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CAITLIN STAINKEN'S THESIS

By

CAITLIN EILEEN STAINKEN

Bachelor of Arts, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, 2007

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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in Creative Writing, Fiction

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Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

David Gates, Chair
Creative Writing

Robert Stubblefield, Co-Chair
English

Randy Bolton, Co-Chair
Theater

Stainken, Caitlin, M.F.A, Fall 2014

Creative Writing

Caitlin Stainken's Thesis

Chairperson: David Gates

Co-Chairperson: Robert Stubblefield, and Randy Bolton

This novel excerpt and collection of five short stories exemplifies the work that Caitlin Stainken has done while completing her MFA at the University of Montana.

The Petroleum Club

Chapter 1: Parview, Texas

Just inside the slaughterhouse, behind the corrugated steel doors that opened onto the stockyard, Javier Morales was zipping his rubber suit up over his Carhartts for the last time. Despite the rush to process the cattle before they died of heat stroke or dehydration, he went through his routine with precision.

First, he grabbed a black trash bag, and swished the plastic through the air several times to open and inflate it. Then he tied it off and clipped it to the end of an aluminum pole the length of a broomstick. The metal doors rumbled open as he pulled the plastic hood over his head and stepped into the glaring sun.

His suit instantly filled with rank humidity. He grew up here but no one could ever get used to the heat inside the handler's uniform. Dried hoofprints covered the deserted corrals like dinosaur tracks. Only one corral still held a small herd of slick black cattle. He walked towards their gentle bellows. He signed his initials on the clipboard hanging outside the gate, then pulled a lever to open the far end of the pen. He swung himself up on top of the gate and looked over the cattle

They were bred for consistency and therefore indistinctness, but one stood out. She had a white patch right between her eyes. He spotted her at the edge of the herd. Her large head drooped low and she was listing from side to side on slack knees. Javi worried she might go down before he could get her to slaughter, but at that moment she raised her head and bellowed loudly. It startled Javi, and he almost fell off the gate. He caught his balance, then dropped down into the pen.

His boots landed heavy on the compact ground, and the cows nearest him shuffled back. He straightened up and began waving the bag above his head in graceful figure eights. The billowing plastic spooked the cattle and they began to hustle out the back of the pen, down the path to the slaughterhouse. In the shuffle, he lost track of the cow with the white mark.

His practiced movements aimed to agitate the herd as little as possible. Stressed animals produce tough meat, and contusions would have to be trimmed away to waste. This was the last load of Cartown beef – Javi wouldn't let it be boot brown and tasting of blood.

He prodded the herd through the curves of the high sided shoot system that wove through the corrals and into the shade of the slaughterhouse like a dried up lazy river ride in some condemned waterpark, the cement walls designed to

prevent the animals from seeing the activity of the people further down the line. The sun relented as Javi followed the last cow into the barn and the corrugated door quietly slid shut behind him. The ballast bulbs above dimmed to near darkness as he continued urging the cattle forward. A single ultra bright bulb was installed at the end of the shoot. Once it came into view around the last curve, the cattle picked up their pace, instinctively rushing towards the light. At that point, Javi quit waving his bag and just followed along behind to make sure none of them tried to turn back. If a single cow were to sense something amiss or get spooked by something as innocuous as a rogue shadow or a candy wrapper dropped into the shoot, it could set off a bruise inducing stampede. But Javi had done this thousands of times, knew how to feel out the mood of the herd and keep them calm through the end.

The shoot gradually narrowed until the herd was pressed into single file. One by one, as they reached the blinding light at the end, the huge metal restrainer scooped them up, gently squeezing from both sides and lifting them off their hooves. They seemed soothed by this mechanical embrace. The last moments before they were killed was almost peaceful as the machine carried them, placid and accepting, the last few feet to the kill room where Javi's cousin Ricky stood destroying their brains with a hand-held captive bolt gun.

The regular pulses of the powerful pneumatic gun sounded off, regular as a metronome, beyond the blinding light.

Javi watched the last cow step into the restrainer and then he climbed a ladder out of the shoot. He leaned his garbage bag tool against a wall, peeled off his hood, and sucked in fresh air. The heat inside that suit was about the only thing he would not miss. His job had been important to him. When the water went away, Cartown sped up slaughter and the rate of processing overtook the numbers coming in. Over the past year, the corrals had been empty more often than not. The cattle that did come were slaughtered within a week.

Even if there had been more time, it was no longer worth it. For months now, every new herd had been thinner and thirstier than the one before it. Their emaciated haunches and bald patches made Javi feel sick. He always wanted to give them more food than there was, and especially more water, but there was none to give. He remembered green fields behind his house when he was a kid. The aquifer used to gurgle up and overflow the well when it rained. He used to catch toads, but he hadn't heard one for years. His little sister, Mary Elena, would never know what any of that was like. The fields were dry, cracked apart and filled with scorpions. Once, she found a litter of dead kittens and brought them home in her lunchbox. They were dried up like mummified fetuses. Javi walked

into the kill room.

Ricky was finishing up. The carcasses were suspended in the air by heavy chains looped around each animal's back right hoof. The left legs, unchained, jabbed out spastically. Javi knew this to be spinal reflexes, that the circuits for walking were in the spine, that when you destroy the central nervous system the walking circuit goes hyperactive, but it still made him uneasy the way those legs kicked out, like the whole dead herd was on the run.

