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The Grand Gallery

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THE GRAND GALLERY

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Thesis

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The Grand Gallery

Chairperson: Kevin Canty

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Co-Chairperson: Deborah Slicer

The Grand Gallery is the story of a woman coming to terms with her identity and purpose in a small town in Kansas during the post-WWII boom. Astrid Grand is the heiress apparent to the family business, a gallery that has been at the center of the town's operations from the time of its founding. The gallery displays a person's "collection" at the time of their death. The townspeople collect everything from Victorian mourning jewelry to gum wrappers to objects found in trees. "In many ways," as the novel's opening chapter states, "the collections displayed at the gallery served as a mirror for the townspeople themselves: beautiful and ugly, sophisticated and trashy, bizarre and commonplace, and everything in between." The novel's major conflict lies in the tension between old and new orders. As modern conveniences make life easier for the townspeople, they think less and less of their mortality, and their desire to collect wanes. The gallery is thus in danger of failing. As the novel progresses, Astrid learns her father is dying. She struggles to grasp the realities, and consequences, of this fact while also finding herself preoccupied with a beautiful stranger who arrives in town, a stranger who serves as a reminder of all that lies outside the borders of her small town. Astrid must decide whether she will fight to save the gallery, or if she will let it, and all that it stands for—family, tradition, honor, obligation—fall by the wayside.

(1)

In those early years, Astrid and her brother Charles saw a great number of collections come and go. Collections of miniature chairs. Whirligigs. Carriage clocks. Paper dolls. Civil War–era medical equipment. Silver sweat-meat baskets. Pencil sharpeners. Old maps. Old buttons. Portraits of babies. Portraits of dogs. Turn-of-the-century parlor games. Victorian mourning jewelry. Ceramic state plates. Ice cube trays. Chocolate wrappers. Weather vanes. The weirder the better, the siblings agreed. Burnt objects. Objects beginning with H. And Astrid’s favorite: objects dredged from the town lake. They followed their father around the gallery. Watching, learning. Some collections were so fantastic, they wondered later if they had seen them in a dream.

Astrid was nine and Charles eleven when he died. He died of tuberculosis at their grandparents' farmhouse in the early hours of a winter morning while every windowpane and their mother's heart frosted over with ice. After Charles's death Astrid clung to her father, and her father clung to the gallery, more than ever.

According to Edward Grand, a person had not truly lived unless a record of their existence survived. That record was contained in the objects the person had collected throughout their lifetime—objects that told the story of a life. Anyone could be born, marry, bear children, work, pay taxes, die: none of it mattered without a collection. The objects had to be chosen with care. What made a person a person? What made that person unique? Edward Grand's sincerest hope was that the collections displayed at the gallery would serve as a mirror for the townspeople: beautiful and ugly, sophisticated and trashy, bizarre and commonplace, and everything in between.

Some collections were better than others, to be sure. On occasion, revisions were required. "Look at it this way," Astrid had heard her father tell countless collectors over the years. "You have a lifetime to make it right. Don't you owe yourself that?" Edward Grand could tell when the townspeople were holding out, when they refused to give their all. "You can do better," he told them. More often than not, they did.

A lackluster or embarrassing collection was one thing, but failure to collect was another. In the town of Riddle, Kansas, there were collectors and there were nothing people—"no thing" people—people without collections. Collectors tended to be happy, gentle, and kind, the Grands agreed, while nothing people were sad, brusque, even cruel. That said, the Grands could never be sure to which group a person belonged. Collecting was as personal as politics or religion, and like politics or religion, people kept quiet about their collections until they didn't.

Of course, some people talked a big game but in the end had nothing to show for it. Then others the Grands pegged as nothing people would turn out to have the most heart-wrenchingly original collections. Take Rhoda Vanbuskirk, for instance. Astrid thought her a foolish, doddering housewife, only to have her come to the gallery one afternoon to register her collection “in case something dreadful should happen.” Hers was a collection of broken objects maintained since childhood, including more than two hundred everyday items like broken pencils and cups, a cuckoo clock her father had once smashed out of rage, and most delicious, a Humpty Dumpty coin-bank that had fallen from her son’s shelf and shattered. That collection had been a humble reminder never to assume. That said, for every Rhoda Vanbuskirk, there had to be at least ten nothing people wandering expressionless in the streets. Nothing people lacked direction, purpose, *identity*, Astrid’s father always said, and it showed.

For decades, the gallery had been the beating heart of the town. Now, twenty years after Charles’s death and five years after the war, the gallery was in trouble. There had been no new collections in months, and everyone who was going to pay to see the Jim Brady collection had done so long ago. Meanwhile the building itself, one of the most historic in town, was practically screaming for repairs. The roof leaked and threatened to give way under the onslaught of recent thunderstorms. The limestone foundation was cracked and crumbling and overrun with mold. Rumors circulated about the gallery’s demise, which only made matters worse. The townspeople began to stay away, to let nature take its course, as if the gallery were a little injured bird they had come across in the forest. All the Grands could do was wait. Wait, and hope. Hope the next collection would be something the townspeople would clamor to see, or at least be something they could take a mild interest in.

Each day at the gallery, Astrid waited out her shift behind an ornate reception desk. Her legs were always cramped and her spine ached. Whenever it rained, and for hours afterward, the erratic *drip drip drip* from the roof into a bucket behind her chair became the soundtrack to an ever-growing madness. Every so often, a rogue drop missed the bucket and splashed her neck. The drops were murky, oily, foul-smelling. No matter how many times she moved her chair, they always found her.

From its conception the building had been intended to display the collections of the townspeople. It was a building, as Astrid's father put it, that had always known what it was about. At fifteen-hundred square feet, it was a small gallery, though it looked much larger from the street, with floor-to-ceiling windows along two storefronts overlooking the busiest corner in town. Astrid's father insisted the gallery, like the Grands themselves, should be like a blank canvas for the collections displayed there. The décor was functional and austere. Off-white walls. Low burning lamps. The original gallery rules, penned by Astrid's great-grandfather himself, posted on the wall behind the front desk. Along the western storefront, the permanent exhibition space could be found. Here their beloved Charles's collection was housed as well as the collections of town founders and other prized citizens, and a donations box that always held at least three dollars and eighteen cents (to encourage further donations). Nestled against the southern storefront was the featured exhibition room where the Jim Brady collection waited out its final days. Admission three dollars, one dollar for kids. Next to the postcards Astrid sold at the front desk, the featured exhibition had always been the gallery's biggest money-maker—when it made any money at all, that is.

Astrid was thirty and unmarried. She lived at home with her parents and Victor, the strange man who had been the boy her parents brought home to replace Charles two decades ago.

She always wore black. She wore black out of respect for the collections and not, as some speculated, out of continued mourning for her dead brother or dead fiancé (though she still wore Elliott John's ring). Eight years ago Elliott John had died in the war and she had not gone on a single date since. She knew her childlessness disturbed her parents and especially her father, who was, as always, concerned with the future of the gallery. Astrid, meanwhile, suspected the gallery could survive just about anything. It was an institution. The town's lifeblood. Many years from now she would be here at this desk, just as her father would be here, hobbling from window to window to observe the machinations of the town.

Her official title was "registrar," which meant she kept track of the collections, the items in those collections, and their respective owners. Most days she spent daydreaming or chatting up some insufferable boor who had stopped by knowing she would be stranded there for hours. A few had grown up during the heyday of the gallery and came to lament its current state (as if she did not have her own family for that), some still believed a collection giving glory to God would ensure salvation and wanted to talk about that, and then there were the worst ones of all: those whose constant niggling doubts brought them to the gallery several times a week to discuss options, edits, re-imaginings. Sometimes the person brought the objects with them and lined them up on the desk. While examining the items, Astrid often considered which she might choose for her *own* collection. She rarely offered more than a casual appraisal. Her father, she was sure to emphasize, always had final say.

When any interaction became unbearable, Astrid excused herself, turned to the massive leather-bound ledger propped up on the desk before her, and pretended to settle into some urgent work. The ledger gave her instant authority. Everyone knew the ledger was the most comprehensive record of the town's secrets. It contained the names of every person who lived or

had ever lived in Riddle, Kansas, along with that person's birthdate, deathdate (if applicable), profession, address, pertinent rumors, and notes about their collection (if they had one).

As for the Grands themselves, utmost secrecy regarding collections had long reigned. Only Astrid's father spoke about his collection, a vast assemblage of soil samples from the region, which he displayed in glass jars on shelves in his study. Victor constantly wrote in one of his little black notebooks, a new volume nearly every week, though no one knew what about. Then there was Astrid's mother, who was as much a mystery to Astrid as Astrid must have been to the others. Helena Grand either shut herself in her room for hours, or else went on long drives in the service of some undisclosed but crucial mission that the others knew better than to ask about. She was always working, always addled, but proud: hers was an earned exhaustion. They were all proud, in their own way, of having given themselves over to their work, of being "all in." A sort of competition had developed among the family members, though as Astrid saw it, should any one of their collections fail, it would reflect poorly on them all.

During those long hours at the desk, Astrid often wondered how her father would react when she at last revealed the nature of her collection to him. What would he say when he learned every object in her collection had been taken—*stolen*—from the collections of those who had come before? That "working on her collection" had therefore meant stealing from strangers and loved ones alike? Would he praise the boldness of the concept? Her tenacity for seeing it through? Or would he reject the collection, and Astrid herself, outright?

Her father, more than anyone, had always been her audience.

□

One morning at the gallery, Astrid sat at the desk and watched the townspeople dash past the storefronts in a frenzy. Housewives, young couples, the elderly: they were all rushing to join the growing queue across the street. It was the first time the Charm Theater had reopened since its main hall caught fire more than a decade ago. It was also the first dry, sunny day in nearly a week, and yet everyone was racing one another to get indoors. As they passed the gallery they kept their gazes fixed on the marquee ahead, not a single one daring to gaze into the gallery windows lest they make eye contact with the spinster behind the desk. By early afternoon, the queue snaked around the block and out of sight.

Meanwhile, the gallery had not seen a single patron all day. Astrid took the opportunity to work on a dress for Ida Braeburn, the town florist, who had promised a decent sum for her efforts. Nearly everyone in the family had taken on extra work to help make ends meet. A month ago, Victor started working part-time at the bank, which meant he only worked Saturdays at the gallery now. Astrid's mother spent her days making house calls as always, but they were mostly for Avon now, not the gallery. Astrid's father insisted these other jobs were only temporary. They would all be back working their old hours and then some. In the meantime, he urged the family not to get so caught up in their new responsibilities that they let their *own* collections fall by the wayside.

Just after two, Astrid was just about to stand and stretch her legs when the bell on the front door clanged. She stuffed Ida's dress out of sight and sat up straight. When the Benson brothers strolled in, she sank back into her chair.

If anyone could help the gallery, it was the Bensons. Thanks to key early investments in the local cement business, they now possessed more wealth than the Riddle family itself. Yet until this moment the Bensons had never visited the gallery, had never lauded it, had never made investments of any kind, not even in the form of their own collections. They were, the whole lot of them, some of the most wretched nothing people Astrid had ever known.

“Busy day at the gallery, huh, Lloyd?” said Tom, the older and meaner of the two. As children, Tom had been the one to follow Astrid around the playground asking her to appraise his latest “collection” (a crusty old sock, a fistful of worms, a dead bird).

“Sure is,” Lloyd said.

“Can you imagine what we could do with a location like this? Corner lot? Superior natural lighting? We’d have to overhaul everything, of course, but well worth it in the end, I’d say.”

Unbelievable: the rumors were true. The Bensons indeed had designs on the building, despite its many faults. The brothers had come here today to make their assessment, as eager (and ugly) as a pair of turkey buzzards. They passed the front desk and neither they nor Astrid acknowledged the other. From there they swooped over to the permanent exhibitions. Here were the cases displaying the clothes, tools, and tintypes of Walter Riddle, the town founder, and his family. The original gallery floorplans and a hunk of limestone representing the life’s work of Astrid’s great-grandfather, Petey Grand, the gallery’s chief architect. A collection of native Kansas butterflies (of which at least three species were now thought to be extinct) belonging to Astrid’s grandfather, Thomas P. Grand. And most dear of all, the handkerchiefs that

commemorated the last days of Charles Grand, son of Edward and Helena Grand. The Bensons passed over the rows of cases without seeing any of it.

“Let me guess,” Astrid said when the brothers finally approached her. “You’ve come to register your collections. Who wants to go first?”

Lloyd leaned over the desk trying to read the gallery rules on the wall behind her. “Rules of the Gallery,” he said. “Does it say, ‘Thou shalt not covet another man’s collection?’”

