self-inventory of the state of my costume is cut short, however, when the audience parts again to make way for Huckle with a series of appreciative gasps. He is wearing an all-white suit with a black string bow tie and riding down the hallway on a white horse.

“Earleen, I have come to ask your hand in marriage.”

The room erupts in applause. “My new son in law!” Beverly exclaims, clapping and beaming. The young boy in blackface slides the engagement ring onto my finger, then bows. Soon a sea of hands are lifting me from the SpeedThrone and up onto the horse to sit behind Huckle. The motion makes my breasts leak more; the entire top half of my dress is drenched by the time I’m positioned behind him on the horse and we reverse down the hallway and out into the back yard, where the battle reenactment actors are waiting to begin.

“Ma’am, would you please blow the horn to officially start the bold combat?” I reach down from atop the horse and grab the cornet he extends to me. When I blow it makes a sad and flatulent decrescendo.

“Charge!” a man yells.

The fight begins. Because no one at the party is dressed like a Union soldier, it looks like a brawl designed to settle an internal matter within one singular company. Whenever

a man is shot or speared, he feigns death through lengthy exaggerated motions that first involve grabbing the wound and making loud verbal pronouncements, “Woe is me!” “I have been reduced to simple meat!” Then he staggers around the battlefield and finally falls to the ground and begins shaking before sitting up in one last final gasp for life.

When the battle is over, a replica cannon is wheeled out and fired off into the grass field. I wonder if Pops is still crawling around out there, and if so whether or not it’s possible for him to step into the trajectory of one of the steel balls.

This patriotic display is followed by fireworks.

“We had to get a county permit,” Beverly shouts. “Hold on to your hats.”

They light up the entire sky. Huckle draws me close to him on top of the horse and my breasts leak onto his shoulders. He reaches a few fingers back to my dress to feel then rubs his fingertips together. “You are just soaked. Tears of joy. My mother said you’d be emotional. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. This is the day you’ve dreamt about ever since you were a little girl.”

Most of my childhood dreams involved Pops being eaten by a bear and me then being able to fall asleep without fear of waking up to him needling me with a knife and demanding I show him my batteries or else he’ll cut off the tips of all my fingers. Once I’d discovered what it felt like to give myself over fully to vulnerable unconsciousness, finally unleashed from the pervasive fear that prevented me from getting true rest in any sense of the word, the fantasy ended with my peaceful death in my kennel, my eyes closed, and the bear returning several years later to take my bones back to her cave for her little bear cub to play with.

During the last of the fireworks, Beverly and Dennis bring out a cake that reads: SHE

SAID *YES!* The sky is littered with sparks and Beverly begins to light candles on the cake. *Happy Birthday Pops*, I think. *Welcome back.*

CHAPTER 11
THE CEREMONY

The expulsion of Pops from my body felt like I'd suddenly been rid of a tapeworm. I had a ravenous hunger and began to replace the all the fat that Pops had sucked from my bones. Huckle appreciated watching me eat so much.

“Look at you go,” he'd say when we were on a date at Chicken Church. “You took down that Brimstone Burger in seconds flat. Your mouth is like a racecar's pit team. The boys at work all said ‘You wait Huckle, the moment you get a ring on your girl's finger she's gonna let herself go,’ but don't you listen to them. You're a long way from fat. Take some time to enjoy yourself. You've got our whole marriage to diet. I say we celebrate. I like your style. Sitting across the booth from you is like watching a pie-eating contest at the fair. It's even better because you're so tiny. You're like one of those magicians who makes cars disappear, except it's food instead of cars. There's nothing magical about a fat person eating a lot, but you're such a little bird, it's unexplainable where it all goes. Do you have a trap door beneath your jacket I don't know about? I'm just kidding. Wouldn't mind searching to see though, if you catch my drift.”

It is fully caught in the back of his truck on the night of my seventeenth birthday when we pull off the road into a patch of trees. “Earleen,” he says, “or I guess I should say my fiancé. The time has come for me to give you the gift of womanhood.” He starts to remove his belt then pauses. “Should I take off my pants by myself, or is that like me unwrapping your present for you? Do you want to do the honors? Here, let me help you out of your clothes first. Why don't we put the radio on? You're lucky you don't have to worry about pregnancy since we're already engaged. If you get pregnant tonight, and I

wouldn't even doubt that because I am really good at sports, I mean if I have great aim in bowling and throwing baseballs, it only makes sense for the same level of agility and accuracy to be present through every cellular level of my body, and if it happens, well, instead of feeling shame and depression and having to go off to some unwed mother's center and forfeit your baby to an adoptive couple who are more able to financially provide, you get to rejoice that your family has started. It's no big deal for women to be pregnant on their wedding day anymore. Just a head start really. You don't have to be afraid to tell me when it happens, I won't get angry or feel like my life is ruined like most men. If you think about it, it won't really affect my day-to-day life much at all, you know? You're the one who'll be carrying it and then getting up with it in the middle of the night and staying home with it all day. If I need a break from its crying and it isn't time for me to go to work, I'll just go out with the boys for awhile. So basically just lie back and feel grateful that you're one of the lucky ones. Listen to the music. Did you tell me about how many scars you have? I mean I know you told me but did you *really* tell me? I wasn't expecting all this. If you were a table you'd be for sale at one of those scratch-n-dent showrooms. No matter. My first car was a beater, dented to hell on the outside but it ran like a dream. It's all the same under the hood, right? It all looks the same in the dark?"

It lasted roughly the length of the song that came on, which I did listen to. Its lyrics were about stealing a bottle of wine from someone else who had stolen it.

When it was over and I sat up, I thought I saw a tiny black handprint on the outside of the truck window and a tiny circle of condensation, as if from the smallest mouth, just above it.

Beverly was adamant the wedding occur just after Christmas on the anniversary of Alabama's secession from the Union. Planning the event became her personal obsession. She had my dress custom-made based on a dress Dolly Parton wore to the Country Music Awards in 1978. "I also took the liberty of getting you this sparkly underwear set to have on beneath it. Look at the bottom of these panties. They call that a sunburst pattern. Enough glitter to blind you. Same with the bra top. Little cutouts on each cup in the shape of stars. Other people call it lingerie, but I told the salesman that in my mind it's a grandbaby makin suit. This will knock Huckle clear off his feet. When you're raising twins and pregnant with triplets his retinas will still be burning from the glare of these sparkle panties on your wedding night. Don't you even worry your pretty mouth telling me thank you, just put them on for me and let me see how you look. Who cares about all those scars when your derriere is lighting up the room! My my Earleen, you are going to a real vision in these."

On the day of the wedding, I wake up to Grans wheeling into my bedroom and Beverly chasing close behind her. "Spit them out now, Mom. She's got your 'something blue,' Earleen. I got them out of her jewelry box and set them on the dresser and the next thing I knew the little minx had them in her mouth. Come on, Ma." Beverly pins Grans' nostrils shut until her slack jaw opens. It's early in the morning and her dentures aren't in yet. Her wet gums and tongue combined with the blue gems look like some amorphous ocean creature undulating in the deep. Beverly quickly picks them up off Grans' lap when they tumble from her lips. "She cleaned them for us! Shiny and new. Let me just dry them off with a little polish." She rubs them in a fold of her bathrobe then sets them

down on my nightstand. “These are a nice wedding trinity: old, borrowed, *and* blue. Three in one. And your sparkle panties are new.” She claps her hands together. “It’s show time, you precious bride!”

The church processional begins with Beverly pushing Grans down the aisle. Her chair has been decorated with white ribbons that lift and ripple when she’s in motion. After a few seconds Grans engages the electrical controls and the chair speeds forward down the aisle away from Beverly, its tires ripping the white paper on the ground. She crashes into the altar then reverses and jerkily positions herself in the front row. “She wants to get this show on the road!” Beverly jokes, running after Grans; there is an audible chuckle from the attendees. *You have no idea*, I think. The sooner the ceremony is over, the sooner I’ll be out of the house, the sooner Grans gets her gigantic crib back.

The rest of the ceremony proceeds without incident. Huckle says his vows and though the reverend accidentally skips over the part where I am supposed to say mine, a gold ring is placed onto my finger and I hold Huckle’s ring out for him. He slips his finger through, but first he moves it in and out of the ring a few times in a lewd gesture and winks at me. When the reverend asks if there are any objections, Grans does a small figure 8 in her chair but I’m the only one who seems to notice.

After the wedding, Huckle and I stand in a long receiving line saying hello to the guests. “Welcome to our family, dear Earleen,” Huckle’s mother says, stepping forward. Her angle of approach is slightly off and her outstretched hands accidentally close around the statue of the Virgin Mary to my left instead. “You’re the daughter we never had but now have,” she whispers into its ear. Huckle’s father steps forward and shakes my hand.

“Best of luck to you,” he says quietly. Huckle’s mother detaches herself from the

Virgin Mary and her left hand finds his father's beard braid, which serves as a rope of orientation for her to hold onto as they walk. "Love is a battlefield."

Candi surges forward and gives me a giant hug. An open wine cooler is sticking up out of her purse. "Little Earleen, oh my god, congratulations." She smiles at Huckle. "I'll tell her all about what to do with her tongue in the bedroom," she says.

"Whoa!" Huckle laughs. "We've got a live one! Earleen your friend Candi is one to hold onto. Hang out with her as much as you like. Bring a pen and take notes on everything she has to say."

We transition to the reception hall, where Candi spends most of the night sitting on the DJ's lap and necking. Chicken Church caters the buffet. The chicken and biscuits and sides are arranged amidst faux white satin in oversized ceramic buckets that have white, feathery wings on their sides; a white stick that holds a halo above each bucket lets guests know the wing's flavor, which is anthropomorphized in titles such as "Saint Teriyaki Ginger Onion."

On an opposing table of red satin, a small statue of the devil is igniting the propane burner of a pot of chocolate fondue with his pitchfork. *May She Be An Angel in the Kitchen*, a sign overtop the white table reads, *And a Devil in the Bedroom*.

The cake is a large sheet with a pictorial scene of a forest. Huckle, rendered in frosting, stands in the middle wearing orange and black camouflage. A long hunting rifle rests at his feet. In his hands he holds a deer carcass up by its antlers. Blood is gushing forth from its chest. The deer's head has been replaced with my own, a veil clipped into the bits of my hair that are strewn around the antlers. *Shot Through the Heart* is written below the image in cursive icing.

Halfway into the reception, Beverly stands up to make a speech. “Huckle, Earleen, I can’t wait for y’all to give me some grandbabies!” she squeals. “Huckle don’t worry now, I hear they’re fun to make.” Laughter echoes through the room. Huckle gives a thumbs-up sign. “Have as many as you can; Dennis and I will take any you don’t want!”

“There’s a chance that a recent supernatural pregnancy irreparably scorched my womb,” I mention, but the words are drowned out by applause.