The chains were hooked to a bulky ceiling track that moved the dangling bodies through a black plastic strip door which led to the cooler, the cattle kicking fiercely all the while. Despite their movement, Javi could tell they were dead because their tongues hung out, long and flaccid. He was leaning against the wall, watching them file past, when he saw her – the one with the white mark, moon bright with a red circle in the center like an angry eye where the bolt had entered her skull. She swung around the corner, leg jerking as wild as the others, but unlike them her tongue was only hanging partway out. As she got closer he saw that her eyes were open and blinking. Then she began to bellow.

Javi shouted down the line for Ricky to shut down the conveyor. He walked over like a casual surgeon, trailing his gun on a thick cord, and without a word he delivered a second bolt to the cow's forehead. There was silence; the

tongue stayed out this time.

Has that ever happened before? said Javi, catching his breath.

Not to me, said Ricky. It's rare.

Thick blood oozed out of the second bolt hole. The thick purple tongue now hung long and limp. Sweat streamed down Javi's face.

Ricky squeezed Javi's shoulder and went to turn the conveyor back on. The cow with the white mark would hang in the refrigerator with the rest of her herd for a few hours, to bleed and chill before processing. Usually the cattle hung overnight, but this batch was a rush job on account of the plant closing down. The carcasses would be minimally processed, sold as full sides to be butchered elsewhere. Already, just behind the strip door, their jugular veins and carotid arteries were being severed. Soon their heads would be removed for inspection, the skins peeled away, the bones hacked and sawed to specification. Javi the double bolter swing away, both legs now still. Then he followed Ricky out of the kill room.

Javi's job was over, but he felt compelled to stay at the plant, to see out the end of the final work day. He walked around to the main slaughter hall where yesterday's kill was being processed.

The most notable feature of the main slaughter hall was not the hundreds of

brown faced figures cloaked like bruised bananas in yellow hazmat suits splattered with blood and offal, not the furious laboring of humans faced with the task of disassembling mountains of bone and tissue, not the sounds of saws and hammers and snapping tendons, sounds like a dentistry school for giants or sadists. No, the thing that stuck like an electrified pin to the parietal lobe was the smell – Iodine? Dirty fingers? Cancer patient pee? It hung thick in the air, a fetid cloud of particulate beef.

The hides had already been removed and the internal organs discarded. There was nothing but meat and slick tendon left hanging from hooked bone in various states of dismantlement around the perimeter of the floor. The workers were using chainsaws and bone cutters to anatomize the carcasses into primals and subprimals, dissecting the beasts into identical pieces of cow puzzle. A boy young enough to still be in high school was walking through the galleys in a bloody white coat and a hairnet, collecting meat scraps and suet from the floor in a white five gallon bucket.

Against the far back wall, Juanice and Carlotta were using small electric saws to neatly slice the finer chunks into grocer sized consumer cuts which they wrapped first in plastic and then in large sheets of waxed butcher paper, sealing each package with a Cartown logo and packing them into insulated cardboard

boxes. Both women had worked at the plant for over three decades, since Cartown Beef set up the refrigerated butchery in Parview. Javi thought of these women as his aunts. Their veteran status gave them the privilege of wearing brightly colored aprons over their yellow hazmat suits, making their area seem more like a kitchen than a laboratory. In their hands, the hunks of flesh began to look like meat. Javi always wondered at what point the smell went away.

Hours later, when the carcasses of the final herd were brought in, he wondered which had been the one with the white mark. He would've liked to see her one last time, but without heads or skins it was impossible to tell them apart. He stood watching the work until late that evening when the foreman came out and blew the whistle that signaled the end of the day. The workers finished their final tasks, thoroughly cleaning their stations, as though they would be returning the next day. By mid morning the next day, the meat truck would have come and left; the last load of Cartown beef packed up and gone.

In the morning, Javi lay awake as the smell of his mother's carne asada breakfast tacos filled the house. Usually, she only made tacos on weekends, when there was time to eat. Every weekday since he'd begun working at the plant he'd

been up before sunrise, driving to the plant with the other workers, but that morning all was quiet outside. No trucks passed.

Finally, he rose and went into the kitchen where Mary Elena was eating tacos and chocolate milk at the table. His mother was standing at the stove, stirring sauce in one of her nice blouses.

What are you doing cooking in your work clothes? he said when he saw her.

She didn't answer him. The plant was the only place she had ever worked. She started there before he was born, as a scrap collector on the slaughter floor, and worked her way up to a position in the administrative office. When his father died of a heart attack, she got Javi the job in the stockyard. He was only seventeen then, but he was ready to do it. His plan had always been to stay in Parview, where his family was. The need brought out by his father's sudden death gave his work meaning. He moved up quickly, and as a handler made even more than his mother.

But as Cartown began rushing to slaughter increasingly inferior herds, he realized that Parview wasn't going to make it. The fields and farms around town went sterile. When the water rationing began, people started to leave. They didn't even try to sell their homes, they just walked away. The movie theater shut down,

the doors barred with splintered two by fours. The shelves in the grocery store were sparsely stocked, except for the meat case which was packed with frozen steaks. Still, most of the plant workers stayed on. Those like Javi and his mother had nowhere else to go.