“I prefer rule number six,” Tom said. “I believe it says, ‘Thou shalt not collect.’”

“What do you jerks want?”

“We want to speak with your father. We’ve got an offer for him. One he isn’t likely to refuse.”

“I’m afraid he’s busy at the moment,” Astrid replied. “As a matter of fact, he’s drawing up the papers on an exciting new collection and simply can’t be rushed. I’m sure you understand.”

“A new collection, you say? How *grand*. Who’s the lucky devil?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see like everyone else. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Without another word, she opened the ledger and began thumbing through. She flipped to the “B” section, right in front of them, and did not attempt to control her glee. Just as she had suspected, the Bensons, despite being one of the largest families in town, had not registered a single collection since the early twenties, with the exception of an eccentric aunt-by-marriage whose “assorted juice cup lids??,” as the entry read, must have been a real riot. The brothers left

the desk and milled around the lobby, yawning and picking fuzz off each other's sleeves, until eventually Lloyd pointed to this watch and Tom huffed and they filed out into the street.

Astrid's father emerged from his office a minute later.

"Have they gone?" he said.

"Just now."

"An offer I'm not likely to refuse, my ass," he said.

He shuffled over to the front desk. These days, like the gallery itself, Edward Grand was somewhat of a deteriorating monument. For as long as Astrid could remember he had relied on a walking stick, though lately he seemed to have more trouble than ever perambulating. *These old joints always stiffen up in winter*, he insisted whenever she expressed concern. *I'll thaw soon*.

The car accident that had mangled his right leg in early adulthood also left it three inches shorter than the other. When he stood on one leg, he was six-foot, and on the other, just five-ten. Long ago Astrid decided her father's current mood could be placed into two rough categories, depending on which leg he favored: tall and powerful or small and meek. Now, it appeared, it was small and meek.

He turned his head and sneezed. Astrid held out a tissue. On top of everything he had been unable to shake a cold their family had been passing around like a hot potato for weeks.

"Go home," Astrid said.

"What? And miss all this fun?"

"I'm serious. Some rest would do you good. I can handle things around here."

“I’ll be fine,” he said, and consulted a page in the ledger. “Besides, your mother might stop by and I want to hear the latest from the hospital. They’re saying the mayor might not make it, you know. Nasty case of pneumonia.”

“Knowing you, you’ll find a way to catch it.”

“Don’t you start.”

She returned to her sewing because she did not want to discuss his health either, or all the ways he was bent on disregarding it. He made a note in the ledger—Astrid let her gaze wander from her sewing long enough to confirm it was the mayor’s page. Her father looked up from the ledger. He pointed at the dress in her lap.

“Now what have you got there?”

“Just something for Ida.”

“Isn’t there anything else you could be doing? For the gallery?”

“This *is* for the gallery,” she said, and kept on sewing.

“You know what I mean.”

He picked up the morning’s *Register* from the desk and threw it back down in front of her. The headline above the fold read, “When the Going Gets Ruff: Local Dog Owners Battle New Puppy Blues.”

“No obituaries. No accidents. Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing as far as I saw.”

“Well, what about the reminder cards? Any appointments to confirm?”

“Everything’s up to date.”

He looked up at the clock over the entryway. It was only a half past three.

“A spot clean then?”

She started with the immense windows that spanned both storefronts. As a child, all that glass made her feel like a rare and beautiful fish in a giant fishbowl. The townspeople were her audience, always eager for her next trick. This corner had always been a high-traffic area, but back then the townspeople loved the gallery and had a vested interest in its goings-on. When Astrid thought about that time, how different it all was, the gallery, the town, what she understood of the world, her heart swelled. Everyone was miserable back then, between the poverty and the wars and the dust storms, yet there was so much good will. When Charles died, the town mourned with them, and honored his collection with longer lines than the Charm would ever have. Back then, Astrid could spend an hour buffing the fingerprints of curious onlookers from the outside glass. *Whose collection had debuted this week? Had everything gone according to plan?* Today, walking along the storefront, Astrid detected not a single smudge. She performed the ritual nonetheless: dipping the towel in the water and vinegar mixture, wringing it over the bucket, moving it in precise circular motions over the glass. She had pinned up her long hair that morning and she welcomed the caress of the bright sun on her bare neck and shoulders, the trickle of sweat that ran all the way down her back. As she worked, the sun caught the small ruby on her finger. Elliott John’s ring. It was always with her, a blood-red reminder.

“I will return,” he had insisted that afternoon in the park, tripping on the roots of a tree on his approach, ring already in hand. “Then I’m taking you away from this place.”

Maybe her father knew about their plan all along, or maybe he only sensed it, but for whatever reason he had doubts about E.J. from the beginning. He saw those doubts confirmed when his only daughter's suitor, of all the young men in town preparing to ship out to war, failed to register a collection. Then, after the fact—nothing to be done. “To think, you might have married an honest-to-goodness nothing person,” her father had remarked on their way home from the funeral, his idea of consolation. But E.J. had been no nothing person, Astrid knew. His refusal to register had only been another iteration of his promise: *I will return*. Now, whenever Astrid remembered how excited she had been by the prospect of escape, if not by Elliott John himself, she felt a dull awful thump in her gut. The only way to quell the guilt she felt for once wanting to leave was to pretend she had never wanted to.

When she went back inside, the window-washing complete, her father was standing beside Charles's handkerchiefs. He must have been admiring them moments before—he had always been so proud of Charles's collection—but now he was fixated on the line outside the theater. His brow was furrowed and he was propped up on his bad leg again.

“Look at them all,” he said. “So happy. So healthy. So carefree.”

“Maybe.”

“Seventy-five years,” he said. “Can you believe it? Only to have our worst year ever?”

“Give it time. It's only March.”

“They've forgotten the big picture.”

Astrid took the towel and bucket to the back room and swapped them out for a dust cloth. She ran it over the display cases in the permanent exhibition, those of her brother and

grandfather and great-grandfather, though she knew they, too, had gone untouched since that morning. She moved next to the gallery rules, which hung on the wall behind the front desk, rules each generation of the Grand family had endeavored to uphold and which the Bensons had so rudely blasphemed just minutes before. Astrid buffed the glass with steady, practiced motions. She recited the five rules in her head. Together they made up a familiar mantra:

Rules of The Gallery

1. A resident (hereafter referred to as “collector”) shall maintain as many collections as he likes, but only one shall be eligible for display.
2. To be eligible for display, a collector must first register his collection.
3. Collections shall meet common standards of decency, subject to the gallery owner’s approval. Collections shall not contain dead bodies, body parts, or pornography.
4. After display, unclaimed collections shall be disposed of by the gallery owner. (In rare cases, the owner may request that a collection, or portions of a collection, become part of the gallery’s permanent collection.)

And, above all, the most important rule:

5. Collections shall not be displayed until after such time as the collector’s death.

“They’ve forgotten,” her father said, “their mortality.”

Astrid joined him at the window. She placed her hand on his shoulder. At her touch, his whole body trembled, like a thin branch under the weight of an alighting bird. *He is stressed*, she thought, *and worn out from his cold*.

“All my life you’ve taught me to be patient. You’ll think of something,” she said. “You always do.”

She left him to his thoughts and stepped into the featured exhibition room. Here, in the chapel, she could forget everything: troubles with the gallery, the Bensons, her father, Elliott John. Here only the collections reigned.

Jim Brady had been insane, a permanently shell-shocked eccentric who received profound but uncertain injuries that landed him in the state hospital in Topeka. After his release Brady returned to his hometown of Riddle with nothing but a pair of tattered boots and a knapsack that indeed looked as if it had been made by a mental patient. Various colors and fabrics stitched together, haphazard-like, a sort of Frankenstein bag. Brady kept everything he owned, which wasn’t much, in that knapsack. People felt sorry for Jim Brady. They started giving him things. Trinkets mostly. Every time someone gave Jim Brady something new, a book or a marble or a broken watch, he raised his index finger and repeated the same line—“*And another thing!*”—before placing the item in his knapsack. Eventually one of the local seamstresses made Jim a bigger bag, but he outgrew that one, too. Near the end, Astrid could spot Jim from two blocks away, shuffling under the weight of all those things, many not inside the bag but tied onto the heap with a complex system of ropes.

The Grands called the collection “Sisyphus.” From the start they suspected no one was coming to see that collection, just as they suspected no one was going to claim it when the next collection came along to take its place. In the end it would all have to be hauled off to the town dump, like a surprising number of collections that came through these doors. It was a depressing thought.

Perhaps that was why, out of all the collections over the years, Astrid had fewer compunctions about stealing from this one. In its three-month run she had already taken a matchbook, a deflated helium balloon with string trailing, a jump rope, a faux-amethyst bracelet, a balsa wood glider plane, and a miniature bronze horse. As always, she feared someone in the family knew, or suspected, what she had been up to, but no one had said a word. Truth be told, she doubted anyone had noticed. She was the one to document the objects in the collection, after all, and she was the only one who spent any real time with it.

The objects spoke to her. *Take me*, a 4-H ribbon urged. *Me next*, a novelty belt buckle proclaimed. If she had not taken an object in some time, the panic would set in. The feeling someone had set the clock hands at double- or triple- or quadruple-speed, a feeling that time was short—*For her? For her collection?*—and the panic escalated until she found the right object, or a satisfactory object, and put it in the ground. After that the panic would subside, sometimes for weeks or even months at a time, sometimes just hours. Today it was the Duncan yo-yo, sitting between the ceramic kitten and the pink hairbrush in the display case, that summoned her. The yo-yo was purplish-blue, the color the night sky takes on when blasted with magenta just before sundown, and had the loveliest scratch down one side.

Astrid crept to the chapel door. Her father was at the front desk now, bent over the ledger. Without raising his eyes he reached down, lifted the hinged lid on the handle of his walking

stick, and removed a pillbox from the secret compartment that everyone in the family knew about. He swallowed two pills, without water, in succession. Astrid returned to the display case and took the brass key ring from her pocket. When she unlocked the case and lifted the glass, she was greeted with the full force of a sweet, earthy smell, something like the neck of a child that has been playing all day in the sun. The smell recalled the richest soils she had encountered over the years, silty vibrant soils teeming with organic materials, soils that made her dream about the objects she had buried sprouting roots and growing into plants that popped up all over town. A broken dish into a dandelion. An embroidery of a cat into a rose bush. A cufflink into a cactus.

In fewer than ten seconds she slipped the yo-yo into her pocket, rearranged the objects in the case to hide its absence, and locked it up tight again. Her heart crashed against her ribcage. These were the moments she most identified with her father's speeches about the importance of collecting. She could not imagine what her life would be like without *this*.

She was about to return to the front desk when she heard the clang of the bell followed by the telltale click of heels.

"Sisyphus has got to go," her mother said, breathless. Astrid stood at the chapel door and watched Helena Grand remove her gloves and slip them in her bag, which was always brimming with the latest Avon lotions and perfumes. She turned and, checking her reflection in the window, scrunched her silver-blond curls. "People are complaining," she said. "They want to be moved. Inspired. Not made to think about the plight of the homeless. We might as well be shaking a cup at the door."

"What people?" Astrid's father said. "What are you talking about?"

“People at the hospital. Patients. Even the nurses. They’ve started calling it ‘The Hobo Collection.’ They’re saying you can smell it through the glass.”

You can, Astrid thought. But the best collections are always the most pungent.

Her father paced the foyer. His walking stick pounded out an angry staccato rhythm. “I don’t care what anyone says about Jim Brady. That man knew what he was about. If half those people had his clarity of vision—but no, they turn up their noses and stroll right on past, better hurry or we’ll miss the picture show. They refuse to learn anything at all from him.”

Astrid’s mother glided over to Charles’s collection and pressed both palms against the glass. Her back was turned and Astrid could not see her face, though she could picture it exactly. It was her mother’s true face. Her misery face. The creases around her eyes and down her forehead would lengthen, deepen. Her mouth would slacken. Her gaze, intensify.

“There’s more,” Helena Grand said. “The mayor’s going home in the morning. They said he’s made a miraculous recovery.”

“Of course he has.”

Astrid’s father hobbled over to the display case and huddled beside his wife, who had not moved from her original position. Under the soft glow of the overhead lamp they whispered. Astrid could not make any of it out. She stepped away from the doorway and sat with her back against the chapel wall. When the bell announced her mother’s departure minutes later, she rose and returned to her desk.

“There you are,” her father said.

He asked for the cloth and Astrid handed it over. He began working it over Charles's case. With each pass, he removed another trace of his wife's enduring love.