Huckle gets up next. “Not everyone knows this,” he says, undoing his bowtie, “but you could say Dennis set me and Earleen up, without him even knowing it—I met her at his clinic! So thank you Dennis, for having your clinic, and putting Earleen to work out front. Now I know what you all must me thinking . . . you’re scratching your heads going, ‘Wait a minute, doesn’t Dennis run a clinic for women who aren’t good at getting pregnant? Was Huckle trying to have a *baby*?’” The room roils with laughter. *He should be a comedian* a woman across the table from me exclaims. “Nope, I wasn’t there to try to become some scientific experiment that laughs in the face of God. I’d taken a baseball to the groin and I had to make sure the Breedwell family jewels hadn’t broken into pieces of stained glass if you catch my drift. Now on our first date Earleen said not to let Dennis know about my accident because he’d keep testing my sperms to make sure there weren’t any floaters, and I’m thinking okay, that furtive request goes against my honest nature. But I know some people prefer to live their lives in deceptive secrecy and I thought you know what, if Earleen is one of those people, maybe I’ve been brought into her life to try to show her the value of truth. Of course enacting that type of drastic change in another individual is a long and winding road that can take years or decades to travel, so I said sure, I’ll honor this demand of Earleen’s now in order to win her trust and be in a good

position to beneficially influence her later on. But guess what happened after our first date: no sooner did I get home than my phone rang and Beverly was saying ‘Hello Huckle, did you have a nice time with Earleen tonight? If she did anything that put you off please let me know and I can speak to her about it in a roundabout way, she’s behind on socialization skills and even a few other developmental aspects because her parents were drug addicts who kept her abused and starved and she was largely incarcerated inside a dog crate for most of her childhood, but she’s very bright and I know she could learn to be an excellent partner.’ Well I said ‘Beverly I appreciate you asking. I had a fine time tonight. You could maybe suggest to Earleen that she make slightly more thoughtful expressions when I’m speaking, and that she generally seem more fascinated at my comments, not by interrupting to say *That’s interesting, Huckle*, but just by showing that through minor movements in the musculature of her face and upper neck. But Beverly,’ I said, ‘the most important and beloved quality, in fact the foundation of any great relationship is the ability to listen, and Earleen is not a bad listener, so I’m willing to forgive a lot.’ And though Beverly was of course thrilled that I take characteristics such as communication into account when choosing a date and I’m not one of those shallow guys who will only speak to a girl if she has a nice, excuse me for being crude here, rack as they call it, because Earleen doesn’t have much in the way of breasts, really all her secondary sex characteristics are stunted, in a lot of ways her body is like a child’s, Beverly said ‘Huckle there is one thing we have to ask you to do in order to continue dating our daughter. I really apologize for this but Earleen is our one and only and we don’t get another shot so we have to insist. Don’t worry it isn’t a background check or anything. We’re just going to need to test your sperm and make sure there won’t be any

reproductive hiccups in you and Earleen's baby-making. Her period was very delayed due to malnutrition but she's gotten it now and when we had the dentist cap her teeth we decided to have her fully sedated so that Dennis could also bring in an ultrasound machine and do a sonogram of her uterus and ovaries without her feeling traumatized and worthless if there was an issue, in which case we'd have to screen her potential mates for their receptiveness to prolific adoption, but Earleen's parts were cyst and scar-free, the tea cup and the saucer and the sugar bowl and all of it, probably the only part of her that isn't scarred'—and let me just say here that I thought Beverly was exaggerating with that last scar comment but she really is not, beneath that white dress she's in right now Earleen is as scratched up as a record on the floor of a cathouse. So I said, 'Actually Beverly, I met Earleen in your husband's clinic,' then I explained the scenario and offered to do another good-faith test because even then, and Beverly will attest to this understanding, she and I both just kind of knew that things between Earleen and I were going to head to the altar and I wanted to fully ease my future mother-in-law's mind." There are more awws from all corners of the reception room. "And when she and Dennis got the results back and saw how potent I am, it was an absolutely done deal. Let me tell you all what their wedding present to me is—and this will be a surprise to Earleen, where is the photographer? Can you get a shot of Earleen's face when I announce this? Dennis and Beverly have bought us a *house* right across the street from them. And you all know what a distinguished neighborhood that is. One of those houses is like winning the lottery, not the Powerball or MegaMillions of course, but the millionaire raffle if two people were to win at once and have to split it. For the past few months Beverly has been giving me all these catalogs and having me pick out electronics and big screen televisions

and even this heated rack that you put in the bathroom that makes your towels feel like they've just come from the dryer. Anyhow, all this to say, I sure am glad I went in to get my sperm checked. Could we all please lift our glasses up into the air? I would now like to make a toast. Not to Earleen directly, but Earleen babe this is certainly for you in a roundabout way." His glass moves up above his head. "Let us drink to the ball I took in the balls that lead me to you, my wife." Everyone makes an "Aww" sound and then clanks on their glasses demanding Huckle and I seal his tribute with a kiss.

Afterwards I'm encouraged to have champagne and dance. Candi catches my bouquet and immediately accosts the DJ's microphone for a victory speech. "Who wants it," she slurs, a reflective hand pointing not to the bouquet but to her body, "which of you motherfuckers is ready to make me an honest woman." Beverly gives a signal to the DJ and music begins to swell from the speakers suggesting to Candi that her speaking window is up, "I learned that trick from the Oscars," I hear Beverly say, "they cut them off with music if their thank-you list goes over a certain time limit." But Candi will not be silenced. Her eyes focus down into slits and she surveys the crowd. "I've slept with every unmarried bachelor in here and more than a few of the married ones." The DJ raises the volume of the song "Oronoco Flow" by Enya louder still. Candi turns to him. "And you I'm sleeping with tonight. All I do is give. When does my Christmas come." *Sail away, sail away, sail away.* "I am twenty-six and what do I have to show for being super freaking nice to every guy I meet." *Sail away, sail away, sail away.* "I got pregnant on Valentine's day two different years, but I do not have any kids. Do you understand what I'm saying?" *Sail away, sail away, sail away.* "When I was in middle school these older guys fed me some moon juice and then took me to this van they used to hauled

around instruments for their band in and the next week all these Polaroids of the three of us were going around and no one has ever treated me the same after that.” *Carry me on the waves to the lands I’ve never been.*

When we exit the church’s reception hall, something on the floor in front of a door with a plaque reading BOILER ROOM catches my eye—little black circles that for a moment seem to be shaped like baby feet. I’ve seen so many sets of two ink footprints on the framed copies birth certificates brought into the clinic by proud successful mothers to be hung up on the wall. *It’s the champagne*, I think, Huckle has whisked me up into his arms and is carrying me out to the truck. By the door Candi is on the ground violently wrenching into the pot of a plastic palm tree and the DJ is standing behind her and looking at his watch.

CHAPTER 12

THE VIEWING

The morning after our wedding, Dennis and Beverly walked over to our house across the street to make sure we were getting settled in properly. When Huckle was out back showing Beverly the location he'd decided upon for the infinity pool, Dennis reached into his jacket and took out a card, which he slid across the table to me then quickly went outside to join the others. The front of the card read "Congratulations" and the inside was blank for personal message, where he'd written, "It is my sincere hope that you will one day join me in the fertilization room," along with a note detailing his desire to pay for any classes I take at the local college should I want to become a physician's assistant. Though the thought of collaborating on endless pregnancies with another father-figure held a certain amount of trauma, I was touched by the message and did indeed enroll and begin courses, though I didn't mention this to Beverly or Huckle. I went directly to the office hours of each professor on my first day and explained that my academic journey would have to be peppered with bouts of motherhood, then made note of any who indicated they were not unwilling to work with students who needed to simultaneously attend class and produce infants.

It does not take long for me and Huckle to fall into a nightly mating ritual during which Huckle either mutes the television or noticeably reduces its volume. "Gotta keep Beverly happy," he says. "Can't skip even a night. She would argue the night we skip is the night that would've gotten you pregnant. Do you think she has our bedroom under surveillance? Wouldn't surprise me one bit. We skip a night and we'll hear about it. She'll call first thing the next morning. 'How would you know, Beverly?' I might ask

her, and she'd answer, 'I just know.' Two or three nights of that and we'd end up with a live-in security guard who sits at the end of our bed and tells us when it's time for business then watches the whole way through to make sure there's no operator error. That would be fine with me too though. I've never been shy. I don't have any reason to be. My body is textbook from head to toe. I can understand why *you* might feel the need to cover up in front of strange eyes, but it won't come to that I don't think. Not unless you start getting so-called headaches or something. I'd have to be honest with Beverly about that. I couldn't let her get the impression that I'm not reporting for duty. 'Beverly,' I'd have to say, 'Earleen is showing some resistance towards breeding.' That kind of thing is usually just nervous tension though, I think. It wouldn't mean we'd have to replace you. We'd just get some pills to put in your food and help you relax at night. Dennis is a doctor. I'm sure there are a variety of ways we could bypass your frigidity, should it develop. But you're no cruel saboteur. Not my Earleen. You're not one to lock your legs together thereby crushing like a paper lantern betwixt your icy thighs both Beverly's desire for grandchildren to love and my prolific carnal needs. Who knows what might happen to me were I not able to express my seminal fluid inside you on a daily basis. Let me tell you what it's like to be a man Earleen: every second I'm not ejaculating or actively working towards an ejaculation, I feel like I'm holding my breath underwater. A buildup of sperm is no less dangerous than a lack of oxygen. Throughout the timeline of mankind, I can't tell you how many terrible acts would've been prevented if women had dutifully stepped up to the plate in the bedroom, or Neanderthal cave, or wherever. The threads that bind civilized society as we know it together are tenuous and thin, Earleen. A good wife is often the only thing preventing a man from abominable acts of rape and murder. We are

beasts through and through. Thank goodness I'm able to use your body nightly and tame any brute fury that threatens to rise up within me. There will be a few challenging weeks after each child when your sex will be unavailable, having too recently functioned as a birth canal, but we can make it through those by meditating and using your hands and your mouth."

One night as I am closing up at the clinic, I feel a drop of something hit my head, then a spatter of black liquid lands on my computer's keyboard. When I tilt my head back I see a black stain spreading across the ceiling panel directly above me.

An odd temperature, as though I've just taken in a sip of engine coolant, spreads throughout my chest. I don't want to say his name because it seems like that alone could make him appear. But I remind myself of our bargain, and all I did for him—everything he asked, in fact: he's no longer a ghost, he can't simply materialize before me. "Pops?" I call.

There's a rustle in the ceiling. I go to the janitor's closet and grab a broom then hit at the stained panel several times with its handle, even lifting the panel up a little. There's a skittering noise; more liquid drips down. That night as Huckle climbs atop me, I tell myself that I cannot let superstition and fear continue to populate my life. I'll confront the issue head on, I decide.

The next morning I show Dennis the stain and tell him about the sound. Pest control is brought out. Eventually a worker returns with black ooze all over his goggles and thick rubber gloves. "Something has been running around in your air conditioning duct," he says.

“Opossums?” asks Dennis.

I’m staring at the ooze on the worker’s glove, which is bubbling as though heated. “Do opossums leave those sort of stains?” I ask.

“Maybe if something liquefies them in their tracks. We will put a cage around the exhaust fan at the back of the building. That’s likely the access point.”

I try to stay positive, but soon I’m seeing the baby footprints everywhere. When I wake in the morning and go to make coffee, I find one on the side of the stainless steel espresso machine in our kitchen.

It isn’t until Easter dinner, though, that I really start to panic.

“I don’t know if Grans should join us at the table or not,” Beverly says. “The poor thing. Her spring chicken days are certainly over. Of course death is natural. She’s got to move out of the way to make room for all the new souls pouring in.” Beverly then takes my face into her hands and beams. “Like my little grandbaby growing in you.” Her finger taps my nose with a smile. “Wait...oh, Earleen, you knew didn’t you?” She looks over at Huckle and slaps his arm. “You sly dog! Why didn’t you tell her?”

“I thought I’d let you announce it the first time. I can tell her about the next one.”

“Earleen, do you not have the most thoughtful husband on earth? Let me catch you up now, I can see you’re confused. How would I know you’re pregnant before you do, you’re thinking. It’s this little device I ordered from Japan. I put one in every toilet in your house. It can detect even the slightest trace of hCG when you keep the tanks filled with a special litmus fluid that looks just like water to the average user, which would be you. Once it does, it sends a signal to this little receiver.” She takes a blinking wand on a string out from beneath her blouse. “See how that green light is pulsing steady? If there

were to be any sort of drop in your daily levels, that you leave in your toilets I mean, it would change to yellow. You're going strong! Almost three weeks now. But Grans, sweet goodness. I've never seen someone turn downhill so fast."

Dennis wheels her in. All the hair on top of her head has fallen off. Her eyes are wide and completely bloodshot and her pupils have flattened out into horizontal dashes. The most frightening change, however, is an inky baby footprint planted in the middle of her forehead.