That morning, nothing seemed real. Javi's was standing still, holding a dripping wooden spoon and staring out the window. He followed her gaze. Across the flat landscape of grassless brown, a somber parade was moving along the dusty road towards the plant, looming large as ever in the distance. It didn't make any sense. The plant would be completely shut down by now, the meat pick up truck long gone. The gates would be locked.

What's happening? he said.

His mother turned back to the stove.

He went into his room and dressed in his Cartown issued pants and shirt. In the living room he pulled on his heavy work boots and kissed Mary Elena on the forehead.

Where are you going? said his mother.

I'll be back, he said.

Javi, we're leaving today, she called after him as he merged into the procession outside.

The crowd proceeded in silence, kicking up a puff of dust that seemed meager compared to the usual cloud stirred by the trucks and SUVs they drove to work. The sky above them was cerulean wide, streaked with pure white wisps – smoke clouds, they called them, because they never let any water, not for over 20 years, and somehow the streaks made the air seem hotter, like fire was raging just beyond the horizon, blowing oven breath across the plains. As they reached the plant, the crowd formed a circle around it and kept walking, a collection of stragglers in yellow and beige, beating a dusty track into the perimeter. They paced in slow procession, forming a diffuse yellow halo around the plant.

Chapter 2: King Frederick's District

Zach Powell never had a problem enjoying his fortune. A bit of enjoyment was just what he needed to take his mind off the phone call he received that morning.

As he strolled across his city property, only three acres but a behemoth considering its location in the heart of the historical King Frederick district, he daydreamed about an upcoming excursion to the sprawling recreational ranch he kept just outside San Cupertino. But the rec ranch circled his mind around to his third property, the Powell Cattle Company, and right back to the phone call.

Behind him, he pulled one of the bull calves of his most lucrative stud. The calf loped along easy, playfully butting the back of Zach's legs and tugging at the rope tied around its neck. Each year, after the fall calves had been weaned, Zach chose a favorite to keep as a pet through the summer. The young bull was put on display in the Powell's yard to fatten during in the final months before the Texas Angus Select Sale.

Every spring, a young bull could be found grazing on the Powell's lush green lawn or lounging under the pecan tree, seeking respite from the brutal south Texas sun. The bull was kept tied to the pecan by a rope just short enough to keep him away from the gazebo. Linda tolerated the summer bull, but demanded the

gazebo remain, in her words, clean and shitless. Hector was in charge of basic maintenance, daily feeding and keeping the yard clean, but Zach oversaw the finer details of the animal's care. Supplements, coat brushing, special treats - he liked to stay involved.

It was common knowledge within King Frederick's district that Zach paid the encompassing city of San Cupertino to ignore the zoning regulations forbidding livestock animals within city limits. The Powell's were one of the oldest families in the district, and despite their dwindling numbers, they maintained a reputation for largess, backed by cattle money, and oil behind the steers. They paid for the ornamental flowers and the water to keep them cascading out of the median on King Frederick Avenue; they anonymously donated sizeable bonuses to keep the highly degreed public school teachers locked in; they hired historians to verify the significance of every chisel chipped stone in the district, and donated their resources towards numerous other projects and purchases all intended to keep property values as high as possible.

Of course, when it came to these matters, *they* really meant Linda, who kept track of the Powell family's charitable account with the meticulous diligence of a wartime president. Zach let her have full control of those funds, though he refused to give her access to the accounts that held the vast majority of their

assets and accumulations. Those he kept private. Zach treated the charitable account as an inconsequential fraction, yet it was sizeable and replenished frequently enough to suggest a wealth resting in those private accounts that surpassed rational measurements of value. Zach enjoyed checking his accounts, but he didn't actually know where most of his money came from anymore. Other people managed it entirely. Lumps just appeared, and he relied on them continuing to appear. Many people did.

Of course, there was an edge to this generosity, delineated by the stone wall borders of the King Frederick District. Beyond those walls lay San Cupertino proper, the land of gangland crime and lax dress codes. The Powells concerned themselves only with the goings on inside the cheery kingdom, and they did so with the largesse and graciousness of the Castros. Mr. Powell, though his wrath could strike with laelapsian accuracy, was generally quite charming. His joviality did almost as much as his money for his standing within the community and in his business dealings. It was for these reasons that, though the summer bulls stank to high heaven in the heat of the summer, and though they became dangerous once they reached maturity having spent their formative months in isolation, the neighbors never fussed.

In fact, summer bull had become a tradition. Zach's pets earned top dollar

at auction year after year. This money, marked for the charitable account, went right back into the community, which was Zach's way of keeping Linda from putting the kibosh on the whole thing. Not that she had the power to stop summer bull, even if she'd tried.

Back at the Powell Cattle Company, the PCC, the calves that promised to bring in a high dollar, but not high enough to live with the Powells, were pampered by seasoned ranch hands until it came time to sort out the breeders and send the rest to the slaughterhouse. Come September, once the testicles dropped and the horns came in, Zach accompanied his summer bulls to the auction block where they were sent into the bidding wars and sorted by the same binary formula as the rest: steaks or studs.