More than any other objects in the gallery, Charles's handkerchiefs cried out. These objects, unlike the others, spoke to every member of the Grand family. Astrid heard them now. For years she had heard them but the time had never been right. Stealing objects from the chapel was one thing. Stealing them from the permanent exhibition area was quite another. Even after she convinced herself she could do it—she could take one of Charles's handkerchiefs, and in record time—someone was always around. Always watching. She could wait for a rare moment when the busy intersection emptied, perhaps when the rainstorms returned. But Edward Grand was always there, always bursting out of the back office with a brilliant new idea or complaint and she could not risk it. Perhaps, if she could convince her father to go home sick today after all—*Stop it*, she admonished herself. *You are getting greedy.*

As it turned out, her father sent *her* home early that day. She gathered her coat and lunch pail and the ledger that rarely left her side. In the foyer they spoke briefly about dinner. Before leaving Astrid felt a sudden urge to embrace her father, to fold him up like an easel in her arms, but his expression suddenly grew stern.

“You know how important it is for us to set an example for the community,” he said, shifting his weight from his bad leg to the other. “Living as simply and purposefully as we can. Only acquiring new objects that directly contribute to our daily lives and well being.”

He knows, Astrid thought. He is going to reach into my pocket and pluck that yo-yo out.

“As for objects that have already found a place in our lives,” he continued, “we must cast them out when they no longer serve us or no longer—”

“Bring us joy,” Astrid interrupted.

With that her father clasped his hand over hers and snuffed out the blood-red twinkle on her finger. A shiver ran through her body. His hands were ice cold.

She left her father there in the foyer, perched on his walking stick. The gallery would not close for another two hours. He could always close early, but Astrid knew he would not. His pride would not permit it.

Times like these, she wondered if the gallery gave her father joy. If it gave her joy.

□

No sooner had Astrid stepped out onto the gallery’s front steps than a woman, a complete stranger, ran up to the western storefront and pressed her nose to the glass.

She must have been about Astrid’s age. Late twenties, early thirties. She looked so much like Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce* that for a moment Astrid thought she must be in costume. The woman’s dark glossy hair was swept up in a high bun framed by a row of tightly curled bangs. She wore a fine double-breasted hounds-tooth suit that could not be purchased anywhere in this town, probably not in the whole state. The woman was poised. Confident. A woman who knew what she was about.

Astrid was so fixated on the woman that she missed the bottom step and tumbled to the pavement. The ledger slipped from her arms and she scrambled to retrieve it, cursing in her head.

“Are you all right?” the woman said, putting a gloved hand to her mouth.

“I’m fine.”

“Tell me, is this the place where they show the dead people’s collections?”

“Good grief,” Astrid said, taken aback. “I’ve never heard anyone call it that before.”

“What do you call it?”

“The gallery. The *Grand* Gallery.”

“But it’s true? The whole idea is that these—*collections*—can’t be shown until after a person dies?”

Astrid turned and through the gallery windows met eyes with her father at the front desk. He was watching their interaction expectantly, no doubt hoping she would convince the woman to come inside and register.

“Well, yes,” she said.

“How odd,” the woman said, and took another peek inside. “*Why?*”

“Why what?”

“Why must they be *dead?*”

“It’s one of the rules of the gallery,” Astrid said, hugging the ledger to her chest. Without realizing it, she began to back away inches at a time. “It’s the most important rule.”

“But—”

“Collections only achieve their full beauty when they are beyond tampering,” Astrid said. She felt her cheeks redden and her pulse escalate as her father’s words became her own. “They must be beyond tampering.”

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean—”

Before the woman could finish, Astrid turned on her heel and stalked off down Main Street. She knew her father was watching yet she had no choice. It was the panic that made her flee. The panic that ordinarily compelled her to take new objects for her collection. She had never felt the panic return so soon after stealing. The yo-yo was still in her pocket, after all, waiting to be buried. Still she felt the crushing urgency. The *tick tick tick* of the clock hand. But why? Perhaps it was not the same old panic, but something else. Something that woman had said?

With the panic came a flush of anger. Who did that woman think she was, coming into their town, showing up outside of their gallery, and asking such questions?

Astrid walked to the park on the north side of the river. She sat on a bench and put the ledger and her lunch pail beside her. For more than twenty minutes she waited for the children playing nearby to leave. Then, after making certain no one was watching, she dug a shallow hole beside the old train locomotive. There she buried the yo-yo. When she had finished she stood and brushed the dirt from her hands on the hem of her skirt. The object was safely in the ground and she felt better, but only for a little while.

(2)

The Grand family lived on Oak Street, though it was two elms, no less imposing for all their early-spring nakedness, that stood guard at either side of the front walkway. The house was a red-brick Dutch Colonial with black shutters and a chimney frequented by the starlings that lived therein. Its most distinctive feature was its severe gambrel roof, whose shape always reminded Astrid of the pointed hood worn by Anne Boleyn. Edward Grand had grown up in this house. As a child he watched the house being built under the direction of his father and grandfather. Astrid's father knew countless stories about the old house, seemingly every story there was to know: every window that had ever been broken, every scratch and every ding and how it got there, every renovation, every party, every birth or death or engagement or disavowal.

The house was large and yet crowded with history. The stories taking place in Astrid's room alone had been enough to keep her awake at night well into adulthood.

Each evening, after dinner, the members of the Grand family retreated to their respective corners of the house to work on their collections. During this time, Astrid sat in her room in the window seat that overlooked the backyard and sewed or sketched new items to sew. The very nature of her collection meant she could not work on it here, in the home. At times, she would pull down the map of the town that hung over her bed and study the second map pinned underneath. On this map she had marked the locations of the objects she had buried over the past twenty years. Two hundred and eighty-seven objects, according to her most recent count, more than fifty in the backyard alone.

Before the map, before the panic, there had been other objects. A rock or coin or button she buried while playing outside in the yard. The first object she recorded on the map was a miniature brass kaleidoscope, no bigger than three inches, tarnished green and metallic-smelling from being submerged underwater for who knew how long. But inside—. She had never seen anything like it. So many colors undulating before her eyes. Her father showed it to her a few months after Charles's death, just before her tenth birthday. The kaleidoscope belonged to the police commissioner's collection, a collection that included hundreds of items dredged from Cottonwood Lake during a search and rescue mission more than a decade prior. Hairpins, paperclips, buttons, earrings, rosaries, batteries, tobacco pipes, dice, harmonicas, matchbox cars, dentures, tires, road signs, a bowling pin, balls of all sizes, four tricycles and six bikes, a rubber tree, a Christmas tree, a clawfoot bathtub. A car and body had also been found, though those objects had not, naturally, appeared in the collection.

When Astrid took the kaleidoscope, she thought of it as an early birthday present to herself. She had wanted to find a chain to run through the metal loop on the side so she could wear it proudly, but of course that was impossible. When her father noticed the kaleidoscope had gone missing from the chapel on the day of the collection's debut, he confronted her about it. She denied everything. That night, before bed, for reasons she still did not understand, she took the kaleidoscope from under the broken slat in her bureau drawer and buried it at the edge of the creek in her backyard. She remembered feeling safe knowing it was near, knowing she could return to it one day. She never had. Instead she took new objects, and buried new objects, not only in the yard but all over the town. Together the objects made up a strange pattern she could not read. A wide net reaching from one end of the town to the other. She thought of that net waiting to catch her should she stumble or heaven forbid fall. Other times she saw it rising up around her like a fisherman's net, drawing tauter and tauter, until it snared her.

She spoke to no one about her collection. Not even her father, who had been the one to get her thinking about soil in the first place. Her earliest memories were of gazing up at the jars in Edward Grand's study. They were meticulously polished—rows and rows of gleaming glass with dirt and muck and filth inside. (Glass itself, he noted, came from materials in the ground.) To the bottom of each jar he attached a label indicating from where and when the sample had been taken. When the samples were fresh, you could see weeds growing or worms writhing in them, but over time all soils took on the same dry, gray, lifeless appearance. You could tell which of the slushy soils he had carried around in his pocket for a while, because the soil would roll around the inside of the jar and harden into a cylindrical shape. Sometimes, when Astrid picked up a jar to inspect it, a bottle cap or coin or arrowhead that had broken free from the soil would rattle around in the bottom.

“The whole history of human civilization,” her father once told her, “is of people burying things and digging them back up.”

One day, Astrid supposed, maybe before she was brave enough to tell him about her collection, he would dig up one of *her* objects. When that day came they would see each other for the first time.

But what if he never saw her?

Her whole life would be a tree falling in the woods.

Wasn't it this fear that had been at the heart of her encounter with the strange woman outside the gallery? The incident was by now many days past, yet she could not forget it. *Why must they be dead?* The question circled in her mind, persistent as a prairie hawk in winter, and compounded with her curiosity about the woman herself. Who was she? What was she doing in their town?

She must be a rich city-girl, Astrid decided. From time to time high rollers like her turned up around here, travelers en route to Kansas City or Tulsa or Wichita. The railroad closures meant nothing to them. They all drove their own cars. People like that did not come to Riddle, Kansas, and stay. Thinking of the woman—the dramatic swoop of her updo, the curve of her neck—she felt a growing panic.

She was staring at the map on her bedroom wall trying to make sense of the patterns when a knock came at her door.

Her father.

“One moment,” she said. She covered the secret map with the other one, trying hard not to rustle the paper.

Edward Grand stood before her, sicker than ever, small and meek. He was feverish, the cold having given way to a nasty sinus infection that was never going to cure itself. He was stubborn about doctors and avoided them at all costs. They all did. But she was irritated with him for not looking after himself.

“Family meeting in one hour?” he said, and without waiting for a response shuffled off down the hall.

She knew her father hated being sick, but she sensed his irritation with her too. What had she done now? She knew it could not have been about her interaction with that woman outside the gallery the other day—how she had run off mid-conversation, in what her father called a “tizzy,” when she should have been promoting the gallery. She had blamed her behavior on a sudden stomach cramp, perhaps triggered by her having fallen down the gallery steps moments before, and he had accepted her explanation. She had not mentioned the panic. She spoke to no one about the panic.

He must know, she thought then, because to think about the panic meant to welcome it. After all these years he knows everything and intends to confront me at the meeting before everyone.

But then she thought of previous family meetings. The most recent concerned the decision to close the gallery on Sundays and to cut hours throughout the week. More than likely, she told herself, this meeting would also be financial in nature. But did it always have to be something bad? Maybe, just maybe, her father had news that a rich distant cousin had died and

the Grands would get everything. But suppose there was no rich cousin? Suppose her father intended to tell them he had decided to take the Bensons up on their offer after all? The possibilities were dizzying. Worse, she did not know what to hope for.

She left her room and stepped into the dark hall. The four upstairs rooms were laid out in a horseshoe shape around the stairwell. On one end was Astrid's room. Beside her room was her father's study, then her parents' bedroom (her mother's bedroom these days), and then, on the other end of the horseshoe, what used to be Charles's room but had long since been Victor's. Strips of light glowed under the two doors in the middle. Her parents were both still hard at work. Victor's doorway was dark but that was because he insisted his room was haunted and refused to work in there. Astrid went downstairs to make tea. On her way to the kitchen she passed the sitting room, where Victor was lost in his writing, as usual. He had one elbow propped up on the desk and a hand covering his left eye, his lazy eye. That eye had kept him out of the war and a few relationships besides. He assumed people disliked him because of his eye, which made him bitter and rude, which made people dislike him. Astrid studied Victor for several seconds, but it was not until she turned to leave that he finally looked up at her.

What were the contents of that look? Two parts frustration, one part exhaustion, and a dash of—she could not pin it down—revulsion? Rage? Whatever it was, it sent her on her way without so much as a hello.

In the kitchen she put on the kettle and decided on a tea, passionflower. *Working at the bank has changed him*, she thought as she took down the white porcelain cups and saucers and arranged them on the serving tray. Victor still had the posture of a vampire, was still self-conscious about that eye, but there was something extra, a new haughtiness draped about him like a gaudy cloak. Mostly his demeanor seemed to imply that he had gone out into the world

and had seen how things are done, and now it was his job to teach the rest of the family about it. Sure, he was making a fine wage at the bank, and they were all grateful for it. But even gratitude had its limits.

She poured the tea and brought the tray into the sitting room, where she offered Victor a cup. He accepted it with a nod and a half-smile. Countering disdain with kindness: a tactic Astrid often relied on. She took a seat on the sofa across the room from him.

“You’re looking upbeat this evening,” she lied. “Have you done much writing?”

“A fair amount. Nothing to shout from the rooftops about.”

They sipped their tea. Overhead, the floorboards creaked. For thirty years Astrid had clocked that walk, accompanied always by the thump of the walking stick. Her father’s walk told all. She knew when he was feeling well, unwell, somewhere in between. She knew when he was bored, perturbed, surprised, outraged. Usually, he was anxious, as he was now: his pace frenzied and erratic, full of unexplained gaps and missteps. It was because she could so easily spot the panic in his walk that she was able to recognize it in herself.