"What's that smudge on her face?" I ask. My chest is pounding and I reach down and place a hand upon the alleged baby in my stomach. *There's a logical explanation, I repeat to myself over and over. You are safe and your baby, if you are indeed pregnant, will be safe too.*

"It's the darndest thing." Beverly takes a monogrammed handkerchief out of her pocket, licks its tip, and begins to scrub at Grans' forehead. "She wakes up with these marks all over her body now. The other day her whole face was covered in them."

I push back my chair and stand. "We have to move. All of us. Relocate elsewhere as quickly as possible."

Everyone laughs. "Earleen, will you help me bring in the deviled egg plates?"

"You have to believe me. What's causing those marks on Grans is a legitimate evil force in the world." Having finally spoken up, I do not back away from the truth. "It's my father."

"Pregnancy is making you downright loopy, Earleen. Don't let her be driving around like this Huckle. Earleen honey, your father blew up. Remember? Then you came to live with us. Did I forget to put out the napkin rings?"

“He did blow up, but he found a way back! You have to believe me, we’re all in *grave danger*.”

“I’m in grave danger of starvation if I don’t get some food in my belly ASAP,” Huckle jokes. “That ham sure does smell divine, Beverly.”

“No one’s gonna starve in this house.” Beverly beams. “Dinner is served.”

At home that night I take a pregnancy test, one of a large bulk package from the clinic that Dennis and Beverly included in our wedding gifts, to confirm Beverly’s technology. It’s true. Beverly was right.

Huckle mounts me, and I begin to feel silly about my scene at dinner. Of course baby Pops isn’t terrorizing Grans in her room at night. Everything is going to be fine. I have an odd calm communing for a moment with the baby. “I didn’t know I’d be able to have any real children,” I say out loud.

“Keep the chit-chat hot for a minute babe. Until I’m done. Talk about washing a car or something.”

The baby inside me is silent; I don’t feel it wringing my insides like I’m its marionette. Huckle finishes then forgets to climb off me before falling asleep. When I manage to wriggle out from under him, I continue my conversation with the fetus. “You’re a very polite passenger.” When I add that I can’t wait to meet it, I realize how much I mean this. There will be islands of moments, without Huckle or Beverly or anyone else, when I will be alone with the child. It’s a sort of freedom that appeals to me, and one I can hardly imagine—it will be a person I can interact with on my own terms.

In the morning I find a note from Huckle next to the English muffins:

Dear Earleen,

Woke up early and worked out my biceps with the Tone-O-Matic ProFlex muscle stimulation arm electrode pads that I ordered from the Maxmale catalog & though they did expand my size and definition I also experienced overwhelming increased blood flow and minor numbness that resulted in me spilling

my creatine Glandshake Express all over the front living room could you please mop

it up? Also Beverly called and the gist of her message is that Grans has assumed room temperature as of last night if you catch my drift, I know you will be sad because you have a caring nature but now that she's gone I feel like it's okay to tell you, she was always trying to hit you with her motor chair. Believe me those collisions were not accidents, I looked into her eyes once when she was approaching you dead on and saw nothing beyond a cold steel gaze of intent. In elementary school there was a plumpy kid we all called Wheeze who would do the same thing whenever a group of us did bumper cars with him at the fair, it was fun and games to us but to him it was a ruthless cat-and-mouse chase. He grew up to kill a hobo. You are in many ways an innocent so I will not tell you what he did with the transient man's spleen. Let's talk automated blinds later. Fixed window treatments = getting on my last nerve.

Your Lucky Charm,

Huckle

It takes roughly two days for Beatrice to discard all of Grans' belongings from the home. While I don't want to believe that Pops was involved with her death, the mounting evidence is growing stronger, and because of the baby I don't feel like I can ignore it. If it takes leaving on my own and hiding away, that's what I'll do. The fetus that's inside me now won't panic and flounce like a tetherball if I try to hop on a bus.

Though I can't help but wonder if leaving is exactly what he wants me to do? What if he's trying to chase me out into the world's cold streets where he can have at me without anyone else's intervention?

And what does he want? Does he need an adult in the world to do his dirtier biddings? I imagine he could find someone far better suited to this than myself. If he's trying to get back into his old business, I'm just not what he's looking for. My face and small-framed body are better suited to being a Red Cross campaign image than to shaking down people to make them pay for their last bag of drugs.

"Grans sure had a *smell*, didn't she? Some weird ointment? Like mothballs soaked in eucalyptus? Even her jewelry smelled. I know some people would say *Beverly Stark, you are a madwoman to throw away gold!* My answer? Small price to pay to rid your house of the odor of a stale tomb. And I swear to goodness gracious Earleen, if you thought it was bad when you lived here you should've smelled her near the end. It got even worse. It was like..."

"Rotting motor oil?"

"Oh my heavens, exactly! You must've smelled her at Easter dinner. Here I was hoping the brown sugared yams would cover it up. That's like trying to hide Bigfoot's charm stick behind a fig leaf."

The service is closed-casket. Dennis gives the entire office the day off so that all the workers can come and her service will be better attended. I sit next to Candi, who elbows me during the liturgy to offer a sip from the Mad Dog 20/20 she is smuggling in her purse. “No thanks,” I whisper. “I’m pregnant.”

“That makes two of us,” she says. “Until Saturday at 10:30 am. Then it will just be you.” She closes her eyes and drinks from the bottle the way people who have been rescued in the desert drink from canteens.

After the ceremony, I sneak away from the crowd milling around outside the reception room and try to lift the lid of Grans’ casket open for a peek, but it is locked. Feeling I must know, I go find one of the funeral parlor workers.

“I need to see the body,” I say.

“You really do not,” he says.

“I do,” I say.

“Can’t let you do that. I’m the general groundskeeper here. That means I have to clean up what happens once you get a look.”

“It’s incredibly important that I see her.”

He slides his glasses down to the end of his nose and examines me through their bifocal end.

“I don’t know what happened to that poor woman. I cannot in good conscience expose her corpse to the cold light of day. Bodies that have been locked up in the trunks of cars in the prime of summer for three, four weeks—I handle them without batting an eye. This lady just about made me lose my religion. Do you ever feel like you’re being *punished*?”

I nod.

“I’m a grown man but I’m not afraid to admit this. When her body came in I fell down on my knees and said what in the name of the precious Lord Baby Jesus did I ever do to deserve this. I went way back, all through my life. Two tours of Vietnam. Sure, I did some stuff I’m not proud of, but nothing so atrocious as to warrant this. I feel confident in saying that there is not one serial killer that has ever walked the planet who deserves to have *that* albatross sitting in *that* coffin over there you are asking me to open hung around his neck. Now we people in the funeral business aren’t as cavalier as other folks are about passing on into the garden of solitude, we do not say things such as ‘over my dead body’ when one of our co-workers asks us can he please have the last glazed donut after he has already eaten more than his share. So understand that I mean it when I say you would have to literally end my life and steal the key from the belt on my waist in order to open up that coffin and view it.”

When I start to open my mouth he stops me.

“I know what you’re going to ask already. ‘What if I paid you,’ you’re going to say. We get offers of financial compensation in exchange for time alone with the bodies on a daily basis. Usually we figure well, they are already dead. Some man shows up right after a young girl’s funeral and claims he’s her long lost uncle who is feuding with the family so he couldn’t come to the service but she was the apple of his eye, etcetera. Perhaps he has on a fake beard or some other easy-to-see-through disguise thinking it will keep us from pegging him as the guy who showed up after a young girl’s funeral last week and said the same thing. Abominable, sure, but it isn’t like she’s going to feel it. On the other hand we all have living children who need braces and college tuition. Everything is

relative is what I'm trying to say. But I will not take one cent from you to look at this lady. That cash would be a monkey's paw that would bring me to ruin. Her body is straight up cursed. You've got that look in your eye though. That corpse-viewing fever. I know it well. Can I show you another body instead? No? If it's oddities you're after I can still satisfy. Okay, okay. Well now that I get a better look at you, I can see the score. I've been in this business long enough to know that if I flat out deny you you'll just be back here tonight prying into the coffin with a crowbar. I'll tell you what I can do. I'll give you this key and then I'll go on my lunch break. If you release the apocalypse from that coffin, I do not want be in the immediate splash-zone of its wrath. Have your look and then lock it back up and slide the key beneath the office door. Don't say I didn't warn you. You will never be able to enjoy a sunset or a butterfly or the goodness of any other form of life ever again. Okay. Give me a five-minute lead. Be discreet. Anyone catches you with that key, I'll say you bit me and stole it. Have a nice day."

Nothing about what is inside the coffin is identifiable, on first or second glance, as Grans. Her body has twisted and dried into a large black raisin roughly three feet long and half a foot wide. The only feature retained on her face is her mouth; its lips are sucked outwards and hardened, as though something drained the life out of her through them. Small black spores of ooze are all over the coffin's inside; it seems like she has been in there for millennia. When I close the casket and lock it, I know that the rules have changed again. Pops isn't just back, he's back to killing.

CHAPTER 13
VISITATION DAY

In the coming months, I'm on a vigilant daily search for any sign of Pops around. I encouraged Huckle to get a high-grade security system, which he was happy to do, and I spend any moments not working or going to school seated behind its control panel, which has video monitors of the home's periphery at several different angles. I don't spot anything though, not even during several all-night vigils. Eventually I allow myself to enter into the whirlpool of pregnancy excitement Beverly is swirling in; each week she brings over a load of preparatory gifts and has Dennis perform an in-home ultrasound. She blows up these grainy photographs into matted and framed 11x13 prints that soon decorate the walls of both of our houses. Beverly starts using them to create customizable products of all sorts: mouse pads, throw blankets, t-shirts, coffee mugs, tote bags. I'm expecting a delivery of a large adhesive decal of the fetus Beverly ordered for the bottom of our infinity pool when the doorbell rings.

I don't see anyone at the peephole. I assume it is a package drop-and-go but when I open the door and look down at the mat I am not greeted by a cardboard box.

Nothing's there. But I know he's standing off to my right side even before I turn to look; on this side of my face it feels like someone's holding a magnifying glass up to a window's light, and my scar on that arm is aching with remembered heat. I need to look but I cannot. Instead, I say, "He's here," to no one at all, or perhaps to the baby, in a voice so calm and flat it sounds like a recording. Everything human inside me seems to be draining away; it feels like my veins are pooling out into my stomach and filling it again with a cold pregnancy.

My feet make a slight shift in the carpet, rotating my body just an inch closer to where I know he's standing. Not looking directly at him, I see his shape only as an inchoate shadow; my eyes search the screen of the television, the glass top of the table for a possible reflection, but the angle isn't right. I turn a little more and now I can see movement, streams of Pops' watery ink. He starts to move towards me in quick thuds. Suddenly I'm gripped with the fear that he'll run and his hands will be on me before I've had a chance to fully see him; the thought of not knowing his exact form when he enters my house transforms me to bravery and I look at him head-on. I see the shapes of little hands and teeth then I shut my eyes.

Inside my blank head, the only sounds of the house are my amplified breathing and my heart; they are so loud I sound like a monster. In the great distance there is a noise of an indifferent ruthlessness in the weather—perhaps wind, perhaps rain, a whisper of assault. I force my eyes back open and my breath twists out of me. There is no wind or rain. There is only Pops breathing a coal patch of moisture onto the window by the door. His skin and scalp are emptying themselves of something. There's a liquid flowing across his body, tightly cohering to his skin. I briefly imagine a marble statue whose fountain has been filled with fresh soil.

Pops' adult face and hair have fully returned. They've grown into his body in a way his arms and legs have not. It's as if Pops' adult face had been hidden beneath a baby layer of fat at birth. Now the months of living have pulled the skin taut; the mask his birth afforded him is stretched gaunt and lenticular. These fleshy cells hang beneath his jaw like a sagging curtain that has been pulled away to reveal his true form. I walk out on the porch, startled even now at his new size and his inability to change it. He could not swell

up and tower over me, I know, but I do not now what else he might be able to do in its place. Standing next to him, the dead smell hit me instantly, a muck of fish and bile.