But this year's summer bull was special. It had done something that peaked his interest, something he had never seen before. This calf weaned *himself*. Of course, that would eventually happen naturally if calf and cow were allowed to stay together long enough, but this calf did it while practically still soft hooved and wet behind the ears. The rest of the new herd was still doe eyed for teat when the little bastard dumped his own mother.

And he wasn't some bloodless little dogie neither. In fact, he was the biggest calf in the barn, sturdy and well built with fine shoulders and solid

haunches that promised to put on meat. There was an arrogance about the calf's rejection of mother's milk in favor of the grain meal fed to full grown steer, a meanness that Zach could appreciate. He had a white mark right between his eyes that might count against him as a color defect when it came time for auction, but Zach chose him anyway, for that mean spark he liked to see in his live possessions. The ranch hands called the calf *cabrón*.

El cabrón que cago en la leche: The bastard that shit in the milk.

The old men, the ones who had worked the ranch for generations, were spooked. They urged Zach to choose another calf and veal Cabron before he got any bigger. They warned him that a calf that showed aggression at such an early age would only get worse, that his temperament would make him unpredictable and dangerous, but Zach ignored them.

Don't worry boys, he said. I can handle him for a few months. He had them load Cabron into his steel trailer, and then drove him into the city.

Back on his city property, he pulled Cabrón around a patch of expertly hedged Forsythia to a grassy spot where a teenage girl was sitting in a white adirondack chair outside the carriage house. She was wearing a white tank top and neon orange shorts. Her legs, crossed loose and long, had a childlike softness that began above her brown knees and slunk into the inner hemline of her skimpy

shorts. One of her slender arms dangled down to the supple green grass where a fuzzy squirrel was sneaking towards her upturned palm. Just as the squirrel tried to snatch a red candy out of her hand, she clenched her fist. The creature scurried away empty pawed.

Zach was pleased with the pleasant scene he had inadvertently orchestrated. *I deserve this*, He thought. *How could I have predicted?*

The girl was Hector's daughter. They'd been living in the carriage house, formerly the guest house, for what? Three weeks? Four? And rent free. There's charity for you. There's helping one's fellow human. Whatever Linda had to say about it, it cost the Powells nothing to let them stay. There were three pristine guest bedrooms in the main house, and not even Linda could claim to use the carriage house with any regularity.

Plus, it was better for Hector to be close to his work. No commute. The Caladiums never forgot to get watered. Linda required over forty varieties of annual in the front yard alone, and Hector knew the planting and watering schedules like Zach knew what time to piss. He practically caught Cabron's turds on the way out of his ass, and no sooner had a fingernail of paint scratched off the portico than Hector was at it like the pope on a pedophile with his little pail of matching touch up. He worked so quietly, so inconspicuously, that it seemed the

entire property was naturally lush, green, and manicured. Zach kept Hector off the regular payroll and instead had the maid pay him in cash from an extra amount deposited with her weekly electronic paycheck. Hector was worth it.

He had been working for the Powell's for over a decade when Zach asked him, Hector, whereabouts does a person like you live?

It was an honest question, the kind that sometimes arose in Zach's mind when he pondered his enormous luck at having been born into a position of power and influence. He was not altogether prepared for Hector's answer. Hector said that he and his daughter were sharing a small home with another family, and he was riding over an hour a day on the Via bus to get to the district.

We pay you decent don't we? Have you looked for someplace closer to here? said Zach.

I have a daughter, said Hector, hesitating. Her school is expensive sir.

How old is she? said Zach.

Sixteen, said Hector.

Zach, awash with the generosity and compassion the Powell's were known for, said, Hector, I want you to come live here. I think it would be better for everyone.

In your house?

You can live in the carriage house. You know we don't use it.

But my daughter?

Bring her, said Zach, and that settled it.

Hector moved into the carriage house, flooded with feelings of gratitude and amazement. Living in the King William District meant that his daughter, Mercedes, would be able to complete high school at King William's High, which was more prestigious than the best private school he could send her to outside the district. She was a good student. Hector would make sure she understood what it could mean for her future and that she would not waste this tremendous opportunity.

They moved into the carriage house with one truckload. Zach left all the furnishings there for their use. There was a cognac leather living room set, a kitchen full of coordinating dinnerware and forged iron utensils, antique mahogany four posters with carved artichokes on the posts. They dropped their bags in the living room, and Hector stood speechless while Mercedes went from room to room feeling more and more like a princess with every smooth finished surface she laid her eyes on.

Zach walked into the house and asked Hector what he thought.

It's too much, said Hector. Mrs. Powell...she doesn't mind?

Mercedes walked in and stood next to her father, smiling at Zach with lips like ripe fruit.

This must be your daughter? said Zach.

My Mercedes, said Hector. The girl gave a polite nod, holding Zach's eye.

Hector, said Zach. This is going to work out just fine. I want you to stay, so don't argue with me. Make yourselves at home. With that he left, giddy with his latest stroke of good fortune.