“So this meeting,” Astrid said. “Any idea what it’s about?”

Victor stopped writing mid-sentence and squinted at her. “You’re telling me you don’t know? I’m surprised you’re not leading it.”

“Don’t be like that. I was only making conversation.”

“We’re here to talk about the gallery, of course. You know—how it’s failing?”

He returned to his writing and she did not object. Whenever he grew petulant like this, she calmed herself by picturing him five years old and naked. Her mother trying in vain to corral

him in the tub before summoning a ten-year-old Astrid to help chase him down. Long and lanky and blonde, just as he was now, tiny little boy's penis stark and unavoidable as he flailed about in the hall. She hated the sight of that penis. He might have looked like Charles, she remembered thinking even as a child, but Charles never behaved that way.

Behind Victor the grandfather clock, which had been passed down for generations in the Grand family, ticked resolutely away. The clock was made of mahogany, with a brass dial with an open center so the inner workings of the clock could be observed. The moon dial, which alternated between images of the moon, the prairie, and the sea (even though no one in the family had ever seen the sea), indicated the full moon would arrive soon. The best time to plant fruit trees was during a full moon, her father had once remarked, and Astrid wondered if that held true for other things one might put in the ground. Beside the clock was a sideboard table topped with a lace table runner, crocheted by Astrid's maternal grandmother, which was in turn topped with twin brass candelabras that had belonged to Astrid's paternal great-grandmother (only half the candles had been lit, according to a new family rule). The coffee table was made of a repurposed barn door. Years ago, after renovating the barn on his property (when it was still his property), Astrid's maternal grandfather had presented the table to Astrid's parents as an anniversary gift. Astrid's mother had grown up on that property, had played in that barn as a child. Decades later, when they took Charles to the old farmhouse to die, he had gazed upon the barn whenever they wheeled him out onto the balcony.

Astrid watched the pendulum swing in the belly of the grandfather clock. Back and forth. Back and forth. She thought eight o'clock would never come, but then the minute hand inched along and met the hour hand. The gears turned and the Westminster Quarters began their familiar song. After the eighth strike of the gong Astrid's parents plodded down the stairs like

schoolchildren reluctantly returning from recess—first her father, then her mother, towering in heels and carrying the big overstuffed box she brought to every family meeting, waiting patiently for her husband to make his descent. Edward Grand took a seat beside Astrid on the sofa.

Astrid’s mother sat in the Queen Anne chair and set the box on the floor beside her, from which she removed a pen and notepad. In the candlelight, their faces appeared wan and ghoulish. *The harsh winter has aged them, Astrid thought, but they are still young.*

Not so long ago, the four Grands would sit here, in this room, and tell stories of collections past—collections from Edward Grand’s childhood, from his father’s childhood, and before. Astrid would lay the ledger on the old barn door and read aloud entries at random, and her father would expound on them. Sometimes, after a rare drink or two, he would let loose secrets he immediately knew he should not have, stories about collections that had suggested curious behavior in the lives of their owners. Often, they pointed to various misdeeds: adultery, self-mutilation, arson, incest, possibly even murder. Objects that could not be explained, like a blood-encrusted knife that had been cherished by an old priest, or a suitcase of women’s underthings belonging to the town’s most notorious hermit. But now, whenever the family gathered in this room, they spoke of other things. Of the rain and the bank and the latest Avon perfume (which smelled a bit like violin bow resin). Anything to avoid discussing the very thing that was on all their minds. But now, it seemed, Edward Grand had brought them all here to do just that.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said now, as if any of them had a choice. “I have a plan. A first step, anyhow. If the townspeople want to forget their woes and cut loose for a while, I say let’s help them do it.”

The plan was to throw a party. A fundraiser, including a live auction, for the gallery's upcoming anniversary. There would be punch and snacks and music and dancing, perhaps a live band, plus party favors and games for the kids. They couldn't forget about the kids. They were the gallery's future, after all.

"How are we going to pay for all of that?" Victor said.

"With donations from local businesses, mainly. We'll ask the Charm to provide popcorn and sodas—the least they can do after stealing all our business. Perhaps we'll auction off one of Una's famous pies."

"What about admission?" Victor said.

"Admission," Edward Grand said, "will be free."

"What?" Victor said. "Don't you think that's a missed opportunity?"

"Not if the free admission gets them inside, where they spend their hard-earned cash on our fabulous auction items."

"They haven't given us any of their hard-earned cash in a long while. What makes you think they intend to start now?"

Shut up, Victor, Astrid thought.

"Really, Victor," her mother said, her tone more cloying than critical. "Give the idea a chance."

"Astrid, what do you think?" her father said.

Astrid picked at the hem of her dress. She must have just snagged the thread, because it was starting to unravel. “I like the idea of a party,” she said. “And a fundraiser certainly sounds wise.”

“I agree,” her father said. “See? Astrid understands.”

“He’s already made up the cards, in any case,” her mother said.

“Cards?” Victor said. His left eye began to twitch and a hand flew up to cover it.

“Fliers, really. Made of card stock,” Edward Grand said. “Show them, dear.”

His wife turned to the box at her feet and began to rifle through it.

“Let me see here,” she said, and quickly became flummoxed. The fliers were not where they were supposed to be, or else had gotten mixed in with other paperwork. She began to pull sheaves of papers from the box and laid them haphazardly on the carpet. Astrid’s father huffed. He was halfway out of his seat when Astrid’s mother at last produced the elusive fliers.

Edward Grand wrenched the stack from her and offered half to Astrid, half to Victor. His pride, palpable.

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“What do you think?” he said when they had finished reading.

He was looking at Astrid, but it was Victor who spoke: “That last bit is fairly tasteless, don’t you think?”

“Oh?”

“It’s basically saying, ‘We need someone to die by June 19.’ Someone with a collection of ‘uncommon truth and beauty,’ that is.”

You are naked and thrashing on the bathroom floor, Astrid thought. You are peeing in my dead brother’s bed.

“The townspeople know how the gallery works,” her father said.

“Then why print something like that at all?”

“I’ll tell you why, young man. Do you know how many people are walking around this town with unregistered collections?”

“Eight hundred and eighty-two,” Astrid said.

“Exactly. Your mother, bless her heart, secured four new registrations just this week. But that’s not enough. The town’s bigger than ever, and the number of registrations continues to drop. We have to remind people to do their civic duty. We have to remind them of the importance of sharing their life’s work with their fellow man.”

“I still think it’s in poor taste,” Victor said. “If people don’t want to register, they probably have good reasons for it.”

“A few maybe, but not all. Some, as you well know, fully intend to register and then *bam!*—it’s too late. That collection never sees the light of day.”

“But don’t you think it’s strange we don’t mind the ‘bam’ part, so long as the poor fool’s registered?”

“That’s how it’s always been. You know that.”

Knew it and embraced it all these years, Astrid thought. Only now you speak up. Why?

“If you ask me,” Victor said, “we should display *a number* of collections at the anniversary party. Collections-*in-progress*. People would pay an entry fee, and we could choose the best, say, five for display? With a cash prize for first place? We could get people excited about collecting again, and turn a profit to boot.”

“Collections-*in-progress*?” Edward Grand said.

“We wouldn’t have to change the rule forever. Just for this one event. Although maybe we should think about changing it. I mean, why can’t we show collections any old time? Why does the person have to die first?”

At that, both Astrid and her father bolted upright on the sofa, as if someone had reached out and struck them both across the cheek. Her father had never been a man to lose his temper, but his face, already flushed from his cold, was reddening by the second. He picked up his cup of tea that had gone untouched throughout the meeting and drank it down in one long gulp.

“What you are suggesting would destroy the gallery and everything it has stood for,” he said.

“Just hand out the cards, will you?” Astrid’s mother said. She was on her knees now, gathering the stacks of papers from the floor and stuffing them back into the box.

The meeting was adjourned. Edward and Helena Grand shuffled out and left Astrid and Victor alone with the grandfather clock marking off the seconds of silence between them.

“Let me guess,” Victor said finally, aiming his pen at her. “You agree with him.”

“I didn’t say that. But you could be a heck of a lot nicer, you know. Maybe people would listen to you more.” They were maybe the most honest words she had ever said to this man, this imposter-brother she had lived with for twenty years but had never known. Her sudden capacity for candor embarrassed her, and she looked down at the loose thread on her hem, tugged it, unraveled it further. “How did you come up with that idea anyway?” she said.

“How have you *not* come up with it? If you’re really going to take over that gallery, you better get with the times.”

“Calm down,” she told him. “No one’s ‘taking over the gallery.’ Not for a long long time.”

□

Late that night, long after the houses on the opposite side of the creek had gone dark one by one, Astrid sat cross-legged on the floor between her bed and the window seat and read by candlelight. *The Vogue Pattern Book*: “The fashion magazine for the woman who sews.” A gift from Delilah at the dress shop. An old issue, but still decades ahead of what most women in Riddle would consider ready-to-wear. A few, though, were getting braver. A handful of local women so adored Astrid’s trademark dresses they began commissioning their own. In the window seat, with her sewing supplies and fabrics, she kept an envelope full of all her earnings. Nearly three hundred dollars already. She did not yet know what she might do with it.

Unlike Astrid’s long line of black dresses, her clients craved color: green velvet with gold embroidery, orange-and-white-polka-dot gingham, fine sapphire-blue silk. She blushed whenever she lifted the window seat and saw the fabrics she had amassed there. The vibrant colors leapt out at her, an almost dizzying effect, like she was gazing into a kaleidoscope.

The Vogue Pattern Book was full of pictures of high-class women with long white gloves and outsize hats leaning against walls or men or else over the railings of boats. Again she found

herself thinking of that mysterious woman outside the gallery. She would not be surprised to turn the page and see that woman peering up at her.

How strange, she thought, that Victor and the woman should have been hung up on the same idea. *Why must they be dead?*

When the promise of sleep finally arrived, Astrid blew out the candle and slipped into bed. She had just pulled the comforter to her chin when she heard a loud thud from her father's study. She sat up, alarmed, and waited. She heard the whir of a jar rolling along her father's desk followed by the screech of her father's chair and then—silence.

Moments later she heard the whine of the study door.

Her father was out in the hall now. She could hear him breathing before she heard the first thud of the walking stick. She knew what to listen for because in her world of constant secrecy she knew how hard it was to stay invisible, to stay silent. The more you tried, the more obvious your presence became. The floorboards outside her door creaked, followed by a restrained stomp, step, stomp, step down the stairs.

Astrid cracked her door and peered into the dark hall. She saw her father just before he disappeared down the stairs and out the front door. His pockets bulged with jars and there were several more tucked under each arm.

(3)

Each morning Astrid and her father walked the six blocks from their home on Oak Street to the gallery downtown. They had long since worked out the most direct route. They never deviated from it, in part because the Grand family strove for efficiency at all times, and in part because Edward Grand's bad leg tended to fail him if he traveled much farther than a few blocks at a time. Astrid's father carried his walking stick; Astrid the gallery ledger and her lunch pail. The pair clambered over the uneven brick sidewalk together, arm in arm. As they walked, Astrid noted all the places along the way where she had buried objects. She thought, too, about new undisturbed stretches of soil that awaited her. Her secret gave her strength and a sense of purpose. But there was shame, too, she could not reconcile.

"I've been thinking," Astrid said one morning on their walk to work. "Remember when Agatha Woodbridge's neighbors cleaned out her garden?"

A front had moved in overnight. Woolly storm clouds obliterated the sun and a chilly northern gust pushed Astrid and her father on toward the gallery, their bare cheeks and knuckles red from the cold. The trees along the sidewalk shook their branches and weak fence posts rattled and moaned. The rain could come at any time, or hail, or tornado, or else the storm would charge through town within minutes and the sun would emerge victorious. That was Kansas weather for you—what the Grands called *weather whiplash*—though it was the only weather any of them had ever known.

“Of course,” her father replied. “Those boys from your class were the culprits. Father Bob wrote a column for the *Register* about it.”

“Agatha was dead. She had no family. No one that would have had a claim to her garden. It all would have rotted. Gone to the birds.”

“Without question.”

“So do you really think what those boys did was so wrong?”

“Suddenly we have a regular Aristotle on our hands. Let’s see. I suppose it was wrong for some of them and right for others. What terms had each of them been on with the old woman? How did each feel about what they were doing? What motivated them? Did one take more than his rightful share, more than he or his family could eat before it rotted in their kitchen, or did each leave plenty for the others? These are the sorts of questions I would have to ask before offering my answer.”