He lifts his arms skyward. It takes me a moment to figure out this is a request. Holding my breath, I bend forward. He's slick and sticky. Taking him into my arms and leaning backwards to pull him inside, I actually hold him for a moment because it is a choice. Once I let him go, I know my choices will be over.

"You're pregnant," he says.

His voice is still his own, just slighter. His small size hasn't raised the sound of its pitch the way I expected; instead it just limits its capacity for volume. "You're pregnant," he repeats.

I drop him to the floor and shut the door, looking over to Beverly and Dennis' house to make sure neither one of them is standing outside and watching on.

"No," I answer. I mean it as a denial, but it has a ring of anticipation to it: I'm also saying no to whatever it is that he wants.

His wet hands grab at my thighs, parting them as if to look inside. I kick him off and his head flies back, but he doesn't appear to feel pain; instead a sheet of black splatter hits the wall in near slow-motion due to the weight of the fluids. He produces a laugh, and this is indeed childlike; his size and the tiny quivers of his chest betray the deep creases in his face, the stringy hair and glabrous patches of his skull—in the places where his hair is missing, a grey membrane of brain seemed to shine through.

When his face stops moving, any traces of his smile are impossible to see; his jowls hang so thin and slack they seem incapable of expression. I realize I can see through the skin dangling off his face; it's nearly transparent, like the wing of a bat.

“I don’t feel so well,” he says. And then the shutter comes. The whole world stays still while Pops speeds up in a dynamic seizure. He’s blurring out across the space in front of me like the world is furiously trying to erase him. I’m able to catch one thin streak of expression that catches and hangs in the air like the afterimage of a camera’s flash: his eyes are rolled back into an epileptic grimace, his mouth is open, his teeth are sweating small drops of poison.

When it stops he goes slack for a moment, his mopy head twitching lightly in a downturned gaze. “Pops,” I say. In this helpless state within a child’s body, his brow concealed by his hair, I’m able to feel some acute burl on the continuum of sympathy.

His eyes lift to my stomach. “It’s my ticket,” he says, reaching for my leg. “My ticket back to health.”

I push him back from me. The black paw prints he left on my arms and shirt have begun to sting my skin with the sharpness of kerosene. “You already had your ticket.” Spit comes out with my words. Combined with the tears and snot I feel even more grossly akin to his dripping body. “And you killed Grans.”

“This time’s different,” he says. He begins to bend over, wheezing and holding his chest like the air has been knocked out of him. His eyes look up to meet mine; a long trail of black ink spills from his mouth onto the floor.

“I gave you a chance. No more.” I place my hands around his neck and begin to squeeze its slippery trunk. His neck isn’t much wider than my arm. *He’s weak now, I think. After all this time he’s finally weak.* His eyes enter back into his head a little, his body goes slack. Pushing him backwards, I climb on top of his tiny chest and squeeze until my white knuckles lose their grip and all his movement stops. Sobbing, I let myself

fall to the floor beside him with spent relief. It's the same feeling that flooded me after I'd given birth, the thought that I'm finally rid of him.

"You're gone," I say. My voice is a faint cobweb.

"We've got more to talk about."

I sit up and feel my stomach lurch forward. "No." I can't tell if I'm whispering or screaming.

On his neck, crescent-shaped cuts from my fingernails are faintly oozing; it looks like tar. "We could start with my innards," he says.

Pops grabs my hand and holds it to his chest. "No heartbeat," he smiles. "No lungs."

"But you were breathing hard—"

"I do that from time to time. Make the motions. But air isn't going in any more than a heaving fish in your hand would get water." He made the exaggerated puffs of something panicking before death. "Do you remember the time I took you to the gas station?"

I do; it was the only in-town outing of my youth.

"There was a lemonade machine," he continues. "You'd stare into that thing like it was some type of crystal ball."

I remembered. Inside the machine, it looked like it was raining. "So what?"

"Best I can feel, that's what I've got in me. An empty little cave that drips all day, then the drips climb back up the wall and fall all over again."

"You don't have organs?"

"No organs, and no blood."

"Then what drips?"

His hands move to his neck and squeeze. A dark bud of the tar comes off onto his

fingertip, which he spreads between his thumb and then stretches apart like a line of sap.

“This is me, sugar. Before I could appear in liquid, and now I can appear with this.”

“That’s you?” I point to his running nose, the watery ink melting down his face.

“That black stain is you?”

He smiles. “Here and present. I wear this body you gave me like a shoe. I just get inside and make it move. But the thing about shoes is they wear out. You outgrow them. All of the above.”

In a push more urgent than I have ever felt—more urgent than the need to give birth when the time came—I become crazed with the immediate need to kill him. My eyes scan the room and stop on the desk’s letter opener. Jumping to my feet I run to the desk. I expect his ink to bleed out onto the floor and make me fall, or his tongue to grow into a dark tentacle that cinches my waist and throws me to the ground. But I reach for it and soon have it in my hands. Raising it above my head, I charge at Pops. In the tunnel of my vision, his child body falls away; he is only a floating face, a pile of swinging flesh that has wilted from his bones like a starving plant.

I plunge it straight into the side of his neck, then back away.

“I’m not here to bargain.” He reaches up and slides the opener out from his neck. The blade is coated with a thick layer of mess that he licks off. “Last time you thought you had a choice, but you didn’t really. One way or another, you were going to smuggle me back. You just made it easier on yourself by playing along.”

“And easier on you.”

His small finger lifts up into the air, an objection. “You’re assuming a lot, little girl. You think you know it all. I was a gentleman to you. The only scar you have is a few

stretch marks. Other forms of my arrival might not have been so kind to your fair body.”

I turn and walk towards the kitchen, my eyes set on the large new block of glistening knives upon the countertop. But at the same time I feel resignation welling up inside my veins like a drug, flowing evenly through my body until my shaking arms and fingertips take on a calm steadiness. I remind myself that winning against Pops has to be thought of differently than other types of winning: it can't be getting what I want. Instead, I can refuse to let him make me feel, to let his demands terrify me.

“Why are you here?”

“You are pregnant, aren't you? About six weeks.” Walking on his knees, he begins to follow me. “Ask me how I know.”

“I don't care how you know.”

“I have hold of your thread, Earleen. The same cord that let me find you after I died and led me back into the world right to you.”

“I know all about your tethers.” With my hands I'm putting dry dishes away, running a towel over the countertop. These everyday motions calm me. Each fork I put into the drawer, each cup I place in the cupboard tells my brain that *nothing dangerous is going on*; these aren't movements my muscles make in times of hurt or panic. With him looking so little on the ground, the part of my defenses that would believe anything in order to cope is even able to twist his presence into something benign. *He's like a child asking for a birthday present that's too expensive, or wanting me to change the painful ways of the world that aren't fair. This is just a conversation that I'm having with a young boy. This is just me playing reason to his wild hopes.*

“Well imagine my surprise Earleen when suddenly I felt another thread. It almost

tickled when it showed up. I felt it kind of moving into my vision, coming in one ear of my head with plans to go right back out the other. Had to seize it quick so it didn't get away. Say you're driving a buggy with one horse, then suddenly a wild foal starts chasing alongside. A speedy little thing with plans to overtake you. I had to reach out and grab it by the tail. But now my buggy has two ponies. And I've got two reigns."

Beyond our kitchen window I can see the yard and the mouth of the woods. Here and there dead leaves hover on top of the grass. If I keep my head turned this way, everything is normal. There are clearings and openings. With my eyes, I can make out what appears to be a promising escape, never mind the reality of its uselessness. It takes longer than I'm proud of to give up this image and turn to face the worst possible offer. My hands clutch the sink behind me. I wonder if he still has power over water, if he could manifest that should he feel threatened enough. I imagine him turning on the faucet behind my back and pinning my wrists with a set of liquid handcuffs.

"I'm tired of asking. What do you want?"

"You won't do this favor for your old man out of the goodness of your heart." A glob of black is inching towards his chin; he quickly sucks it back inside his mouth and wipes his arm across his face. "So I'm going to save us some time and tell you why you will do it."

Knowing this won't be good news, I pull out a chair and sit. I feel instantly tired; so tired that if his threat were to be removed this very moment, I would place my cheek upon the table and instantly surrender consciousness.

"I'm going to wrap myself around that growing new thread inside you. Every day, a little more of me will do it until I'm fully in. I'll stay right here, just put me in a bed. All I

have to do is concentrate. My being here is a courtesy Earleen—I can do it from farther away if I have to. In fact I’ve already started. That’s part of the reason why I’m not so solid as I might be. The more I place myself into you, the more I’ll break down. I’m breaking down anyway, but this speeds up the inevitable. My cells are happy to do it. Leave this old skin for some new. Next time I’ll be able to last longer. It’s like filtration. I know all about purity from cooking drugs. You have to filter and filter and the product gets more and more pure. Eventually, I’ll be able to live to old age. That’s all I want. I never was one to get robbed sitting down.”

“I’m aging myself. How many times do you think I can have you?”

“They’ll be a way. Maybe you’ll have some daughters sooner or later, and they can help me out for a change. You’ll get to rest. Job well done, out to pasture. But let’s be optimistic. Maybe this next time will be all it takes.”

“I’ll kill myself before I’ll let you cannibalize my baby.”

“You could. Or I could kill you. All I have to do is give that thread a long tug, and it’ll bleed right out of you. *Or*, and this is the thinking man’s option, we can try this out and maybe it works one hundred percent this time and then you’re free of me. You’ve got the best years of your life to enjoy yet, Earleen. You don’t want to die having never lived. It’s not so bad, just adjust your thinking a little. Approach it this way: this one was never intended to be your baby. This is my ride. Soon as I get to my destination, then you can have another one. I’m not taking anything that can’t be replaced.”

“I don’t know Pops.”

“There’s nothing to know—I’m already in you. What’s inside that stomach is already a little bit of me.” With that, I feel a squeeze in my abdomen and bend forwards until I

gasp. “You see? I’m at the wheel.”

He waddles over to the refrigerator and takes an ice cube from the door, then swallows it whole like a boiled egg. His insides make the sound of a hot iron moving over starch. “You know I thought about not telling you at all. Kind of surprising you; just getting all the way in remotely—but that would’ve taken longer. I’d have to really scrunch my forehead and concentrate to do it across that much distance. Plus I’m a fair guy. This way we sit down and tell your husband, and he doesn’t leave you because he thinks you’re a deficient baby-making machine after you shoot me out. Otherwise the birth might frighten him a little, don’t you think?” He makes the motion with his hands of opening curtains and peeking his head through. “BOO!”

“I’m supposed to carry on with my life while you’re up there vaporizing in the guest bedroom and cannibalizing my offspring within my body.”

“You managed to carry on while I was growing in you before. You were even able to squeeze in some fun, if I recall. This way I’m close and I get in as quickly as possible. And when I come back out, you’ll be prepared. I wouldn’t bother you if there was another way, honest to goodness. Before coming to you I tried sucking the life out of that old bag in the moving chair. I squeezed every last drop of living out of her—you know that sound straws make when the glass goes empty? Anyway, it hardly did anything. Didn’t even perk me up for five minutes. No use moving on and trying Dennis then, I figured. Unless Earleen decides to be difficult.”

Just then the door opens. “Honey, I am home! I had the greatest chicken pesto sandwich today. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. There are several things I want to run by you.” Then he looks up and sees Pops.

Before Pops can say anything, I jump in. “This is my Uncle Jim,” I say. “Biological paternal side.”

“I appreciate your hospitality,” Pops extends him an inky hand. “Such manners are the essential tools that separate us from the apes. We all have opposable thumbs, sure, not winning any evolutionary contests on that front. But I use a napkin when I eat. Most of the time. You get my drift. I’ll be landing here for a bit, but I won’t be any trouble. Don’t need any food. Won’t even run up your water bill. Just close the door and it’ll be like I’m not even here. I need a place to hunker down and get some beauty sleep. I’m tired, you see.”

“Keep a bit of distance,” I warn Huckle, worried he’ll slap Pops on the back and a layer of vitriolic plasma will fly off him and splatter all over us. “He’s sick.”