Zach considered it karma that she was gorgeous: pearled bronze skin, mouth a perfect glazed tangerine, birdlike body in that verdure state of bulging adolescent beauty that a tulip takes on in the days just before full bloom. Her body was the kind of poem Zach could appreciate, and he took the time to do so. He often worked from home a few days a week in the summers, but this summer he hardly ever went into the office, instead sitting in his office all day, or sitting with his laptop open in front of the television in the den. Whenever he needed a little break, he would untie Cabron from the pecan in the front yard and walk with him around back, past the carriage house, to enjoy the view.

When the high school let out, Mercedes began to appear regularly, sunning herself in the yard, as she was now.

She stood up as he approached, skittle nipples tenting her tank top, and

adjusted her crotch with a guileless pinch.

At ease, he said. He stood in front of her, stroking Cabron's white patch, making him butt up against his palm. He stared at Mercedes, taking her in with fluid eyes and giving her the same warm half smile that he used to convince foreign business executives to buy his beef.

How're you liking it here? he said.

Very much sir, thank you she said.

Oh come on now. Relax. Have you met my friend Cabrón?

Mercedes held his gaze and returned his smile. Zach yanked down on Cabron's neck rope and the animal's enormous fuzzy head nuzzled into her bare shoulder.

Give him a pet, he said. He's sweet.

Mercedes raised her hand to stroke the bull's wet snout.

Chapter 3: Mexicans in the Guest House

Linda Powell watched from the upstairs bedroom window as her husband approached the property keeper's daughter, dragging that bastard bull around like a puppy. She had been two seconds from going out there and telling that girl to quit feeding the tree rats when Zach appeared. They were not in agreement when it came to keeping a bull in the yard or a mexican family in her guest house. The bull left steaming triceratops turds all over the yard, and Hector sometimes didn't see the piles until hours later. It was unseemly. If it were up to her, it wouldn't happen, but it wasn't up to her. Nothing was up to her. And it was nothing new. Every summer, the same frustrations. She could put up with summer bull for the sake of the auction money she'd get as a consolation prize (and by the size of the turds this thing layed it was looking like a fat year at the block), but when it came to offering living quarters to the help, Linda was flat out opposed.

Mexicans living in the backyard - pshaw! What about the housemaid, or Colton's old nanny, or the plumber? Should they come and live in the house too? It was absurd, it was old fashioned, it was racist, and worst of all it deprived Linda of a guest house. How was she supposed to treat guests like guests with a mexican family in the guest house?

Linda watched as the girl mounted the bull and Zach pulled her around on the thing like their yard was some crap ass city park. Might as well get a donkey shaped pinata and a stinking portable barbeque and invite all the employees and their excessive families over for a picnic. There they went, back and forth around the yard, the two of them laughing like there was nothing wrong with the whole offensive picture.

But there was no use making a scene, especially not with Colton coming home that evening. The last thing she wanted was to be fighting with Zach when her son walked in. She walked away from the window and went into the bathroom, determined to ignore the infringements occurring outside, but then she heard the front door open and two sets of footsteps on the oak floors downstairs. She gripped the sink and closed her eyes.

How could he start something like this with Colton on his way home? The boy was blessedly unaware of his father's gross incompetence when it came to logical decision making. And Zach was quick to cover for himself by pointing out anything that made Linda seem picky or dumb.

Linda, just call Luby's, Zach had said last Christmas. If you were smart, you would've known this was too much for you to pull off. It's not my fault you don't know how to run your kitchen.

Linda had responded by yelling at Zach to, Just get out of here, which provoked a, Why're you so hard on dad? from Colton.

Good old Dad had turned the oven off without telling anyone because it was making the house too hot. The turkey was raw and the guests were on their way. So it was Luby's. They had to get their Christmas turkey from a lunch counter that, from the maroon and grey decor and the range of gelatin selections in the desert case, could be mistaken for a nursing home cafeteria. And thank God they were selling turkeys until noon. Don't you mention this, said Linda as she junked the twenty two pound free range bird she'd specially selected from Central Market. But Zach thought the whole thing was just too funny to keep from sharing with the guests.

She had the thing up to 500 degrees, just about burned the house down, he said with infectious jolliness to the crowd of Powells and other King Fredrickans gathered in the parlor. She woke up late like always and was trying to get the thing done in a hurry.

That's not what happened, said Linda, but somehow she was the one who sounded ridiculous.

Sleeps like a log, that one, said Zach. Worst of all, the Luby's turkey was delicious.

Dad was right, said Colton.

A real memory maker, that daddy, thought Linda. Too hard on poor old dad my asshole.

Linda worried that Colton was exactly like his father. Even when he was just a little milk mouth, it was obvious that he was a Powell, through and through. But now that he was nearly grown, she sensed that in some way she had failed him, conceded to the powers that be and abandoned her son to his fate. She felt responsible for this person whom she had brought into the world. She'd tried to guide him when he was young. But Zach, as in all things, held an unfair majority of influence over their son. Where Linda went for straightforwardness and discipline, Zach used money and insults on Linda's intelligence to keep the boy solidly on his own side.

And why not let the boy's nature win out? It was the easiest route. A salary would be created for him when the time was right. He would be fine, probably even happy. Linda had a hard time giving up the notion that her only son might become the type of man she wished she'd married, but the fact was, he was his father's son.