He stopped to blow his nose. He had fought the sinus infection and won, but in its wake came the constant downpour.

“Now,” he said, putting the tissue in his pocket, “do you want to tell me what’s really on your mind?”

“I don’t know,” Astrid said. She slid Elliott John’s ruby up and down the length of her finger: her new anxious habit. “I guess I’ve just been thinking about how much we all take from each other all of the time.”

They trudged on and he did not press her further. She had wanted to ask him about his late-night collecting on their walk, too, but she did not know how, and they were nearly to the gallery already.

On the corner of 8th and Main, her father stopped to buy the morning’s *Register* from the little orphan boy, as he did each morning. Ordinarily he tucked the paper under his arm and waited to open it until they were inside. But on this morning he paid for the paper and snapped it open to the obituary page, right there on the street. “Surprise surprise,” he said, the paper dancing in the wind. “Not a single one,” he said, and stumped off to the gallery. Astrid gave chase, juggling the ledger and her lunch pail and the umbrella she’d brought along at the first sign of storm clouds overhead.

He disappeared into his office with the paper as he did each morning, and Astrid began her cleaning duties, as she did each morning. She cleaned the glass windows inside and out, swept the entryway, and dusted the display cases in the chapel. She saved the display cases in the permanent collections for last, her favorites, and she worked hard to keep them immaculate. She lingered over Charles’s handkerchiefs as she did each morning. “*Charles might have only been eleven,*” she could hear her father say as she worked, “*but he knew what he was about.*”

The story went like this: One afternoon in the harsh winter, when death was imminent, Astrid’s mother came to gather the latest pile of handkerchiefs to be soiled with her young son’s blood. But brave Charles, recognizing he was about to die, refused to let her take them. “I finally

know what I'm going to do," he told her. "I know what I want to do with my collection." He was, quite literally, going to make art from his pain. For the next several days leading up to his death, whenever Charles needed to cough he would reach for a crisp, stark-white handkerchief from the stack and lean over it, directing the bloody discharge in a controlled, deliberate way. Then he would put that handkerchief with the others to dry.

Today Astrid heard, as always, the seductive call of the handkerchiefs. Here were objects that had been touched by her only true sibling. They were not any objects, either, but ones Charles had chosen to endure. They were alive—charged with the residue of her brother's energies. Spirit. Could the soul of a person become trapped in an object? *Yes*.

She reached into her pocket and fingered the keys tucked deep inside, felt the cool brass in her warm hand, the handkerchiefs calling, always calling, when she heard her father's staccato shuffle behind her.

"Perhaps it's best Victor spend more time at the bank," he said. "Collections-in-progress? Can you imagine? I have to admit, the thought has been keeping me up at night."

Me too, Astrid thought.

"Today might be a good time to start handing out those fliers," he told her.

They could start with posting them at local businesses. From there, they would pass them out all around town, and of course she would want to put them in the mailboxes of the town's most respected and, *ahem*, oldest citizens.

“Let’s go over the top ten again,” he said. “I like to keep them fresh in my mind. You never know when you might run into a grandchild or great-grandchild on the street. Not that I should know such a creature if I saw one.”

“Stop it.”

“A father can dream. Besides, you haven’t joined the sisterhood yet.”

Astrid cleared her throat and read aloud the names:

Thom Burns, 90.

Edith Mann, 91.

Jim Goforth, 91.

Hils Jenkins, 93.

Odette Pearson, 95.

Joan Sims, 95.

Emily Hex, 96.

Ulricht Waits, 97.

Ulla Newsome, 98.

“And?” her father said.

“And at the top of the pack, of course, Asa Goins, 102.”

“A hundred and two a-‘Goins’ on a hundred and three!”

“That joke *never* gets old. Unlike Mr. Goins himself.”

Asa Goins had indeed been a local mainstay for as long as anyone in town could remember. He was the son of an escaped slave who had fought for the Union army, which awarded Asa Sr. forty acres in south-central Kansas. A natural gas deposit was later discovered on the land, and thus Asa Jr. and his wife Lillian inherited enough cash to buy a hundred and sixty acres of farmland south of Riddle. Unlike most of the other black families in town, the Goins were wealthy, which some of the most mean-spirited locals disliked them for. Even after the Goins lost all but ten acres and the family home during the Depression, many townspeople still held a grudge, though they would never admit it.

“Asa Goins,” Astrid’s father said, examining his page in the ledger. “How *is* the old relic holding up? Those girls still have him tucked away on that farm of theirs?”

“I suppose so.”

“I’m certain they can afford to, considering what I was paying Elsie and Eliza for landscaping all those years. Landscaping!”

“I doubt very much they are living off those same spoils. Anyway, you overpaid on purpose to butter them up. A lot of good that did you. A hundred and two and he still hasn’t registered.”

“I just know that man has a one-of-a-kind, knock-your-socks off sort of a collection. You can just look at a person and tell. That man—he knows what he’s about.” He handed her the

stack of fliers that had been sitting in the corner of her desk for almost a week. “Help me get him, will you?” he said.

Astrid was grateful for the opportunity to get out into the world, to feel the warm lick of sun on her body, even for a short while. Her father watched the gallery while she put up the first fliers around downtown—outside the barbershop, the Charm, Una’s Diner, the library, and the dress shop. At Delilah’s the newest spring fabrics were on display and she could have lingered there for hours, pawing at pink taffeta and burying her face in silk.

When it was nearly time to return to the gallery she took the long way back, along the river path. It was one of her oldest and most used burial sites. While she walked along the path, the blue-green water of the Verdigris River sparkling beside her, she thought about the Goins family.

She had not spoken to Elsie or Eliza Goins in more than a year, though they had once been close. Elsie and Eliza were strong self-reliant women who, like Astrid, had lived all their lives in the shadow of a much revered father. The sisters had been at the Grand home the day that news came of Elliott John’s death. They had been Astrid’s first consolers. After that, on Saturdays when the day’s work was done, and sometimes before, Elsie and Eliza came inside to the sitting room and drank tea with Astrid. They always stayed for hours. But when the worst of the money troubles started a few years ago, the services of the Goins sister were one of the first things to go, and the women had fewer and fewer opportunities to meet. That was because the town had become more segregated every year since the rail line closed. The town’s minorities lived amid shuttered depot shops and restaurants on the south side of town, while the proud whites clung to relative prosperity to the north. From time to time Astrid thought of the Goins sisters and wondered how they were getting on, but she had not gone out of her way to contact

them—nor they, she. She felt a flush of shame for not reaching out sooner. What if Victor was right about the flier after all? “*We need someone to die by June 19.*” What if she gave it to the Goins sisters and they, forgetting their one-time friendship, took offense?

There was the matter of the incident with the Lawrence Axton collection to consider as well. Lawrence Axton had been an accomplished pianist and composer. He had also been black. Two years ago, when Axton’s collection of original sheet music debuted, someone threw a brick through one of the gallery windows. The attached note read, “Not a collection. Not in this town.” Astrid’s father had done his best to keep the incident secret, but it had nonetheless occurred, and the Grands could not pretend otherwise.

Back at the gallery, Astrid resumed her post at the front desk and her father returned to his office. She put the rest of the fliers away, in the desk. She would deliver more tomorrow, she decided. Later, but only when the time was right, she would take one to Elsie and Eliza.

The phone rang. Astrid recognized the voice of the mayor’s wife immediately and put her through to her father. Perhaps the mayor’s condition had taken a turn for the worse? Her father emerged from his office a few minutes later in high spirits. He indeed had good news, though not what Astrid had expected. The mayor had been so frightened by his recent death scare that both he and his wife wanted to register collections at the earliest opportunity.

“I better get over there before they change their minds,” her father said. He consulted the clock above the entryway. “But it’s only a quarter after.”

“I can close.”

“But you’ve never closed by yourself before.”

“What’s the big deal? Don’t you think I have the hang of it by now?”

He hesitated.

“It’s just,” he said, his resolve faltering uncharacteristically, “this feels like an important moment, don’t you think? A changing of the guard, so to speak.”

“It’s nothing of the sort,” Astrid said, frowning. “Now hurry up or the mayor’s going to die on you. Then you’ll only have yourself to blame.”

She stood at the southern storefront and watched her father disappear around the corner. Dust cloth already in hand, she walked over to the permanent exhibition square and began the daily cleaning ritual. When she got to Charles’s case, she drew in a sharp breath and threw a glance over each shoulder.

“I must be quick,” she said aloud, as if to Charles himself.

With trembling fingers she took the brass key ring from her pocket. She knew the key by sight and moments later she heard the satisfying click of success. Gingerly she lifted the glass lid—careful not to smudge the glass—and beheld her brother’s collection. An unexpected swell of emotion overtook her, like a strong headwind filling a sail. She took a quick appraisal and decided on the stack of handkerchiefs pinned in the upper left hand corner. The stack was fifteen, no twenty, deep—the top one splattered with her brother’s final contribution, offered up the morning of his death, according to the placard. A dusty-red smear run through with a brown-gray clot. Astrid thought of the murky red glow of dying stars whenever she looked at it. “Death Star,” she said aloud now. It was her favorite from the collection, everyone’s favorite, and though she wanted this handkerchief for her collection it would certainly be missed. With sweating fingers she unpinned the stack and began peeling the layers back until she reached the

last handkerchief to contain a drop of blood. Quickly, just as she had rehearsed it in her mind, she folded up the handkerchief and placed it in her skirt pocket. Then she replaced the stack, working the pin back through each kerchief before driving the pin firmly in place and closing the lid. After locking up she checked the glass for fingerprints and was pleased to find not a one.

It was a quarter after six by the time Astrid emerged onto the street, umbrella and lunch pail and ledger in hand. She crossed Main just as the cashier at the Charm posted a “Sold Out” sign in the ticket booth window.



The sky was darkening with the impending storm, but still the street appeared fantastically bright as she left the gallery. It was not just the theatre marquee, which had been dark for more than a decade but now glowed with all the lurid brilliance of a traveling circus. Nor was it the full moon that already hung low and luminous over the town. More than anything it was the sensation Astrid always had after taking something that did not belong to her. A rush, a thrill, an afterglow—panic. It would not subside until the object was safely buried. Until it was buried Astrid could not shake the feeling that everyone in town was watching her, that someone had turned a spotlight on her and her behavior, and that after all these years she had finally been found out.

A flurry of wind rustled the hem of her dress and raincoat as she walked along the brick sidewalks. Curls sprang up around her face amid the growing humidity. The rainstorms would return any minute, but she could not go home. She could not enter the house with Charles's handkerchief. Some objects, she knew, were more powerful than others. This object was one of the most powerful she had ever handled. Even now, with the handkerchief tucked neatly in the breast pocket of her raincoat, she felt its presence. If she were to take it into the house, the others would sense its presence, too. Would hear its call. Her mother, if no one else, would hear it.

She would have to bury the handkerchief that night. It had been only a few minutes past six when she left the gallery. That meant her father, her mother, and Victor would soon be gathering round the table in the dining room, the room with the largest windows in the house, large bay windows that overlooked the backyard—and the moon that evening was so bright. She would wait. Wait until the three of them finished eating and retired to rooms at the front of the house to work on their collections.

In the meantime, she would visit Una's Diner. Astrid adored Una, a gregarious Irish woman with frizzy gray hair streaked with red who had deep feelings about the mysteries of the Catholic Church that never interfered with her ability to tend bar. Her husband had died from a heart attack while shoveling snow the same week Elliott John had gotten himself blown to bits at the front. The two events had nothing to do with each other, but Astrid and Una had become partners in sorrow, and rejecting sorrow, nonetheless.

Maybe, Astrid thought, the men from the concrete plant would be at Una's that night. She liked hearing the men boast and cuss and tell stories. Most of all she liked hearing stories about accidents at the plant, because they were always so much more brutal and terrifying than any of the accidents at the dairy or the barbershop or the apron factory. There was the time Charley

Critchfield's sleeve caught in the kiln door and his arm ripped clean off, or the time a cement pillar fell out of its mold and became an enormous rolling pin that left poor Olney Bricker dead in its wake. There were other less brutal stories, too, stories nonetheless charged with an atmosphere of real terror and intrigue.

Most Saturdays the booths were taken by six-thirty or seven, and the bar and the good four-tops not long after that, so that by seven-fifteen the only seats left were at the high-top by the front door that wobbled no matter how many napkins you wedged under the leg. Tonight the diner was empty save four cement plant workers in the corner booth and two bottle babies at one end of the bar waiting to be kicked out for the night.