“He’s sick...you mean he’s a *democrat*? Just pulling your leg. Is it allergies?” asks Huckle. “Rheumatoid arthritis? Are you on a daily multi-vitamin? They say the newest health craze is magnets. I myself have a bracelet that’s ionized but—”

“I just need to be rejuvenated,” Pops belts, his voice overpowering Huckle’s and blowing our hair back in a foul wind. He stares at him with a trace of malice, then smiles. “It’s not contagious, partner.”

“Why don’t you think about what you want for dinner,” I say to Huckle. “Uncle Jim won’t be joining us. I’m going to get him settled upstairs.”

“Sure you don’t even want a bite of chicken or something there, Jim? Starve a fever but feed a cold, right? You running a temp? Looks like you could use a Kleenex or two. Earleen, do we have a box we can get him? I’m sure we do. Of course we have tissue. We’re not barbarians. Though—”

“Well I’m pooped,” says Pops. With that he begins to climb the stairs, sometimes scooting on his knees, sometimes walking while still crouched down towards the floor. I watch his inky footprints sink into the carpet and I let these capture my mind: *when he goes to bed*, I think, though the voice saying this in my head is the operator of my body rather than me, the automatic control that keeps my heart beating while I sleep and now is narrating the monologue of a housewife, *I will go to the store and rent one of the machines I always see there, the large red units that steam clean*. I picture waving it across his tracks, sucking the trail from the stairs to the bedroom then going upstairs to his bed and running it over his body, sucking him up in tidy diagonal lines. *How clean it would be if I could suck him up like a stain then proceed to go freshen the fabric of the hallway draperies*.

“You seem to know where you’re going.”

He’s moving on his fists, setting his shoulders forwards to gain the leverage to drag his feet and knees in front of him; his back is tilting towards the floor with a simian curve. “I’ve been everywhere you’ve been since I died Earleen, more or less. Well, more. Two needles on a compass is what we are. If I stand still I can feel you moving.” He strains upwards to reach the doorknob of the guest bedroom. Thick tendons in his neck, grey as steel cables pulse forward and tighten like a pulley for his wrists. “But I don’t want you to feel claustrophobic or anything. I just have a little leash on your soul is all.” He smiles a wide smile at the bed and stands at the open door for a moment. He looks so delighted that I glance into the room worriedly; what is pleasing him that I don’t know about? But there’s just a bed and a dresser. The stale air in the room has an unused, segregated quality. Walking into it almost feels like walking into another house.

It takes a few attempts for him to lift himself up onto the bed. The scene is nearly comical: Pops the star of a western movie, his character a man who's drunk himself blind and now is trying to mount his horse. "Rest for the wicked," he grins. "A rare pleasure." His eyes close and his hands fold across his waist in an oddly resigned position. His sudden stillness seems deceptively peaceful.

"You look like you're posed in a casket."

"Welcome to the funeral before the resurrection," he says.

"You would never close your eyes if someone else was in the same room with you before. I don't think I saw you sleep once my whole childhood."

One of his eyelids oozes away and the exposed ball rolls down to look at me. The side of his cheek is a saurian leather; patches of his body—the face, the hands—look ancient. And then there are his boyish knees, his frame that began to degenerate before it could start to grow.

"You shouldn't be here," I say. "Not in my house or this world."

"It would benefit you to lose that attitude, Earleen. For your sake. Besides, my stay's gonna go by fast. Blink and you might miss it, like a train. You'll feel the shakes of it coming in under your skin, in six or seven months it'll pass by and your hair will blow back a little, and then it'll be gone."

"You won't ever be gone. You'll return and return to leech from me until I'm dead."

A bird lands on the windowsill and begins to chirp, absentmindedly picking at its feathers. Pops flings a bit of goo from his arm at the glass to frighten it away. I watch the hole in his eyelid fill back in like quicksand so it appears closed again. "I'm a proud man, Earleen. I sure do hope I don't have to ask you for help anymore after this. In fact that's

really why I'm here. You could say all I want is my independence. God-given rights Earleen. Life and liberty and what not."

"I'll let you rest."

"Don't be a stranger, now. My house is your house. You know, truth be told, I'm not sure how much longer I'll be pleasant to look at. I want to speed this process up as much as I can. Pedal to the metal. But speed's only good if it's efficient, hear me. A merger of quality and quickness. I want you to appreciate the fine craftsmanship of what's going on here, Earleen. I basically gotta build a brick wall with my mind: take out all the essential pieces of myself one by one, and find a place for them there inside you, in that little house you've got growing. I apologize for having to evacuate the current tenant. Nothing personal. I've got seniority is all." He cracks his neck and bares his decayed teeth a little; they are spaced wide like the bars of a grill, his charcoal lungs set deep behind them.

"You don't need to leave this room, do you? Haunting me in the shower won't bode well for the pregnancy. There are already a few stressors in play."

"I'm not well enough for games," he says. With that he turns onto his side, and the room falls so quiet that I have to leave so he can't hear how quickly I'm breathing.

CHAPTER 14

PARTICLES

When I come downstairs, Huckle is drinking a beer in his rocking recliner and watching a program about sharks. On television the jaws of a great white clench down onto a sea lion. He flips the channel to an open-heart surgery. Next a man in a ski mask who's holding a woman against the wall and strangling her. Finally he stops on an informational program about cow slaughter. When they show the electricity going into the cow's skull, Huckle gives a little whistle. "Then it's over and the fat lady sings," he says. "You know, between Jim up there and this cow program, I think the universe is telling me to take it a little easier on the red meat." His hands cup around his face like a megaphone. "'Step away from the cheeseburger.' Your uncle has not aged gracefully. I'm not vain or anything, don't expect me to start coming to the *nail parlor* with you. But I want to retain a general appearance of health, you know? Maybe we should look into a vacation at one of those mineral baths or something. Try a sauna. Sweat it and forget it. Melt off the years. Has Jim tried calisthenics? A nutritionist? The guy doesn't seem to have much in the way of a sense of humor. Laughter, that's the best medicine they say. Maybe we should take him to see that new comedy—you know, the guy keeps trying to kill himself but he's such a nitwit he can't even get *that* right? Hey, do we have anything crunchy in the house to munch on?"

"I'll go look," I offer.

When I walk into the pantry, the first thing I see is a bottle of rat poison on the floor. Suicide. I have a quick fantasy about drinking rat poison in front of a rainbow. The dead ghost baby pops out of me after I die and is microscopically tiny but in a very good

mood. I carry it in a test tube around my neck and wear a jeweler's glass over my eye at all times so I can see it. *What's the best part about dying from rat poison?* the fetus jokes. I shrug. *Every part! No wait, no wait...the taste!* It's giggling and bouncing.

When I look up, the colorful cereal boxes in the pantry fill me with a sudden vertigo; I struggle to grab onto these colors, their strange hues that suddenly manifest in whistling pitches of sound. The cans and labels and mottos surrounding me are like a wet rope I can't grasp and I clutch my stomach and drop to the ground, *Campbell's Soup It Fills You Up Right*, I look down at the middle of my pants and see a bloody-black stain spreading wider and wider, opening like the mouth of a wretched flower.

This "scare" lands me on a week of bed rest.

"Is anything giving you a great amount of anxiety? Inordinate worry? Acute mental pressure?" the doctor asks.

"Doc," Huckle says, "she doesn't have a care in the world. The biggest problem Earleen faces in a day? White or wheat!"

When we get home, I'm eager to chat with Pops about the turbulence.

"I'm going to check in on Jim real quick before I lie down."

"Oh yeah," Huckle says. "Forgot he's staying here. Out of sight out of mind is right. Whoever first said that sure hit the nail on the head. Truer words never spoken. I'm sure I'll forget again in a few minutes. That guy sure is a church mouse."

I expect there will be a smell when I reach the top of the stairway, but instead there's only a prominent warmth. Mirage-like waves of heat are pouring out from under his door. Carefully, I knock upon its heat-soaked wood.

Taking caution not to scare Pops is a well-ingrained habit. I only have the lower 2/3rd of my right year; the other 1/3rd Pops sawed off with a knife and handed to me when he was finished. “I’ll take this as your admission ticket,” he said, drawing it back out from my fingers, “for entering the kitchen unannounced. Admit one.”

It’s then that I notice a vacant blue light spilling out across the carpet. Its intensity flashes in and out, like someone’s watching a movie with the lights off inside. I grab the doorknob then have to pull back; it burns my hand. I make a mental note to bring up an oven glove and leave it by the door. Placing my shirt overtop my fingers, I push the door lightly with my fingertips; it swings open in a long steady creak.

“It’s me, Pops,” I say. “Just coming in for a minute.”

Black specs are swarming around him in a busy mass—some hover close to his skin, others rise up from it. Some parts of his body are now entirely composed of these small insects. They look like fleas or gnats; they’re tiny dots. Some are high in the air and drifting casually, falling in groups at the rate of feathers. All of them seem to be influenced by a wind I can’t feel, except for its temperature. When one sways, the rest move in tandem.

“I just got back from the hospital,” I say. “There was some bleeding.”

Pops’ voice is drawn and wheezy, like he’s sucking words up into a straw. He doesn’t lift his head; instead the black dots begin packing together in isolated features that form a large caricature replica of his talking face. “*We* just returned from the hospital.” The dots widen into a grin. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to exclude me.”

A large sheet of wallpaper peels from the wall and arches down; the glue covering its back looks like melted butter.

“What caused the bleeding?”

“Just getting myself situated, that’s all. Sorry for the inconvenience.” The face starts to spread back out into oblivion, but then quickly regathers with a new message. “By the way, you don’t need to come all the way up here to talk to me. It’s a little warm up here, don’t you think? You can just speak into your stomach.”

I ignore the pang of acid that shoots up my throat when he says this. A part of me is still hopeful: maybe he hasn’t truly gotten in yet. The bleeding could’ve been caused by a failed attempt to break inside. Perhaps Pops is bluffing.

“How long do you think it’ll take for you to finish getting in?”

The tongue inside the pixelated dots of his face licks the corner of its mouth. “Slow and steady, Earleen. I don’t want to cause any more tremors. I think the little elevator drop the other day may be due to me rushing the gates a little bit.”

“But you’ve made progress? Since arriving?”

“No need to worry there.” The face’s mouth draws back into a half-smirk. “I’m an able captain of my ship, Earleen. Master and commander.”

“Can you do it any more quickly? Once you’re inside? Can you speed up how fast you grow?” If the pregnancy were to go faster and I could explain it away as a miscarriage, there’d be fewer questions and less of a feeling of loss, particularly from Beverly’s point of view. She’d just want to put it past us and jump back on the horse. “Is there a way I can help move things along?”

“I like this new attitude. A fine outlook. Stepping right up to the plate. I’m afraid Mother Nature’s route won’t be rushed though. I just have to take my seat and ride.”

The face lurches down and drops towards the chest of Pops’s body, then recomposes

itself and rises again. I place one foot in front of the other, not looking at Pops' giant, representative eyes that follow me across the room like those in a haunted painting.

With the gnats of Pops' decaying flesh gathered above him in the facial representation, it's possible to get a clear view of his body. The middle of his chest is a sinkhole of corrosion that's started to cave and spread. Its lurid edges are busy with microscopic motion. They are eating away at him in a slight way that's hard to perceive. Instead it gives me a needling feeling of something escaping my vision, the unease I might experience if I'm sitting at the table, look down at my plate and sense that my fork has undetectably slid to the left.

Inside the hole, sinews of flesh are visible. When I move closer and look straight down, I realize how much this cavity looks like a sunken ship in miniature, its shell eaten away to reveal the baseboards. What would happen, I wonder, if I reach my hand into this opening? Would I pull it out and see that the flesh of my fingers has blackened with instant frostbite? It seems like a space where nothing already living can survive; like the throat of a python, anything that goes inside will be broken down into fuel.

“Can you still open your eyes? Your real ones?”