Yet, however disappointing, he was hers too. Maybe there was still time. She was glad he still wanted to come home. And by the end of the summer, if

Linda's plans went right, she'd be a much wealthier woman. It all depended on the auction money. The charity account was small beans to Zach, he never checked what was in it, and after all it was in her name. Well wouldn't he be surprised to see how much was there? thought Linda with the first stab of pleasure she'd felt all day. She'd long ago realized that it was foolish to depend on a man as flippant and childish as Zach Powell, yet depend she did, for lack of options. Well, that would all change come the end of summer. She didn't have quite enough, not yet, and there were plenty of things she had to continue to pay for in order to keep up appearances within the district. But with the money that bull would bring in, she'd finally be able to make a serious move. She was counting on it.

Her day dreams were shattered by the giggling come from the chucha downstairs. That little yardbird was in her fucking house. It sounded like a brothel, or a kiddie park. Linda was still standing in the bathroom, gripping the sink. She knew that if she went down there she would not be able to control herself, and control of self was her only weapon against her husband, who had a godlike ability to manipulate any circumstance in his favor. If she went down there and lost her temper, that girl would only become more tightly allied with Zach. What the hell was he thinking? Was she supposed to just stay up here and

pretend she didn't know what was going on? No, he couldn't actually expect her to tolerate this. It was too much. He was trying to provoke her, and she was not going to give him that satisfaction. She was not going to go down there. Now right now. Shit fuck, she thought. Fuckitty fuck shit fuck. Then she heard the door open and close again.

She rushed out of the bathroom and looked out the window. She'd been stuck at the sink for all of fifteen minutes, but as she watched the girl prance over to the carriage house and waltz inside, Linda could tell that plenty of damage had been done in that time. A light popped on in the kitchen and she could see the girl plucking things out of the fridge and getting something started at the stainless steel six burner stove. In the yard below Linda's window, Cabron was tied to the pecan, sleeping curled up in a fuzzy ball. It was as though nothing had happened. Oh, but it had. She could smell it in the air. Linda brushed sweaty baby hairs off her face, straightened her spine, and began a deliberate climb down the staircase.

She found her husband sitting in his leather chair, computer open on his lap.

Hey sleepy head, he said, without looking up.

I wasn't asleep, said Linda.

Oh? said Zach. I thought you were napping. What were you doing up there?

What was that girl doing in the house? she said, maintaining perfect control of her voice.

What girl? said Zach, pecking at his keyboard.

What was she doing in our house?

Mercedes? said Zach, tapping the delete key.

Is that her name?

I gave her the tour, said Zach, still not looking up.

I don't want her in the house, said Linda. It doesn't look right.

You know Linda, it wouldn't kill you to be a little more Christian.

He took a sip of a brown cocktail from a crystal tumbler. He was not bothered, not by Linda. He was at ease, content even. She resented her husband's easy contentment, yet it was the only thing keeping the marriage afloat. She herself was by no means content. Her mind whirred with such a constant hum of discontent that she sometimes wondered whether it wasn't a physical malady, some form of persistent tinnitus.

What are you doing? she said.

Business.

Well finish up. Colton will be here soon.

Colton arrived late that evening, with a laundry sack slung over his shoulder. Linda heard the door and rushed into the foyer where he flung the sack at her feet.

Hey ma, he said, giving her a quick peck on the cheek before heading for the fridge.

He wore boat shoes with no socks, a light pink button up shirt and wrinkled khaki shorts. A rotten vinegar smell emanated from the shoes he'd left by the door. Would he ever wear a sock? Linda wondered.

How was the drive? she said, finding him ravaging the pantry. He came out, arms full of chips and cookies.

Traffic sucked, he said.

We already ate, said Linda. Should I order you a pizza?

He stopped short in the hallway, on his way to join his father in the den, and looked back at her. That would be so great, he said. I'm so hungry.

How about Volari's? Meat lovers?

He gave her a wide mouth grin, a bit of chip debris falling from his lips,

then came back to give her the warm hug she was waiting for. He was much taller than her, still slim but with a promise of growth to come showing in his shoulder muscles and those enormous smelly feet, like a half grown golden retriever.

She flicked a greasy crumble from her shoulder. Go see your dad, she said, but he was already heading that way.

He smiled at her as he walked out and said, It's so good to be home. Then he jaunted down the hall with his snacks, looking like an idiot.

Linda checked herself. Nothing negative about how she'd handled his arrival. She heard the volume kick up on the TV and knew her boys would be in there until bedtime. She would order the pizza and serve it to them when it arrived, and convince herself she wasn't bothered when they asked her not to block the television. Her family was made of great huge ridiculous men; her role was to feed and appease them.

With Colton home, everything in the Powell house was the same as ever. And things were calm, which was a triumph considering what had happened that afternoon. Thank God she hadn't let it get further between her and Zach about that girl. She hoped nothing else would come of it, but she knew better. Shit fuck, she thought, her new mantra.

Chapter 4: In The Backyard

Stuffed from a dinner of grilled sausages – shared with her father, who would return from calibrating the watering system any moment – Mercedes Zacamora was in her bedroom with the door shut, humping a stiff embroidered pillow. Her labia were naughty rottweilers, her nipples electric tasers, her mouth filled with prayer but her heart with nasty poems.