The room was a drowsy yellow and the ceiling fan cast dizzying shadows onto the red checkerboard tile. Astrid took a seat at the bar and piled the ledger and her lunch pail and umbrella on the stool beside her. The fan did little to cut the humidity in the room. Astrid felt prickles of sweat start up under her coat, but she would not remove it. She thought of the handkerchief tucked neatly in her pocket, a plain white handkerchief dotted with a single drop of blood. A little white dove with a thorn lodged in its breast.

While Una brought drinks and pie to the men at the booth, one of the bottle babies reached across the bar and topped off his glass. He held the tap for too long and left a big foaming mess all over. They were both filthy men with bodies that were older than they should have been, but they were veterans and they always tipped decent before they ran out of money, and so Una tolerated them. When she came back from the booth, she caught the men stealing maraschino cherries from behind the bar. She swatted at them with the bar towel as if ousting mutts from a garden and said, "Out, gentlemen, out."

“What’ll it be?” she said to Astrid, wiping the sweat from her neck. “Chocolate malted? Splash of wine perhaps?” She sopped up the beer on the counter. Astrid glimpsed the black rosary tucked under her apron. If she could have any of Una’s possessions in her collection, it would be that rosary. She could feel its energy emanating from across the bar.

“Tonight, I drink scotch and soda.” Astrid said.

“Aha! Edward Grand’s drink of choice. What’s the occasion?”

“Let’s just say I’m feeling—a bit more complete.”

“Something to do with your collection, I imagine?” Una said. “I myself have put in some real hours on it lately. Only trouble is, mine’s branching off in three or four directions now, and that just won’t do. I suppose I’ll follow my paths for a while until one of them dead-ends.”

She plopped down the drink.

“That’s what I like about you,” Astrid said, pulling the drink closer. “You see the big picture. Or so my father would say.”

“How *is* he getting along these days?” Una said.

“Wonderfully,” Astrid said, and immediately wondered why she had been so quick to lie.

“And your mother?”

Astrid paused. “I suppose she’s all right too.”

“We all hope for the best for you and your family. And for your gallery, of course.”

“Of course.”

The drink was strong but invigorating. Astrid would sip it slowly and arrive home by seven. Victor would be in the sitting room by that time, her father and mother hard at work in their upstairs rooms. She would bury the handkerchief at the edge of the yard. Then the storms could come. It could rain all month for all she cared.

She had nearly finished the drink when who should enter the diner but the strange woman she had met outside the gallery days before.

The woman wore a teal-gray suit that was just as exquisite as the last one and a thick coat of coral lipstick. She again wore her hair in a high bun, though she was wind-swept this time, and all the more lovely for it. Astrid turned back toward the bar and fixed her eyes on her drink. The mysterious woman was once more in her presence, but she had no idea what to do about it. She was no longer angry with the woman for what she had said. If anything, she felt bad for running away like she had. It was not like her at all.

The woman ordered bourbon and took a stool beside Astrid's things.

"You're the one I insulted the other day," the woman said, turning to Astrid. "I must apologize. I was so charged up about the whole idea of the *gallery* I'm afraid I spoke out of turn. You work there, I take it? Won't you accept my apology?"

"She doesn't just work there," Una said, setting down the woman's drink. "You're talking to the owner's daughter."

"Look at that, I had no idea. No wonder I offended you. I'm Mariel, by the way. Mariel Steinmetz. I'm the granddaughter of—"

“Arne and Marie Steinmetz,” Astrid said. “Of course.” She shook the woman’s hand. “I’m so sorry about your grandfather. He was such a delightful man. Not to mention one of the most moving collections we’ve seen in a long time.”

“Thank you. So I’ve been told. My grandmother packed it all up and refuses to look at it or even to speak about it. She’s still in shock, I think.”

“She’ll come around. At least she hasn’t thrown it out. You’d be surprised how many collections are just abandoned. A person spends their whole life perfecting something like that, and the family doesn’t want to have anything to do with it. Can you imagine?”

“I can’t,” Mariel said. She traced the rim of her glass with her index finger. “I’ve come to stay with Grandma Marie for a while, help her get back on her feet. It’s been almost a year, but you wouldn’t know it, looking at her. I like this town, but it’s quite a change from New York, as you can imagine.”

I knew it, Astrid thought. Those clothes. That look.

Without realizing it, she reached the bottom of her drink, and the straw gave a rude warning.

“Here,” Mariel said. “Let me get you another.”

Astrid checked the time. A quarter til seven. “I guess I could stay a little while longer,” she said. “I love your dress, by the way.”

“I was just thinking the same thing about yours. Where ever did you get it?”

“I made it.”

“You’re joking. It’s fantastic. Simply divine.”

“I make all my own clothes,” she said. “I could make something for you, sometime. I mean—I make clothes for people sometimes. A little side gig, I guess you could call it.”

Una brought the drink and Mariel slid it over to Astrid, who noted the diamond on her finger.

“Your husband,” Astrid said, gesturing to the ring, “I’m guessing he came too?”

Confused, Mariel peered down at her hand. “Oh, you mean my fiancé. No. Tim had to stay behind. He’s a section editor at the *Times*, where we both work, so he’s very busy, always under deadline for one project or another. I don’t mind it, really. Having some alone time.”

“Cheers to that,” Astrid said, and they raised their glasses.

Mariel said she had tried to get temp work at the *Register*, something freelance, but the editor-in-chief, Mitch Barndollar, said they didn’t have any work available.

“What he meant was they already had a receptionist. But they can’t get rid of me that easily. I work for the *Times*, for crying out loud. So what is it you do at the gallery? Please don’t say you’re a receptionist.”

“Not a receptionist exactly.”

“Tell me all the gory details. I want to know *everything*.”

Much to Astrid’s surprise, she did tell Mariel quite a lot, probably as close to everything as she had ever told anyone before. What she did at the gallery and how it worked, but also everything before. How she and Charles had grown up in the gallery all those years ago. How before Charles got sick her parents had bought her grandparents’ farm to bail them out of debt, except that act of kindness only dragged Astrid’s family into their own sinkhole, and they would

up losing the farm anyway. How despite the family's struggles her parents had not been able to resist taking on another mouth to feed, because young Victor had no parents of his own and they had no son and after all he looked *so much* like Charles. How her mother had been distant with Astrid ever since her brother's death because she never ever wanted Astrid to die. There was the story of Elliott John, too, of course, and how Astrid had been engaged for one whole month before he died, too. But since then nothing much had happened.

"I'm so sorry about your brother and your fiancé. All of it really," Mariel said. "But things are better now, right? For your family? The gallery?"

"It's hard to say."

The second drink was gone and she spoke freely about the gallery's money troubles. Her father had this idea that a party was going to fix everything, but she wasn't so sure.

"I guess there wouldn't be any chance of my finding work there then," Mariel said.

"At the gallery? No, I'm sorry. I mean, I'd love to have you—it really is quite fun whenever we manage to scare up a crowd. But I'm just about the only employee now besides my father and they haven't paid me in months."

"What a shame. When I first walked by that place I had this wonderful odd feeling inside. I asked a man up the road about it, and he told me, 'That's the place where they show the collections.' And I said, 'Collections? What do you mean?' And he said, 'Yes, ma'am, the collections they show after a fella dies.' I had chills when he said that. Chills! I couldn't stop thinking about it. But I guess I have what they call a morbid curiosity."

"I don't see what's so morbid about it. People die all the time. Or they used to anyway."

“Don’t sound so disappointed,” Mariel said.

□

Astrid did not beat the storm. Fierce raindrops came crashing down before she even made it to the bridge. The sole in her left boot was cracked and her entire foot was soaked to the ankle in a matter of seconds. Even with the umbrella she could not keep the ledger dry with all that wind, so three blocks from home she was forced to remove her raincoat and wrap the ledger up like a baby. Sheet lightning reached across the sky like a massive neon spiderweb. The resulting crash of thunder made Astrid jump even though she knew it was coming. She made her way to the edge of her yard, where she crouched. She would need both hands, so she left the umbrella open under the largest cottonwood, with the swaddled ledger enjoying protection underneath. Her dress and boots were drenched and splashed with mud and probably ruined, but she did not care about any of that—she only wished she could see clearly through the downpour.

She dug a hole that filled with rain as she worked. She was soon up to her elbows in sludge, and had to wipe her hands on her already soiled dress. She took one last look around and, satisfied she was alone, took the handkerchief from the pocket of her raincoat. She folded it four times, into a small square, and lay it at the bottom of the hole. The handkerchief was already soaked through before she pushed in the first heap of mud. The rain fell more softly now. When she had filled in the hole she smoothed the surface as best she could and stood, her dress shiny

with mud in the moonlight. That was when she saw it. The slightest of movements at the kitchen window.

A gleam of light. A fluttering curtain.

Yet by the time she reached the front door, her spy had assumed its usual position. She left her raincoat and muddy boots in the foyer and walked in stocking feet to the sitting room. Astrid's mother sat in the Queen Anne chair with a clipboard in hand and the latest delivery of Avon products laid out on the carpet at her feet, waiting to be sorted. Victor sat at the desk, writing as if he were a medium taking dictation from the dead. At another time in the Grand family history, a log might have been roasting in the fireplace. But the chimney had fallen into disrepair years ago and the starlings had taken over. Astrid could hear them now, high up in the chimney, scuttling and chirping and hunkering down for the storm.

"You're filthy," her mother said, rising in her chair to glower at Astrid's soiled socks. "You'll make a mess."

Victor laid down his pen and turned his right side, what he referred to as his good side, toward Astrid.

"Don't worry," Astrid said. "I'll clean it up."

"Your father's upstairs," her mother continued. "He's in quite the mood and doesn't wish to be disturbed."

"I don't wish to disturb him."

She went into the kitchen where her dinner waited in the oven. Her stomach was still nervous and she could only nibble a piece of bread. After that she ascended the old wooden

staircase and paused in the hall outside her father's study. "January 29, 1890. November 17, 1899. June 5, 1902," he enumerated, as if listing entries in a catalog. Each entry was followed, unmistakably, by a firm clank of glass against the desk. *He's frustrated*, Astrid thought. She thought also that he might not mind being disturbed, not by her, but she was exhausted and shivering in her wet clothes and went straight to her room.

After changing she sat in the window seat and looked out onto the backyard. The light from the moon was obscured, but every other minute a flash of lightning illuminated the yard like a stage set for opening night, a clear line of sight straight down to the creek bed and beyond.

(4)

It rained for a week straight. From Astrid's perch in the window seat the continued destruction to the backyard was clear. Mini caverns had formed everywhere, brimming with rainwater, and a few fed tributaries that traveled across the yard and down to the creek. In her nightmares the town was visited by a great flood, a flood so catastrophic the Verdigris charged its banks and sent mighty currents into the town, currents that surged underground via fox holes and groundhog burrows, inundating the earth and ousting hundreds of objects that bobbed to the surface for anyone to find. *I must start digging deeper*, Astrid thought. The panic now accompanied her always, like one of the black dresses she stepped into each morning, without thinking, or the ruby ring that made its way onto her finger after that.

No one was dying. No one, that is, whose death could have benefited the gallery. The last week of March one of the bottle babies that could be seen each night at Una's, Roy Adkins, lay

down on the abandoned train tracks north of town and never rose again. All of Riddle was abuzz, for everyone knew that before the war Adkins had been a safety inspector for the BNSF railroad, which had since closed this line. People said Adkins wanted to die. They claimed to have seen something in his recent speech and actions that, in retrospect, foretold all. Ennis Cleary, who lived in a ramshackle hut on the edge of town, swore he heard the whistle of a phantom train on the night of Adkins' death. When he walked the tracks the next morning, he found the body, face-down, and knew straight away whose it was. Adkins's pockets held nothing but a miniature King James Bible, a photograph of Harry S. Truman clipped from a newspaper, and a small stone that bore a striking resemblance to the human brain. Was this Adkins's idea of a collection? Maybe. Nothing on the books in any case.

Then one morning a few weeks after Adkins's death, Edward Grand received a phone call attesting that Mae Thompson, the retired school teacher, *Astrid's* former school teacher, had been rushed to the hospital in Cherryvale the night before with a burst appendix. They had been unable to save her. For years few had caught more than a glimpse of Mae before that night, though from time to time her husband, Fat Earl, would pop up at the grocer's or Bartmess Drug. It was strange, living in such a small town and never seeing a person. On more than one occasion Astrid's father expressed concern that the Thompsons might have a real "Rose for Emily" –type situation going on over there. "A real *what*-type situation?" Astrid had said. Her father tromped upstairs and returned with the Faulkner, which he lobbed at her with the admonition that she could not stay a clueless child forever. Now the assurance that Mae Thompson had been alive and well all these years came via the news that she was dead.