A trail of the gnats leaves the face's chin, drawing out from the head in a line like a string on the bottom of a giant balloon. When they reach Pops' left eye, they circle around it then draw together to lift up the lid. The white sclera has darkened to a sepia brown. When I lean forward to get a better look, it shoots over and stares directly at me.

“So a bit of you is still in there.” I nod my head back towards the face.

“Sure is. Did you think I'd already be only crumbs?”

The eye moves down to look at the face and rolls back up to me. Pops' real mouth

falls open too wide; he's trying to talk but his jaw now seems to have a weight his muscles can't support. There's a rattle of his voice, a moan filled with power. It's the sound of something whose capacity is temporarily reduced warning others that he will soon return. The gnat face resumes talking after these grunts lead to nowhere. "You'll excuse me if I can't be a gentleman in that form at present. My body's taking a little step backwards in order to leap ahead."

"I'll be back later to check on you."

"If you want, Earleen. But my autopilot is about the best there is. Clear skies and a smooth landing. You don't need to do a thing."

"Except give birth."

With this, the face drops flat with the sound of falling sand. A small, makeshift mouth remains hovered over the center of Pops' collapsed chest; its lips are at the edges of his open ribs. "There will be that minor inconvenience, yes. But you're a seasoned professional. You've danced this dance before."

My lips have parched from the dry heat of the air. I wonder if I'll be able to keep living in the house when he's gone. This room will no doubt stay malignant; its infection will invariably spread through the bloodstream of the heating ducts, the electrical outlets, until every space in the house feels equally tragic and worrisome.

Downstairs, I see a pile of children's books that Beverly delivered. On top rests *The Three Little Pigs*. Its cover has an animated wind extending from the house of straw to the wolf's mouth. His lips are pursed in a Lamaze-shaped O; the strain of his breath reminds me of labor. I am living the story in reverse, I think. The wolf is already in my house, and I'm the one who will huff and puff and try to push him out and away.

That night Huckle and I watch a television show cataloguing the confiscated weapons inmates have made in prison using toiletries, condiments, and their packaging. We look over to see a large swarm of gnats descending the staircase in a visible hive. They float into the kitchen, where we hear the cupboard doors open, the faucet turn on. When they return to float back upstairs, they're holding a glass of water.

"Huckle," I say, "that is not my Uncle Jim up there. It's my biological father, who's trying to enter and overtake our baby's fetus so that he can attempt to steal additional years of life. Those gnats are his minions, small and otherworldly foot soldiers doing his evil bidding."

"Did you see that?" Huckle asks me, pointing and smirking. "Did you see those flies go get a drink of water? You cannot make this stuff up. They do not call the animal and insect population the 'wild kingdom' for nothing. And it just keeps getting stranger. Yesterday I saw a program where scientists had grafted, get this, a *human ear* onto the back of a mouse. A human ear! Can it hear you ask? That is beside the point. What you should be focusing on is this: there are things going on in the world that we have no easy explanation for. Hang onto your seat for the ride of life, because there are surprises at every turn. Did you know that the average dairy cow makes *four times* its own body weight in manure every year? True story. Just when you think you know it all, guess again."

In my nightmare, Pops is holding me down by the wrists—old Pops, the original model—and looking at me for signs that I'm an intruder. He's done all the usual: ensured my hair is not a wig, extracted blood with a knife, felt the surface of my teeth for

recording devices. But I'm not paying any attention to these tests. I watch only his cigarette, which hovers inches from my eye and tilts down when he talks or when he hangs it from the side of his lip like a toothpick. At times it falls between his lips to lower even more, like a log readying to drop down a flume, before raising back upwards at the last moment just before touching my eye. It grows a long neck of ash that bobs in his mouth like the head of a pigeon and finally falls onto my lid; I close my eye in the nick of time. Pops smears the ash across my brow like we're enacting a religious ceremony, extending the smudge all the way down to the bottom of my nose.

I wake to my sweat-soaked shirt clinging to my skin like a bandage. The room is dark and my first thought is one of relief: *he's in the house but not in this room*, I remember, a realization I'm able to appreciate anew every night. The cadence of Huckle's snoring is untouched as I climb out of bed and walk into the bathroom, changing out my wet top for a robe. When I turn on the light it feels like a form of sanity.

My eyes move to a leaking faucet and eye each drop with distrust. Any autonomous motion in the house seems suspect. Pops being here—being close and even getting inside my stomach—but not manifesting himself outside the closed door of the guest room is an inscrutable thought. I look into the glass and remember how all reflective things used to be a scrim for his projection, how Pops' image took on an added horror when stretched across the convex surface of a chrome faucet or gained a surreal blur from the screen of the television. It was only a few years ago that I was brushing my teeth after a shower, spitting and raising my head to see a humid Pops standing behind me, his figure wrought from dew, his steamy teeth bared as though he was about to take a bite out of my neck. Almost instantly he blew a hot teakettle breath of smoke from his cloudy cigarette. What

wasn't absorbed by my hair hit the mirror and made an opaque circle. Rather than turn around I had run my fingers across this moisture vertically, like a claw mark, and gazed through the scratched lines of clarity as though they were gaps in a fence.

This is when it hits me. I feel a wetness gather up in my throat and my eyes begin to tickle as though I might cry. I sit down on the cold bathroom tile for a moment, trying to understand what it could possibly mean. Just as I'm about to say the words out loud, I have a thought: perhaps he can hear me. That cloud of black little gnats might have emissary spies all throughout the house, perched in the air ducts, listening. Perhaps they could even make out the distinct scratch of a pencil on paper and know from the sound what word is being written. I doubt all of these possibilities—when Pops is on the alert, he intervenes prior to any actual need for defense. His minion particles, if that is what they are, would've already descended through the ventilation, like flying monkeys, to examine me awake and on the floor in the middle of the night and ponder what it might mean. Still, I don't want to take any chances. I *think* it and nothing else: Pops isn't smoking. I haven't once seen his image or the gnats puff a thing.

I climb back into bed, drawing the covers up close to my chest so that if the dark cloud of gnats were to burst down the door and enter unexpectedly, I could quickly pull them up to my neck and not feel exposed. Huckle's arm is almost tan enough from the sun bed to hide his thin sheet of freckles. I wonder how many weeks of no sun it would take for them to reemerge as he grew pallid, like a developing photograph.

Sleep doesn't come. Why wait until morning anyway, I ask myself? I throw back the covers and tiptoe into the hallway. I can hear a hiss of heat upstairs, as though a giant furnace is running. There seems to be all sorts of humming going on just below the strata

of what my ears are capable of hearing. I tiptoe down to the kitchen, walking to the store of candles and matches in the pantry. It cracks to life and I watch its light exaggerate my stomach's shadow in its flicker on the wall. I don't trust the way fire likes to make illusions.

With one hand on the candle and one on the stairway railing, I quietly move towards the cloud of heat. Will Pops be able to hear me approaching, I wonder? Can he already see my steps of hushed light? Though I'm walking down the steps of my own hallway, it feels like I'm exploring a new and dangerous terrain.

By the time I reach Pops' door, I'm covered in sweat. I brace my hand with my bathrobe before I touch the hot metal. When the door opens I have to cup the candle's flame against the sudden blast of heat the room exhales. Walking into the room while holding fire feels like I'm moving into a new threshold of possibility.

Steadily placing my feet one in front of the other while holding a candle makes me feel like I'm a part of some midnight processional. Suddenly the room seems imbued with ceremony. I keep moving forward, matching my gait to the gentle lilt and sway of the engorged blackness hanging above Pops. I stop only when, with quiet atmospheric precision, the cloud begins to slide horizontally, off of Pops and away from the candle to the other side of the room.

Exposed, Pops' body is revealed as more desiccated and thin than ever before. Pieces of skin are reducing indiscriminately, some from the left side, others from the middle or the right, as though no bones exist beneath them; he is not so much tightening in around a skeleton as he is spot reducing, like animals come in each day and feed from him wherever they wish. It appears to be a system of graduation: when choice portions are

ready to move up into the particle cloud, they simply leave his body and do so.

Swallowing, I move the candle closer towards a black, lumpy segment of his thigh. Like an overripe banana, aspects of its flesh have rutted inward with uneven decay. I tilt the flame slowly towards it, momentarily gasping when a bead of wax threatens to fall; I extend my hand out to catch it. I pause, certain this motion will stir him, but the body remains still.

Finally, I push the flame towards his skin. Before it makes contact, the surface of Pops' flesh comes to life like a volcanic lake, instantly liquid and bubbling. When I jump back with the candle, I watch a streak of ink bleed off the leg in a sizzle and disappear.

There's a reptilian screech and the base of Pops' neck rises from the bed, his head languidly hanging down from it, swinging. There's the delicate sound of a coin circling before it lands takes on the speed of propulsion, and I realize that his now lidless black eyes are spinning inside his head—at the end of each revolution there is a flash of something white; it takes a great deal of time for their movement to slow, for the pupils of his eyes to line up, like the settling bar of a slot machine, in a space of socket where they are visible to me. Once they lock and focus, they train in terror onto the candle's flame, Pops' body shrinking back, his feet lifting high up into the air as though he is being pulled down into a hole. Then the salesman in Pops wins out over instinct. He rattles his body slightly, shaking awake his dormant voice, and tries to pretend the flame isn't scaring him. Though there is a brief moment, before he begins to speak, where his eyes scan mine: he is reading them, trying to figure out if I've seen his fear. "What's going on, partner?" he asks. His voice sounds like an unraveling cassette tape. "It's the middle of the night."

“Couldn’t sleep,” I say. “I thought I’d come see if you needed anything.” The smell that filled the room when his flesh burnt away is a hot and putrid vapor; I fight against the spasms of my lungs that are prompting me to cough. Pops’ eyes are actively trying to avoid the flame, yet despite themselves they keep returning upwards like a compass needle, acknowledging the source of the light, hypnotically resting there until the flame duplicates within the glow of his pupils. Then they consciously move off to stare at something else. “I was having a nightmare about you,” I add. I don’t want Pops to think that I’ve in any way downgraded his threat. This new leverage I have upon him has to remain a secret until I figure out just how to use it.

“About your dear old dad? I’m the boogeyman? Don’t worry,” Pops says. “I wouldn’t shoot holes in the boat that’s taking me across the water.”

I remember one of the many nights when I woke to darkness as a child only to find that my mattress was moving; something kept lifting it up off the ground. It often took me hours to work up the courage to hold my breath and let my head dangle down beneath the bed, which is the only thing that would make him stop. And there he’d be, his face alight with the glow from a lighter. He often held its flame so close to his face that a small patch of his skin would begin to darken; he was burning himself but couldn’t feel it. This happened to him a lot—the drugs took away all connection between his body and his mind.

“Hello,” he’d say. “I’m your bad dream.”

Instead of jumping to the ground and running—I was afraid he’d grab my ankle and pull me under, and then I would be there on the terms of struggle, which was the worst kind of interaction to be in with Pops—I placed my arms onto the floor and brought my

feet down with me, flattening myself to the ground, and watched him take a long drag from his cigarette.

“How come you don’t smoke?” he asked.

I shrugged. I was seven years old.

“It’s one of the reasons I don’t trust you,” he’d said.

Now a set of two gnats breaks from the pack and lifts up into the air. Were the candle not there to amplify their imperceptible bodies with shadow when they drifted towards me, I may not have noticed their passing at all. I watch them sail upwards in my direction, their shadows stretching and flattening as they morph in shape. Finally they turn into two snowflakes and drift down to the ground. They do not seem bound by gravity at all; only by standing on my toes and reaching out for them, missing them with my first two clutches and then finally securing their flakes within my palm am I able to see what the gnats have transformed into. I open my hand and trace the particles with my fingertips: the gnats have gone and left ash in their place, just as people abandon the earth and leave behind their bodies. “They’re inside me now,” I say, understanding. “Those two tiny pieces of you just went into me.”

“Slow and steady wins the race,” Pops repeats, peering over at the massive cloud.