She finished with a gasp and lay still on her stomach, still wearing her neon shorts, ass in the air on top of the pillow, right hand jammed between her legs. For months now her body had felt out of control, riotous, preyed upon by spirits. She derived a sense of power from the pleasure she was able to release, but was terrified of being discovered by her father. She had been getting careless. Today was bad, she had been unable to control herself. *It was that bull*, she thought, attempting to diffuse her guilt with blame. The loping back and forth, the fur on her thighs, the rough shoestring crotch of her shorts humid, chafing, rubbing.

She opened her eyes and tried to focus on the objects in her room. The recessed lighting fixtures in the high slanted ceiling, the antique silver switch plates and deep set windows with white interior shutters. It was no different from inside the Powell's main house. She had imagined that the luxury of the carriage

house must be nothing by comparison. But no, they matched. It was odd, that the Powell's should let them stay here at all, in a miniature version of their own house. She felt like a doll in a historically accurate dollhouse. She wondered what sort of agreement her father had made with Mr. Powell. Mr. Powell was so nice, so easy. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was a fool. She could probably get anything she wanted from him, especially after today. And there were some things she wanted.

With her father coming back any second, she needed more than switchplates to purify her mind. She became like an animal as soon as he was out of earshot. But he was so quiet, so inconspicuous, she was certain he knew more than he let on. She would have to be better. And Holy Christ she would have to be more careful in the big house. She could feel herself losing control again as she thought about it, so she rolled out of bed and found a pack of matches. She lit the tall Virgin candle by her bedside, a relic of her mother's from the old days. She dimmed the lights, and knelt down to pray.

She closed her eyes and rested her head against her clasped hands, bathed in her own scent, sweet and musky and mixed with bull and the sandalwood and eucalyptus of the Powell residence. Even the soft light of her mother's candle couldn't calm her. The hard wood under her knees filled her up with memory and

anticipation, but she kept chanting out Hail Mary's even as she rose back onto the bed and remounted the pillow. Before she could finish again she heard the front door close.

In a flash she was back on her knees, the offending pillow flung to the other side of the room as Hector opened her door.

Mercechita?

Yes papa? she said, her heart beating fast as a bird's.

Siento, he said, seeing the candle and his daughter on her knees. When you finish, come talk to me. He started to close the door.

What is it? she said.

He stopped and stood looking down at her from the doorway. His characteristically slick combed hair was dry and unkempt, and there was a slight hunch in his stick straight posture. *He knows*, she thought.

Mercedes followed him into the living room, certain that every footstep led closer to her shame. Hector was sitting on the couch. She sat down as far from him as she could. A small wooden box sat on the coffee table in front of him. It was a simple rectangle made of unstained wood, about the size of a shoebox, with a sliding lid. For several moments they sat in silence until Mercedes couldn't stand it any longer.

Mija, he said. Today I learned some things. I shouldn't have been listening, but I couldn't help it.

Mercedes' chest felt like a pitcher overflowing with boiling water that she had no way to pour out. She was in agony. Did he know what had happened between her and Mr. Powell?

We have been lucky here, he said. These people have been good to us. But it might not always be so. Do you know why I brought you here? ¿Sabes por qué me hice siervo?

Mercedes stayed silent. She hardly spoke a word of Spanish. Her father only spoke it at home when he was very emotional.

I'm sorry Mija. I thought things would be better here for you, but I've done you a great disservice.

What have you done Pappa? said Mercedes.

Everything we have belongs to someone else. This is not *our* house, not *our* land. None of this is ours. I've built nothing, I own nothing, I have nothing to give you.

But we live here.

It doesn't matter. We only have what they hand to us. It's not ours Mercedes. They could get rid of us at any moment.

Why would they do that?

You mustn't put so much by what others offer. You have to fend for yourself. Your poor Pappa has nothing to give you.

Do we have to move out of the carriage house?

I don't know yet. Things could be different soon, for all of us. We have to prepare for change.

Hector picked up the box and slid the lid off with his calloused fingertips. Inside was a collection of old photos of him and her mother in Managua before the war. He had only rarely allowed Mercedes to see any of these old pictures. She didn't even know where he kept them. This was the first time he had let her look through them all at once. He picked one up and handed it to Mercedes, her mother in a dark maternity dress with white polka dots. She was leaning against a big white sedan and the sun was in her eyes, dancing on her wedding ring, sparkling on her glossy black curls and making her squint. Her hands were resting on her round belly and she had a huge smile across her pale face. Hector held the photo up to Mercedes's face and sighed again. Except for the belly, she looked remarkably like her mother.

She poured over the photos as Hector looked on. There was another one of her as a baby, bundled up on her mother's lap in the backseat of that same white

sedan. Her mother was still young and smiling, but there was a strain in her eyes. The photo couldn't have been taken more than a year after the first one, but the car looked 10 years older. It was all beat up, dusty and covered with dents and scratches as though it had been parked in a driving range. It was the most recent photo of her mother that Mercedes had ever seen. The rest in the box were much older: shots of her parents laying on white beach towels beside an aqua lagoon, laughing because an enormous hog was digging in the sand beside them; dressed up like royalty, giant hats and white gloves, at a big party on the old banana plantation' in a helicopter, their heads hung with heavy earphones as they looked down into the Masaya volcano. They were photos from an ancient life that Mercedes had only heard stories of. The one of her as a baby must have been taken just before her mother was shot.