Astrid felt a distinct jolt of relief followed by sadness. She remembered Mrs. Thompson as little more than a blur of curly blonde hair and glasses. She certainly could not have guessed

what she must have looked like twenty years on, writhing in pain in the passenger seat while Fat Earl raced down the gravel backroads toward Cherryvale, but the thought unsettled her all the same.

Edward Grand was not conflicted.

“We've got one!” he said, spanking the kitchen table where the Grands had gathered for breakfast that morning. “People will come to see this one, too. Mark my words. They won't be able to help themselves.”

He was in high spirits on the walk to the gallery that morning. He was pink-cheeked, smiling, and voluble to a degree he had not been in weeks. At 4th and Pine they passed the clock tower that would mark the hour at the precise moment they ascended the gallery steps. At 4th and Main they passed Hugh Andrus, painting at his easel. At 3rd and Main they bought the morning's *Register* from the orphan boy, and when they crossed the intersection just before reaching the gallery they spotted him.

There, on the gallery steps, stood Tom Benson.

If Edward Grand's good mood was shaken, he did not let on. “Hello, Tom,” he said. “Have you come to make a donation?”

“Not exactly,” Tom said. “I've come to speak with you about possibilities.”

“Possibilities?”

Astrid eyed Tom suspiciously. He did not sound like the Tom Benson she had always known and hated. What was he trying to pull?

“Sir, I'd like to open a restaurant A pizzeria, in fact. Somewhere the families could go

for a nice meal on movie night. That's where you come in. I want *this* building, Edward Grand, and I'm prepared to make you an absurd offer for it. You and your family won't have to worry about a thing. Why, there'd be nothing to stop you from re-opening at another location. One of these nice little storefronts along Main, for instance.”

Something leapt in Astrid’s chest. A tremble, a stirring. The Benson brothers had hinted at their interest in the gallery at the city council meeting last fall, but Astrid had not yet heard what they wanted to do with the place. It was easy enough to hate the Bensons for throwing their money around the town in any way that suited them. But an *absurd* offer—the sort of offer that could whoosh like magic make all their problems vanish and allow the gallery to stay open, *or not*—well, that sounded like an offer worth hearing out.

Edward Grand indeed waited for Tom Benson to finish his speech. “You want to buy the Grand Gallery,” he said, stroking his chin, “and turn it into a... *pizzeria*?” Then he burst into a fit of laughter so forceful he had to cling to the railing to keep from falling over.

“The building needs a lot of work, of course,” Tom continued, his face flushed now, struggling to hide his anger, “but I have the capital for a project like that. You, on the other hand... You do realize this is a historic building that should be treasured, not allowed to disintegrate into a pile of rubble?”

Astrid's father ascended the gallery steps and took the keys from his pocket as if no one were speaking to him at all.

“You're living in the Dark Ages, old man. It's time for something more *modern*—”

“*Modern*?” Edward Grand said. He whipped around, walking stick raised. “How about a whack in the face? Is that modern enough for you?”

“You son of a bitch. I come here and try to talk some sense into you and—”

“I’ll have you know Mae Thompson signed the papers years ago—years!—and if you don’t think people are going to line up to see this collection, you’re just plain crazy, son. The Grands will be just fine without you and your kind, thank you very much.”

Astrid took her father’s arm and urged him along. Before he could raise the key to the lock he lurched forward with an anguished cry. His body became rigid and strange. Astrid reached out to grab him but he slipped through her grasp and fell on his face on the gallery steps. Astrid bent over him. His face was pinched and red and his left cheek scratched. He brought a clenched fist to his chest, which rose and fell with his labored breathing.

“What’s happening?” Astrid said. “Are you all right?”

A small crowd gathered on the sidewalk outside the gallery.

“Should I call someone?” Tom said.

“Get me inside,” Astrid’s father said to her.

She gathered the walking stick and keys and helped her father to his feet. She unlocked the front door and led him into the foyer, where he slumped with his back against the wall. Not a minute later he demanded his walking stick. Astrid wished he would wait to get his bearings before attempting to walk again, but when she handed him the walking stick she saw he only wanted his pills. Hands shaking, he poured them into his palm: small, flat, white. He swallowed three of them and with a deep exhale rested his head against the wall.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” Astrid said.

“Don’t worry. It’s only this fool leg again.”

“Your leg? Are you seriously trying to tell me *that's* what those pills are for?”

Whatever they were, he did not give them time to act.

“Unimaginable,” he said, using the wall to help him rise. “They weep at the thought of losing this building, but they won't give a moment's thought to its contents.”

With that he limped inside and down the hall to his office. Astrid followed close on his heels but he ignored her and settled into his chair with his work as if everything were perfectly routine. In seconds he was on the phone with the city clerk—he would never guess what that weasel Tom Benson had the gall to say to him just moments before. Astrid left and took her place at the front desk. She was too upset to clean. She opened the ledger to a random page and began reading names aloud. The ledger's sense of history, order, and comprehensiveness had always comforted her, but not today. *What was going on with her father? Was he okay?* The lie about his leg was too much. Surely, if he knew something, something big, he would not hide it from her. From Victor or even her mother, yes, but not from her. The gallery could not go on without him. She could not—they could not. Her thoughts began to tumble one after the next and culminated with a vision of her father's jars arranged in gleaming rows in the chapel's display cases. *No—* she obliterated the thought. He was only riled up from speaking with Tom Benson, she told herself. Her father was always over-stressed, over-worked. But wasn't that itself a reason to consider the Bensons' offer?

The phone rang just after nine. Before Astrid could answer, her father picked up in the office. Curious, she left the desk and loomed outside his office.

“I have the list if you can't find it,” she heard him say. “Surely you'll know it when you see it? Twenty, maybe twenty-five items? She must have had them on display, or packed away

for safekeeping?”

The bell in the entryway clanged. By the time Astrid made it back to the front desk, Victor had usurped it. Without a word of acknowledgment, he took one of the small black notebooks out of his back pocket and began to write. Always with his endless writing. He must have filled a hundred of those notebooks by now. He wore an itchy-looking brown sweater and black slacks. Hair slicked back in a cool blonde wave. Seeing him, Astrid felt like sinking into the corner. She wanted to speak to someone about what had happened to her father, but not Victor. Neither had spoken a word about what he had seen the other night through the kitchen window, though she knew he had been the one to see her bury Charles’s handkerchief. She was beginning to think he would never mention it, that he only wanted to lord her secret—*their* secret—over her for all time.

“I was sitting there,” Astrid said.

“I suspected, given the temperature of the seat. Never a good idea to leave the gallery unattended, though, even for a short time.”

“You aren't supposed to be here until two.”

“Plans change. On that note, I see the Thompson collection hasn't arrived yet.”

“He's talking with the husband now.”

“And Sisyphus?”

“You know he won’t let us start packing the old one up until the new one arrives.”

They suffered together for several minutes in this way. Victor writing at the desk, and Astrid silently fuming beside him. Then, out of the clear blue Kansas sky, people started trickling

into the gallery, one by one. At noon, when half the downtown businesses closed for lunch, at least a dozen people swooped in, as if the gallery were suddenly Cottonwood Lake and they the geese scrambling for breadcrumbs of information. Mae Thompson might have been a recluse at the end, but for a time she had been one of them. Their curiosity was palpable, as well as their relief, as if a psychic weight had been lifted. From among them all, Mae Thompson had been chosen as the next to die. Soon enough, Astrid knew, the townspeople would convince themselves of their immortality yet again, and they would not return here until the next tragedy.

In the meantime the hubbub was good for business. Wads of crumpled bills appeared in the donation box, with Deputy Sanderson pushing a ten into Astrid's hand, with the request that they "Give Mae her due." She admitted a surprising number of drop-ins to speak with her father about their collections, including Doctor Swanger, who had already been to the gallery twice in the past week. His cancer was in remission, but it seemed to Astrid he must be one of those perfectionists, the type who not only took her father's suggested edits but who would continue to work at his collection, and work at it, until the end. She decided his collection must be something either mesmerizing and rare—a one-of-a-kind instrument from his South American pilgrimages that no one alive knew how to play—or else bizarre and commonplace—say, a roomful of miniature doll furniture. She wondered if her father would use their meeting as an opportunity to discuss the episode on the gallery steps that morning. She hoped he would. If only Victor would leave, she might listen in. As it was she paced the gallery, buffing fingerprints and entertaining small talk.

Then, at a quarter to two, Mae Thompson's nephew Tommy arrived and asked to speak with her father.

"He's in a meeting right now," Victor said before Astrid made it back to the front desk. "It

shouldn't be long.”

“Good,” Tommy said. “Because we've got a problem.”

At that Victor dropped his pen and ferried the young man to the back. Astrid followed but stopped at the end of the hall, sick with curiosity. Doctor Swanger emerged from the office as Victor and Tommy disappeared inside. *No one ever tells me anything*, Astrid thought. *I'm always on the outside*. She decided to wait until Doctor Swanger left, and then she would tiptoe over to the door and listen in. But Doctor Swanger would not leave. He walked around the permanent holdings, displays he must have walked past half a dozen times over the years. Perhaps, Astrid mused, he fancied his own collection appearing here, among those of the town greats. Every few minutes he would throw a glance over his shoulder at Astrid. He seemed to want to speak with her. But then he doffed his hat, bowed, and said simply, “Always a pleasure,” before walking out.

Moments after his departure her father, Victor, and Tommy filtered out into the hall.

“Something has come up that requires our immediate attention,” Astrid’s father said.

“What is it? Something to do with the Thompson collection?”

“Yes, but don’t worry. We’ll sort it out. You stay here. Keep the ship afloat.”

That was how she got stuck working Victor’s shift.

After they left Astrid returned to the desk, where she found Victor's notebook lying open, exposed to all the world, a thin red ribbon marking the page. She read the first line, “Occam’s razor—also Ockham’s—after William of Ockham,…” and slammed the notebook shut. She picked it up and dashed out onto Main, but the three men had already disappeared from sight. Back inside she stuffed the notebook inside the ledger, hoping its powers would suffocate any

Victor's notebook could claim. Still she heard it calling.

□

Victor was supposed to be on her mother's team, and Astrid, her father's. Now the men had run off without her, to investigate who knew what intrigue, when Mae Thompson had been *her* teacher. A clueless child indeed. She toyed with the idea of locking up for an hour, just long enough to dash over to the Thompson place, but her father would be furious with her given the day's foot traffic. She phoned home, hoping to convince her mother to cover for her, but the Ice Queen must have been out on a delivery or more likely, out on one of her long drives. Astrid was contemplating other options when the front bell clanged and her new friend Mariel entered the gallery. She was wearing a bright yellow dress with flowy sleeves, a chiffon dream whose fabric recalled the colorful scraps hidden inside Astrid's window seat.

I want to make a dress for her, Astrid thought. One she will cherish.

"I've just been at the *Register*," Mariel said, out of breath. "When I saw you in the window, I just had to drop by. The other day I stopped by, but that other fellow was working the desk. The serious looking one?"

"Which one?"

"A younger man. Blonde? Smug?"

"That's Victor. The doppelganger?"

“That’s right.”

“Did Barndollar reconsider after all?” Astrid said. “But you don’t really want to be stuck behind a desk, do you?”

“This is better,” Mariel said. “I think.”

Just that week the *Register*’s news editor and managing editor had left for positions at *The Wichita Eagle* and *The Kansas City Star*. The ever-enterprising Mitch Barndollar collapsed the two vacant positions into one, called the position “editor,” and offered it to Mariel for a quarter of the men's combined wages.

“Might be good experience, though, right?” Astrid said. “Not that you need it.”

Mariel shrugged. “It's something. You should have seen the newsroom today. Everyone's talking about that school teacher.”

“I know. My father's with her family as we speak, and I'm stuck here. I just know something fishy's going on at that house, and I want to know what it is.”

Mariel was the one to hit upon the idea.

“Why don't you take my bike and zip over there? I can watch the desk for you.”

“I don't know,” Astrid said.

Mariel’s expression lit up with some realization and she took the reporter’s notebook from her purse and jotted it down.

When she had finished, she looked up and gestured to the empty gallery. “Come on,” she said. “How much harm could I do?”



Astrid pedaled across town in a rush of anticipation. The best option, she decided, was to approach the house from the back alley, which would give her the best opportunity to spy undetected. Save two strays that followed her in formation, the alleyway was quiet and empty as she walked the bike toward her destination. Behind Mrs. Thompson's house, a sidewalk path led under a covered walkway that connected two carriage houses. The shadows of two figures under the walkway stretched along the sidewalk where it met the alley. Astrid leaned against the first carriage house and listened in.

“She *never* left the house,” the nephew, Tommy, said. “My uncle had to pick her up and drag her to the car just to take her to the hospital. Can you imagine? Suffering that much pain and saying no thank you?”