Now I realize the cloud will grow until his body is gone, and then the groups of gnats will continue to depart into the arc of my body. Its mass will gradually wane until no more are left to send inside me. I wonder what the breakdown is of the cloud to Pops’ anatomy. Is each gnat a tooth? A fingernail, a strand of hair? Or is the scale even smaller? Is each gnat a cell?

Pops turns away from me, his head rolling alongside his shoulder at a broken angle.

“I need my rest,” he says. “Turn that light out and leave me be.”

When I inch out and shut the door, I keep the candle lit until, in my run back down the stairs and across the house to the bedroom, the flame blows itself out. The pattern of my hurried footsteps spells out the sentence I’m thinking but too superstitious to voice out loud: *there’s a way, there’s a way, there’s a way.*

CHAPTER 15

THE BURNING

I decide that if I'm going to enter his bedroom and engulf him in fire, first I need to secure the exits. I can't have him jumping out the window and escaping, or the cloud of gnats flying off into the suburbs only to enter me from a remote location, forming a hive beneath the roof of our garage and waiting out the days there. The hive is key, and perhaps is now more Pops than his stringy remains are. If they burn up but the hive escapes, he could still be born—missing a leg perhaps, an arm, but Pops nonetheless. Or perhaps he'd be complete but the arm would be the real baby's—something he wasn't able to take control of. He'd cut it off the moment he was born using any stainless steel Emergency Room tool he could get his hands on: the youngest infant on record to ever self-amputate.

I decide to offer the automated venetian blind installation team an extra \$100 if they'll climb the roof and board up Pops' window from the outside. First, though, I have to warn him so there won't be any shenanigans.

The drywall of the hallway around Pops' room has warped with irregular dimples from the heat; the synthetic fibers in the carpet have melted and become pliable. It's mashed down in areas like slept-upon hair.

When I open the door, the hive lifts in the air, just an inch, as though startled.

The way to frame anything with Pops is to offer him a compliment. "Your hive is growing," I say. I keep my voice flat; if I falsely inflect it with a ring of admiration, Pops will know that something's up. "It's starting to fill the room."

Standing over Pops, I see that the eye whose lid had crumbled has now been

completely taken, save for some light filling on the sides. From a slight distance, its open pit looks like a black patch of cloth. Now when the buzzing puff of his voice rises into his mouth in its various particles, I can see it coming through thin patches where Pops' cheek is down to a final transparent layer. "I'm growing up again," his voice says. It sounds prerecorded, like he knew everything he was going to have to say during this time of invalidity and had spoken it into a machine weeks ago in preparation. "Funny, all this work just to be a baby again."

"I'm worried someone will see the hive through the window," I say, fiddling with the drapes. "Kids, you know? They're always running through the back yard even though we tell them not to."

"Give me a shout the next time they trouble you," Pops says. The flimsy corners of his mouth wobble with the intention of a smile. "I'll scare 'em off."

"I'm serious. You don't understand the suburbs. Everyone's in everybody else's business. Parents are on the lookout for suspicious things. Some kid looks up at the wrong time and I've got a knock on my door." I pretend to inspect the drapes with great care, holding one out and placing my spread hand behind it. "I think we should cover this window a little better."

He says nothing; the bugs hang weightless in his mouth without a sound. I feel a sweaty sinking turn in my stomach. Have I blown it? I move forward with the plan calmly, trying to seem like I'm on his side. "Can you ask them to hover down for a bit? I'm going to strip off this curtain and have a crew put up something more substantial." I can feel sweat beading up atop my lip. "The other day they were playing baseball, the kids. Right next to our yard. What would happen if a ball came through the window?"

Would the hive move out into the open air?"

"Well," Pops starts, then he quiets like he suddenly realized it best not to continue. He'd been about to give me more information on how the hive worked. "It could be something or nothing, if that happened," he says, which is perfect. Now I can blame safety, feign outrage.

"We can't hurt children," I say, pulling down the curtains and the rod. "They can't help being proximal to you. You'll hear some footsteps on the roof a bit later; we'll get this window covered up properly. That way they can't bother you and you can't bother them. Or worse."

This is a script that Pops is familiar with—I the outraged protectorate of all things innocent, he the bad man who tries not to spill over and hurt anyone but me, if only because then I might be less willing to help him. Holding the curtains, I walk towards the door. "Tell your gnats to keep down low until we cover the window." I purposefully avoid saying 'board shut'—of course Pops will know that is what's happening when the hammering starts, but I don't want to present it in a way that might cause him to think of containment.

"Guess I've always been your skeleton in the attic," Pops says, laughing a little at an insight that only amuses himself. The folds of his cheeks have become so thin they drape from his bones like fabric, moth-eaten here and there, flapping like the sides of a windblown tent when he speaks.

"We've got to hunker down and fall off the map because of you." I pause. "Just like old times. Us inside a house doing things passers by would never imagine." I move with the cold efficiency of anger, measuring the window a little too loudly, clomping back and

forth to make sure the current shade hangs low enough that the men won't see inside. If he simply believes I don't want to cover the window, he won't challenge it. But if I sound enthusiastic we'll be in trouble. "How's everything coming? You're a strong man; that's never been in question. Being a few months premature won't keep you down."

"I'm a stowaway, darling." Pops' voice is gravely with a weight that would sink it below water. "I gotta be quiet till I get across the border. Let's hush now."

"Well do what you can."

"I'm doing it," Pops smiles. His teeth are now crawling with gnats; they're attracted to the remaining white slivers as if to light, running across the surface and changing the shape of each tooth with their opacity.

"I apologize in advance for their noise," I say. I keep expecting him to stop me as I walk out, to rattle off a sentence that lets me know he's seen into what I have planned and it isn't going to work. But Pops just wheezes. If I listen closely, I can almost hear the sound of the million tiny wings, a collective industrial buzz that make the gnats seem like Pops' unseen utility—the water flowing through his pipes and the electricity lighting up his cables, a thing constantly working but behind the scenes of immediate attention.

Looking at his body, I realize this is the death of Pops that I will actually see. No spontaneous explosion this time. Now he's fading and convalescent. If people decayed rather than died, or died but stayed animated, if we got to watch what happened to the bodies we placed into caskets and tucked beneath a blanket of soil, this, I suppose, is close to what we'd see.

Then at the doorway I feel it: a firm kick. It doesn't hurt, but I quickly shut the door and crouch down, first sitting then lying flat on my back and running my knuckles across

the carpet while I cry. I lie there in the dark for some time, until a tin buzzing rises from the door and I turn to see a few exploratory gnats moving up and out of the crack beneath the door, drawn to me. They come towards my lips, stinging upon impact, trying to get inside my mouth. When I wipe them away they leave long streaks of wet ash down my chin and on my fingers. I'm still crying when Huckle comes home.

“Don't tell me,” he says, seeing my face. “The cable is out *again*.”

For the rest of the night, the baby will not stop kicking. It's as if it's being tortured inside me, and for the first time I wonder if what Pops is doing to its body hurts it. My urge is to cut it out of me, to go to the hospital and carve it out in the parking lot, or attempt to until I pass out from shock and someone notices. Perhaps I could get far enough that they'd take the baby out, and if it isn't possible to save it, maybe its cells would at least be beyond Pops' use. That wouldn't kill Pops, though. He'd still be rotting in my house. Nothing can be solved until he's taken care of.

The next morning I walk outside and stare up at the thick wooden plank nailed overtop Pops' window. While it was happening I walked by his room only once, when the men were almost finished. I'd pondered telling him it was about to start just before the hammering began, then thought the better of it: if I gave him the chance to protest, perhaps he would. I listened to nail after nail be driven into the wood and to the workers' careful heavy steps upon the rooftop, all the while keeping one of my ears on alert for screams of horror followed by the sound of bodies being thrown off the side of the house. When it seemed there could not plausibly be much hammering left to do, I tiptoed up the stairs and cracked the door of Pops' room. All the gnats were hovered around the newly

darkened window, pressed to the glass, looking. It gave me the horrible feeling that they were investigating and had detected malice. Boldly, I entered and cleared my throat.

Pops' torso sucked in then opened with air to decompress. It seemed like his body was already on life support. These gnats were the only thing still animating him, working his voice and limbs.

"I felt the baby kick the other day," I said. I couldn't help but connect its furiosity to the time I saw Pops drown a man in the bathtub. He'd had me come in with them and hold a mirror overtop the man's face so he could watch himself die. That panic and urgency, the mechanical fury that overtook the man's limbs near the end—that, I knew, was the same frenzied panic of life being drained that I'd felt inside my stomach.

"More to come," he says. "Much more to come." And with that, his face turned into a layer of shadow and lifted up into the air. I could still see its shape, the holes of his features as it flew across the room and joined the others, falling into pattern until there was no trace of its form at all. When I walked over and looked at his head, there was only a rind of bone, a hollowed out bowl filled with gnats picking at the remnants.

"Can we still talk?" I asked, wanting to feel relieved that speaking with him was beginning to be impossible. It would be so much easier to kill him if I knew there was no way for him to audibly respond. His chest shook and the sinkhole inside it opened. Then his voice came again, much further away now, far beyond.

"I won't be able to speak for much longer, no. But I've always been a man of few words, haven't I? Or if not few words, many actions. Say less and do more. My own father told me that, I think. He made some good points from time to time. Maybe I should've let him age a few more years before killing him."

I'm suddenly gripped with the urge to reach down into the hole in his chest—I want to make sure he's really breaking down, that it isn't all just some illusion. Its inside feels like the shade, far cooler than the rest of the room. I run a fingertip around the edge and the gnats there land on my finger and sting.

“Hands off, now. I think living up in your belly is as close as we need to be, ain't it? Can't get much closer.” With the window boarded up, the room was now tomblike, dark with only hallway's light to illuminate his shape.

I felt like an explorer who had stumbled upon a cursed mummy and was now cursed herself.

The more pregnant I become, the more maids Beverly sends over. Even driving is off the table; I am expected to do nothing but gestate.

All the housekeepers instinctively keep away from Pops' room. “I vacuumed everything but the sauna, Mrs. Breedwell,” they'll say upon leaving. “See you tomorrow.”

I stop making an effort completely. “Why clean what has already been condemned,” I say to the housekeepers. They pick up my feet and vacuum beneath them.

We've had nothing but rain and when I go out to get the mail—my one moment of physical exercise—my shoes get muddy and leave thick trails across my paths most traveled: the front door to the couch, the couch to the kitchen, the kitchen to bed. The house has begun to feel like an oversized incubator, a place where only the most rudimentary aspects of living can occur. I walk and eat hypnotically, my eyes rooted off somewhere in the distance. Huckle often comes home to find me mounted on top of the

bed's comforter, shoes on, fully dressed, sleeping with an open-mouthed wantonness as if I am stone drunk.

"You are on planet pregnant," he'll say, shaking his head. "All signals down. Earth to Earleen, come in Earleen. An F-10 fighter jet could fly three inches over your head and I do not think you would even blink. Beverly said you might be like this when the pregnancy hits full swing. She sure is a wise and understanding woman. Not bad looking for her age either. Doesn't sag in the places you'd expect. Of course there's some surgical upkeep afoot, but there's nothing wrong with that. Just taking care of herself is all. Aging gracefully. Not that I have ever seen her naked. Because why would I have? Ha!"

When I do go up the staircase now, every step is a new undertaking with hazards that cannot be foreseen. Walking down the hallway is like entering the mouth of a living cave: I'm always unsure what animal might be there to greet me, what set of eyes might glint back a reflection within the ambit of Pops' influence. I can't turn the doorknob, whose metal has begun to droop and stretch from the heat, without feeling like I'm being dropped from a tall balcony.

The hive has gotten much bigger but also more sleepy and droning; it makes no distinction of my presence now when come into the room. When I stand above Pops, it's several minutes before his mouth opens and the gnats sweep out from his throat. Each word he says makes them rise then retreat back inside his throat like pressurized water. "Gal," he mutters. I want nothing more than to increase his confidence and have him fully relinquish control so I can light him on fire.