“No one should live that way,” Victor replied.

A screen door whined, followed by the stomp and drag of Edward Grand's hobble, each shuffle punctuated by the thump of his walking stick.

“It’s hopeless,” he said. “You couldn’t find an elephant in there if you tried.”

“We’ll find it. It’s only a matter of time,” Tommy said. “Tell me, fellows, have you ever seen anything like this? Both these sheds, full to the brim. That bedroom. That kitchen. Those closets. We won’t even discuss the bathroom.”

The men's shadows shifted, came together, divided again.

“As a matter of fact we have,” Victor said. “But it's still disgusting, if you ask me.”

Astrid stepped to the window a few paces from where she stood. The single stained curtain covering the window was pulled to one side by a lamp that had fallen against it. Within the dark carriage house she could make out piles of objects amid a twinkle of broken glass. A rusted lawn mower under a basket overflowing with clothes, old toys, a broken china plate. A bedraggled fake Christmas tree with extension cord trailing. A stack of board games in disintegrating boxes. Tin can after tin can lining two shelves, against which leaned garden tools and a Halloween witch. Three wooden chairs arranged in a circle. A present, still wrapped in pink birthday paper, claiming one. This was no collection, at least not any collection she had ever seen. But then what was it?

She did not know what she was looking at, or for, but surveying that mess her knees began to ache and she felt dizzy, like she might topple at any moment. She had never seen so many objects left in such disarray. A confusion of objects. An insane stockpile. A hoard. The men went back inside and there was nothing more for her to learn there. She left as quietly as she had come and biked back to the gallery in a daze.

□

It was twenty minutes until close when Astrid returned to the gallery. She found Mariel standing at the display cases in the permanent exhibition room. The last of the day's light fell on her bare neck and shoulders. From across the room Astrid felt an urge to reach out and touch that

neck. She had never seen one so perfect before.

At first Mariel appeared to be gazing out the window at the early evening traffic, but as Astrid drew closer she saw that she was examining Charles's collection.

As Astrid approached Mariel turned her head, her expression quizzical. "Come on," she said, tapping the glass. "This is sort of crazy, right?"

"Let's get out of here."

The ledger was heavy and Astrid's arms ached as she and Mariel crossed the river for the final time that day. On the bridge, Astrid tried to explain what she had seen in Mae Thompson's carriage house. No one object had been particularly bizarre or disturbing. It was the whole mess of them together, thrown together really, that she could not understand. The sight had brought about the strangest reaction.

"It was almost, how can I say this? Almost a visceral repulsion. Like something deep inside me was saying, *No*."

Halfway across the bridge Mariel stopped and leaned over the railing. She peered into the water racing below. "We all hold onto things we shouldn't," she said. She looked at the diamond on her finger, glared at it, as if it were a mole she had just learned was cancerous. Astrid stood at Mariel's side, the ledger pressed between her chest and the railing.

"I almost passed out looking at all that junk. Something to do with the lack of order, maybe? Lack of intention?" Astrid continued. "But no, that's not it, either. Maybe it all comes down to a failure to decide."

"Or act," Mariel said.

She slipped the ring off her finger and held it under the lamplight. “You know, I lied to you that night at Una’s. I’m not engaged. Not anymore. Tim left me right before I came to town. I came to visit my grandmother, yes, but also to get away from it all. I couldn’t stand the gossip. The pity.”

“Your fiancé left you? *You?*”

“For a twenty-two-year-old dancer with a cracked tooth.”

“No,” Astrid said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Say, how about we get rid of these things once and for all?” Mariel said. Her gaze fled to Astrid’s finger, where Elliott John’s ruby languished.

“You mean, just throw them in the river? That’s a big diamond. You should pawn it.”

“No thank you. I don’t want to see it downtown on some floozy’s finger.”

“You better not toss it in the river then, or it’s sure to wash up at someone’s feet. You have to bury it.”

They finished crossing the bridge and Astrid led Mariel down to the path on the other side of the river. They chose a spot under a deformed elm that looked like an old witch doing a backbend. Together they dug the hole. The soil was still damp from the week’s rain and gave way easily. They dropped in the rings, first Mariel’s and then Astrid’s. Then they filled in the hole.

“Did you love him?” Mariel said when they finished.

“I didn’t know him. Not really.”

“Why did you agree to marry him then?”

“Because he promised to get me out of here.”

Astrid passed Mariel, who was still crouching in the mud, and leaned back against the elm.

“But you love the gallery.”

“I love my father.”

Mariel stood and joined Astrid under the elm. A few soft ringlets had come loose from her updo and fell all around her shoulders.

“I’ve never buried anything with someone else before,” Astrid said. “Except for, you know, people.”

“I take it you do this sort of thing often?”

“You could say that.”

“Smell this,” Mariel said, holding up a fist full of mud. “Isn’t it fantastic? Smells like life and death and everything in between. You know some people are so obsessed with dirt they eat it? Like that woman at the state hospital. They pulled over a thousand rusted objects out of her stomach. Now *that’s* a collection for you.”

“You really are morbid, you know that?”

“Say,” Mariel said, “Barndollar wants me to drive to Wichita this week and write a story about the new rollercoaster opening there. Why don’t you take a day off and go with me?”

“I’ll try.”

“Don’t try. Do.”



When Astrid arrived home the Grands were already gathered at the dinner table.

“I’ll be right there,” she called to them.

The steady tick of the grandfather clock marked the time it took her to remove her coat and hang it in the hall closet. She heaved the ledger onto the table in the foyer. As she did so, a small object tumbled free. A notebook, face down on the tile. Victor’s notebook.

She stooped to pick up the notebook and some papers that had spilled forth from it. There was a picture of their town in 1890 and a copy of the original gallery floor plans. She left the ledger on the table and took the notebook upstairs to her room. At her desk, under the map of the town, she leaned over the page marked with red ribbon. With the nail of her index finger between her teeth, she read what was written there:

Occam's razor—also Ockham's—after William of Ockham, 14th century friar, philosopher, and theologian. Law of parsimony, in which the simplest solution to a problem is the best. Occam's it is then, if brevity is king. What applications might this have today? Might one aim for maximum efficiency in a minimum number of knife strokes, bathroom breaks, naps? Perhaps why I have always detested long walks?

The eye—She is always looking at it. What does she want? What does she ask of me? ~~That I take my razor and slice it away?~~

Lately I have wondered: Does that brand of beauty come only from her share in a deep sadness she will never fully comprehend? Yes—And you are like a brother to her. You who have no brother, sister, father, or mother. Of course, she has no brother anymore, and soon enough, not any father.

There is no gallery without the old man. But what if his idea has teeth? What if she and I were to come together, on a more permanent basis, in the name of saving this place—~~But there is no money. No money, nothing to offer, and this eye.~~

She is a nothing person, they say. They say she has no collection, no husband, no children, no prospects, and is over thirty besides. I defend her, when I can. But is her secret mine to tell?

I must make her see nothing would have to change. We have a home here and a family to go along with it, for now. ~~She can keep her room. I would not force her to lie with me, I would only ask~~

But perhaps, in the end, there is not time for collections of anything.

She read to the bottom of the page, no further, and shut the notebook. She went to the window, dotted with rain, that overlooked the back lawn. Night had stepped in and pushed out the last of the light. The moon lay low, reluctant to make another night's climb. The stars buried themselves like treasures beneath mounds of thick storm clouds. There the outline of the old sad oak, her former sitting rock. There the silver gleam of the creek. Not so long ago that strip of yard had appeared so vast. Now its borders hemmed her in.

Astrid went downstairs. She lingered in the hall outside the dining room, listening, waiting. No one spoke. When she entered the room her father and Victor sat at opposite ends of the table with her mother between them, buttering a biscuit.

Did she know any of these people?

Her father, she thought with a flash of rage, had never looked as unwell as he did now.

“On second thought I don't think I'll be joining you all tonight,” Astrid said. “Turns out I've lost my appetite.”

“Oh?” her mother said.

“This,” Astrid said to Victor, sliding the notebook across the table, “is yours.”

□

A decade ago, Astrid's mother started a support group called Mothers without Sons. Before the war there had been just five members: mothers who had lost sons in infancy, to scarlet fever, to accidental poisoning, to drowning, and in Helena Grand's case, to tuberculosis. Since that time, the group's numbers had swelled to nearly two dozen. The war might have been over, but a mother's grieving was not—would never be. The other women clung to Astrid's mother for support and guidance. After all, she had survived two decades without Charles, and with remarkable poise, dignity, *style*. Mothers without Sons gave Helena Grand a platform to combine the family's ideas about the gallery and collections with her obsession with Charles: Sometimes one had to let go of objects, however precious, to throw off the shackles of the past. There must have been some truth to the idea. She was helping these women somehow, or at least had convinced them, and herself, that she was helping. All the same Astrid found it strange that a woman who had clearly not gotten over the loss of her own son should be counseling others about it.

It was a little gross, too, that meetings for Mothers without Sons always devolved into Avon parties, which themselves became occasions to recruit for the gallery. How better to recover from the loss of a child than with an exquisite new hand cream featuring “the fragrance of a time-scented garden”? So sorry about the death of your child. Has that left you thinking about your own mortality? (Yes.) What about the legacy you might leave behind? (Of course.) Why not unburden yourself and sign up today? (Why not indeed.) How her mother finessed that talk *and* remained in the group's good graces remained a mystery, as did so much about Helena Grand. But sell those women she did, and register them she did.

On the morning the relentless storms passed and the sun finally broke through the cloud cover, the morning Astrid intended to ride with Mariel to Wichita for the day, she went

downstairs at the regular time and found her mother bent over the dining room table. Piles of Avon products lay scattered, heaped, all around. Astrid startled at the sight. She halted there in the hall and tried to make sense of it, as if she had stumbled upon a scene of violence in the distance and could not yet make out who was doing what to whom. Her mother, as if in a trance, moved the products in their red-and-gold and sapphire-and-silver and dusky-rose plastic-wrapped boxes around the table with erratic movements. Pen in hand, she consulted an inventory sheet and compared it to a chart in her notebook. The kettle's shrill song reached its crescendo in the kitchen, but she did not respond. Astrid had seen "the sorting of the stuff" once before, when her mother had lain the entire winter line out on the sitting room floor mere feet from where Victor sat at his desk writing. On that occasion, Astrid chanced to walk down the hall at the precise moment Victor lashed out at Astrid's mother for distracting him during their appointed work time—and *didn't she have a collection of her own to attend to?*

It was a question, Astrid thought, not for the first time, that bore asking.

Astrid's father lurched downstairs just as Astrid was struck by the smell of burning from the kitchen.

"What's going on here?" he said.

Astrid's mother moaned. "What's going on is I'm trying to do about fifteen things at once here. I'll be helping with Sisyphus all afternoon and won't have time to sort before my Mothers without Sons meeting." She pulled at a loose chunk of hair at her nape as she spoke. She must have put it up as usual before setting to work, but her hair was a mess now. "You weren't supposed to see this," she said. "I'm—behind."

"Get a hold of yourself," Astrid's father said. "You know how you can be."

Astrid, embarrassed for her mother, ran into the kitchen and pulled the quiche out of the oven. The top was completely scorched but perhaps they could salvage the insides. The burnt smell turned her stomach. Maybe she was just anxious about telling her parents they were about to be even more understaffed than they thought. Mae Thompson's collection was finally ready, but before they set it up they had to haul the old one off. It was terrible timing. Astrid had not yet told her father about her plans with Mariel because given any length of time to talk her out of it, to guilt-trip, to cajole, he would have. No—it was best to hit him over the head with it, then run out the door before he could recover.

Minutes later, in the dining room, when she finally got around to relaying her intentions over burnt quiche, her mother sighed heavily, with her whole body, and asked Victor if he could possibly leave the bank early that afternoon to take over in Astrid's stead. Victor kept chewing his biscuit, buying time. He had not looked Astrid in the eye since she returned his notebook days before—nor had she invited him to. She would speak to him when *she* was ready.

Edward Grand, always judicious, said with only a touch of resignation, "It will be what it will be. We'll just have to manage without her."

What relief, Astrid thought. *He at least pretends to honor my wishes and desires.* But minutes later, as her parents left to make the morning's walk to the gallery, what had always been Astrid and her father's morning walk, her father turned in the doorway, a stream of morning light crowning his head and shoulders, and whispered, "I'm disappointed in you."

His words waylaid her as she watched him amble down the sidewalk and join his wife. When her parents disappeared down the block she closed the door and almost burst into tears, but just in time she heard it. The honk of a horn. She opened the door. The sun warmed her face

and there was Mariel in mirrored sunglasses with her hair tied up sitting behind the wheel of a gleaming black convertible.

The day was their own.