"You're getting bigger," I say, lifting his limp, stinking hand and placing its necrotic palm against the curve of my stomach. It's a fight now to remember that he's powerful:

brutality lurks inside his smelly mess; he's not something wasting away that's to be pitied.

It seems like I could overtake him now, but I feel like there can't be any doubt—I need to wait a bit longer to destroy him. He still has control of language. I fear I might wait too long, only to never get the sense that it's the right moment for action. But it seems the right time is drawing closer. I'm waiting for a sign whose form I'm not sure of. It's something I won't recognize until I see it, until it happens—Pops is ripening towards the perfect moment. It's like watching bread rise.

“Sit down if you can take the heat.” Each time the puff of gnats soars up from his throat and shakes with motion, I have a fear that it will transfer from his throat to mine, or to my ears; its pieces are so tiny that it would be impossible to keep them out. How terrible if his voice were to leave his body and manifest itself inside me every time I spoke—it would be even more of a constant invasion than the pregnancy. “You're making me nervous,” the voice says.

“*I'm* making *you* nervous.” I pretend to laugh at the absurdity of it. “You're calling all the shots,” I assure him.

“What's going on, Earleen?” With that, a small section of the eyelid closest to me deteriorates and caves into its center. Two large particles drift over to join the flock of gnats and Pops' exposed eye turns to me. It has been significantly eaten down; it is only a white, cratered surface. “You're anxious. I can tell.”

“Sure. I'm going to be anxious till the moment you're gone.”

The cloud of gnats moves over him and his remaining flesh whipples up like a sail above each bone; his limbs and one rib form a small squadron. I can't feel the gnats'

wind, but it makes Pops' skin fly into the air like silk. A small section of flesh on his ankle begins to unwind from the bone; it almost looks like a scroll of parchment being unraveled. I lean in, hoping, but it is just rotting skin: there is no message written atop it.

CHAPTER 16

THE RECKONING

I am very pregnant in my robe and nightgown when I enter the Construction Utopia warehouse store. It's around four in the morning. I had to sneak out through the sliding patio door and then hotwire the SUV to make this pilgrimage.

Tottering down each aisle, I ruthlessly scan the shelves for any product even remotely flammable as well anything capable of ignition. Two of everything. My cart is a Noah's Ark of conflagrants large and small. I pass by a hunched over figure slipping air filters beneath her trench coat and only partially recognize her to be Delores. "He didn't pay me enough then he fired me," she says.

When I reach the register, I start taking wadded fistfuls of cash out of the pockets of my robe.

"You've got something in your hair," the cashier says. I reach up and inspect. It's one of Huckle's tube socks.

I pay a young man sleeping outside the store to load the flammable items into the SUV and ride with me to the house to unload them. "I rely upon a certain performance enhancer," he quietly says in the car. He's fiddling with something in his pockets then cooking something in a bent spoon and when we reach a stoplight I see he has readied a hypodermic needle and plunged it into his arm. I turn up the volume of a compact disk so that it drowns out the soft patter of him urinating in his pants.

When we get to the house I give him a ski mask. "Take everything inside and put it on the bottom shelf of the kitchen pantry. If my husband sees you, please run. There's a very small chance you'll see a mobile bulk of insects coming your way. If so use any of

these selected products to ward them off via flame.

“How many people are there going to be?” he mumbles, putting on the ski mask. “I should leave the mask on? Will this be videotaped? Did I mention that’s extra? I always forget.”

“I just need you to carry these in to the pantry.”

“I haven’t heard that term before.”

“By pantry I mean pantry. Please grab all you can and follow me.” Taking two bottles of lighter fluid, I tiptoe in and show him the way. When he finishes I pay him and ask if he’d like anything to drink. A frozen pizza catches his eye when I’m dispensing ice, so I give him the box and he wanders to the front door and out into the night.

In the morning Huckle hands me a photo of the boy in the mask on our lawn. “The surveillance system caught this man stealing a *pizza* from us,” he says. “Imagine if the baby was here and this guy had come in looking for pizza but then thought ‘Why settle for pizza when I can have a *baby*?’ and the next thing you know our newborn’s in an oven. We’ve got to tighten the security in this place. Cameras were the first step, but those are amateur hour. I’m thinking lasers. Extreme lock down. Retinal scansion to enter and exit. Call Beverly and Dennis and tell them we need to make an electronic template of their eyeballs.”

When I start to drift off into a nap, I see images of cutting flesh that make my eyes widen. “Do you have a cigarette?” I ask Huckle without meaning to.

“If Beverly sees you smoking with a bun in your roaster, and I don’t say this to mean she doesn’t love you, but she would decapitate you and then stick tubes down your throat where your head used to be and plug them into the wall to keep your body alive until the

baby's here. Bad choice. How about a Saltine. Man, we are having some unseasonably hot weather," Huckle says. I look up. The portion of the living room ceiling directly under Pops' bedroom has baked into a large brown scorch pattern. "Does it look like the frame of the plasma screen television is melting to you?" It does. Huckle takes off his shirt and pants and sits down in the recliner in his briefs to watch the middle section of the TV that hasn't softened too much yet.

I wake up and immediately touch my stomach and my body: they don't feel like they're my own. It seems like the baby's kicking, *it is* kicking, but the pain is coming from somewhere else, somewhere closer than my body. It takes a minute for my waking conscious mind to feel it: Pops is inside my head. When I begin to understand he's there listening in, I immediately try to think of the clinic's blue gloves—nothing else except blue gloves—I try to give him nothing but this image. But even in telling myself this, I can feel the foreign rattle of his secondary comprehension echo inside my skull. A small piece of him must have gotten up there somehow, crawled to my brain like a virus through blood or spinal fluid. There's no way to trick him for the duration of the pregnancy—I know that much. The only solution is to go ahead and do it; immediately, before he has time to prepare or turn his army of gnats upon us. I leap from the bed, taking a moment to scan my reflection for all-black eyes, a black nosebleed.

I seize the lapels of Huckle's pajama top and shake him as hard as I can. "Hurry," I yell. "There is a problem with the cable."

When I begin my pregnancy-hampered run to the kitchen, Huckle trailing after me, a pain begins to unfold in my stomach. I fling open the pantry and wheel out the flammable

supplies; I have placed them all atop the pink wagons Beverly bought for our wedding to wheel puppies up the aisle in before the wedding processional started, “A type of amuse-bouche, you know, to get them worked into a hunger for cute things to look at. Enter your bridesmaids. At least half of the flowers in their bouquets are actually made of spun and dyed cocker spaniel hair. The guests won’t know what they’re made of or why they find them adorable, they’ll just know that they do.”

In my stomach, the baby is writhing in a way that feels hot and wrong. The pain is so great that I get on all fours and ready the provisions while crawling.

“What’s all this?” asks Huckle. “What’s up with the cable?”

The air dries in my open mouth and I try to hurry; he’s coming, the air is getting hotter. My hands are so slippery with sweat that it’s hard not to skid upon the kitchen’s linoleum when I slide from one wagon to another. “Where’s the remote control?” asks Huckle.

I have to cover my ears when he reaches the top of the stairs: it’s an enormous buzzing, like my head has been dropped inside a dense swarm of gnats. My hands are so sweaty that when I try to get up it’s like I’m moving across ice; I crawl in place for some time then almost get a foot down when my water breaks and I slip on its puddle and land on my back. Finally I crawl inside one of the wagons and push off from the wall towards Huckle.

“I have to go to Dennis and Beverly’s. The baby is coming.” I put a blowtorch in his left hand and a water gun filled with windshield wiper fluid in the other. “There’s something at the top of the stairs. It’s a threat to your possessions, your house, and your lifestyle. You have to burn it, every tiny gnat and every piece of flesh. If even one gnat

gets away, it could be disastrous.”

“My cable television,” Huckle says, confused.

I take a can of liquid heat and toss it at the top of the stairs.

The gnats are carrying the remaining pieces of Pops’ body, holding them in a human form, moving his arm bones back and forth like two long spoons. There is a diagonal section of his skull, two vertebrae from different parts of his back, a crescent of pelvis. The canned heat hits into a few small phalange bones that serve in memory of his foot and they instantly boil and disappear in the air.

The baby is spinning inside me as I crawl across the yard. There’s no time for a doorbell. I crash through the dinette window and land on a bed of broken glass just beneath their corner water cooler.

Lifting my nightgown up, I strain down to see between my legs. Beverly runs in and flips on the light switch and screams when the kitchen brightens to reveal me spread eagle amidst moderate property damage. “Dennis!” she calls, running out of the kitchen. “I am sorry Earleen but I’m too squeamish for all but the cuddly parts of the whole baby ordeal.

It’s when I close my eyes to push that I realize I can see through Pops’ eyes if I shut my own: I can access his mind too. Our living room comes into focus through blurred edges of flame and I see Huckle battling the gnats with a die cast aluminum patio torch while he burns at the pieces of Pops’ flesh with a handheld butane quickfire. From the words he’s yelling, I can tell Huckle thinks that Pops’ creature also had a hand in our recent pizza burglary. The bits of Pops’ bone rise up in bursts of flame that turn blue then white. He continues spraying flame into the air, but the gnats form into bullet-shaped

groups and begin to stream up his nose and against his eyes.

“You’re there,” Dennis is saying. There’s so much pain that I can’t hear a single protest of shame in my head at him seeing me this way, *Get it out*, I’m screaming, he’s talking but everything’s so far away. The kitchen lights up with orange flashes of explosion from across the street.

“Keep pushing,” he says, and I stop for a moment trying to contort down to look.

“Is its blood red?” I ask. My hand slaps down against my thigh and runs across the moist patch of hair then draws back up but before I can look there’s an explosion so loud that my ears turn to liquid and all I can see when I close my eyes is a blue fire that almost looks like static.

The baby was born covered in burns. Every part of him that Pops had gotten to immediately lit up when the remains of Pops still stuck on earth were torched. The baby’s body is an intermittent patchwork of healthy skin and scars; it’s roughly half of him, but it’s not homogenous: only his third left toe is burned. The skin above his right cheekbone is, but his left is smooth until his chin and neck. Internally, he wasn’t as affected—some minor bleeding, but no major burns. Perhaps he got to keep all his organs since Pops didn’t have any to trade out. He’s a good baby and doesn’t act like he’s just been through trauma.

The same cannot be said about Huckle, who received some heavy burns of his own. He awoke with a lengthy streak of permanent white in his remaining hair. He blinks less than before, and talks even less than he blinks. I got a little out of him about what happened when he was alone with Pops in the fire.

“A Dodge hemi two-valve-per-cylinder engine will not defeat evil,” he said. “A quarter-pound magic burger with garlic aioli will not defeat evil.” He would not look away from the television screen. Later when I walked past the bed his arm clutched onto mine with white knuckles and his eyes bolted open. “The burning bugs flew inside my nose and into my head.” He stared at me for two minutes then said, “They showed me everything your father ever did to you and played it out in my mind in colorful recording again and again I had to watch it like a movie.” His hand dropped from my arm. “A shapewear side zip cuffed top panty girdle will not defeat evil,” he whispered.

Occasionally he’ll take the baby into his arms. When he holds it the scars seem genetic since both of them are burned.

Beverly’s convinced I should put the baby into a home for badly wounded children and immediately try again. “You’ll already make Southern Sisters’ Mother of the Year for having such a poor thing,” she assured me. “No one expects you to *raise* it.”

Though I’ve scoured his eyes every day since he’s been born and never found a hint of malice, I do not stop looking for a black clump in the baby’s spittle, or stop smelling his skin for any faint trace of motor oil. I’m not sure what I’d do if a sign that some of Pops is still inside of him emerged. Each day I bond with him is like walking further and further out towards the middle of a frozen lake: I have no idea if the ice is getting thinner, if suddenly he will display a seed of Pops and cause everything to fall out beneath me. But for now our household is quiet, silent enough that sometimes I can hear my scars talking to his in the private language of damaged skin that streams between us.

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