I have nothing for you, said Hector. But I want you to remember that you come from proud people, people one million times better than the ones who own this house. You are smart, and beautiful, and I pray you will be luckier than your old man. I want things to be good for you, but you must work for it. Do you understand?

Mercedes nodded. She understood perfectly. She was doing exactly what he wanted. She felt so sorry for him, and so far away, as though she had already

moved into the big house.

She also felt very grown up, and despite the tension in his face, she was relieved. He had worried over her for so long, and now, finally, she could take this burden from him. Just this afternoon, without even realizing it, she had started down exactly the right path.

She was like her mother. She could trust her instincts. They had led her in the right direction, and now all she had to do was repeat the process. Repeat and wait and watch. It was what she wanted anyway. She took her father's hand and gave it a squeeze to let him know she saw the better life her father saw, saw it perfectly. Right through the Powell's kitchen window.

Shrimp and Noodle Casserole

Every year, a week before Christmas, my father made shrimp and noodle casserole. We ate it on Christmas Eve. It was a cold, mayonnaise based dish, made in the drawer of the refrigerator.

The recipe is ancient, but the drawer thing started sometime in the late 1960s, when, halfway through the biggest batch she'd ever attempted, Grandy realized she didn't have a bowl big enough to hold all the noodles. Then she opened her refrigerator. The electric light shone like a guiding star, and in a moment of divine inspiration, she made an epic batch of casserole, right there in the drawer.

My dad swore it was the best batch there had ever been. Every year, he attempted to make it just as Grandy had that famous Christmas.

The ingredients included elbow noodles, several jars of Hellman's mayonnaise, fresh shrimp, boiled with the heads still attached, celery, lemon juice, vinegar, *white* pepper (bless my mother for the vitriol she suffered the year she used black pepper), a whole shakerful of Accent powder, and a few secret ingredients that will never appear in print. It all went into the refrigerator drawer.

Once all the ingredients were in, it had to sit for a week, with an unwieldy piece of loose Seran wrap draped across the top, and a big spoon stuck in it. The spoon could not be washed or changed out until Christmas Eve. The only thing that was up to the chef was how much extra mayonnaise and lemon juice to add as the noodles absorbed the marinade.

We were technically Catholic, but casserole was our religion. Tampering with shrimp and noodle, even in the name of sanitation, was a sacrilege akin to corrupting the Holy Eucharist. When my mother complained about the spoon, which seemed reasonable considering what had been done to her refrigerator drawer, my father said, In Church, everyone drinks from the same cup.

In our house, everyone slurped mayonnaise coated shrimp from the same spoon.

I loved shrimp and noodle casserole. I loved making it with my father, I loved the way it took over the kitchen in the week leading up to Christmas, and I loved the way the flavor changed, becoming tangier and more complex the longer it sat.

My brother found it disgusting. He refused to eat it. This was my father's shame. Dad grew up with six brothers. His calling in life was to parent boys. He thought he'd have six of his own, and that they'd all eat shrimp and noodle

together with that one spoon. Instead, his firstborn was me, a girl. When the ultrasound showed the next kid was a boy, he was thrilled. But Miles came out with Down syndrome, and not liking shrimp and noodle, and that changed what having a son meant. It made things irregular, so to speak. And so, Dad began looking more and more to me to fulfill the duties of a regular son.

As my father's regular son, I was expected to go to Home Depot with him, hold the gaff hook when he had a big fish on the line, laugh at his off color jokes about my mother's family, and enjoy the living hell out of shrimp and noodle casserole. I ate bowls and bowls of it, until the year I turned fourteen and puberty stripped me of my boyhood.

Breasts, blood, and weepiness did not fit in with my father's picture of a regular son any better than the Down syndrome. The transition caused us both to suffer. He handled it by screaming and breaking things. I, in turn, staged a revolt against all that my father held dear, starting with the casserole.

Quit scowling, my father said. You'll make the shrimp cranky.

He believed that foods, especially proteins, could absorb the emotion of the cook. In years past, I always smiled at the shrimp, and took my time carefully

peeling their skins off like little jackets. But that night, I was ripping away bits of meat with the tails.

I'm serious, he said. Lay off.

You're the one making me do this, I said. Why don't you make Miles help?

My brother couldn't devein shrimp or chop celery. He could have helped stir everything together, but he would be grumpy about it, and the shrimp would feel it.

You always help me, said my father. It wouldn't be the same without you.

I hate it shrimp and noodle, I said. It's disgusting.

I whipped another roughed up shrimp into the colander, and my father lost it.

Get out then! he said, pointing at me with the butcher knife. Go! Get out of here!

He finished the casserole alone.

My father's family lived far away, so most years we spent Christmas Eve with my mother's family, at Grand Aunt Rosaline's house. Aunt Rosaline was a real Southern lady. Her home was immaculate, and precisely decorated in

coordinating floral motifs. She kept a vast collection of porcelain dolls arranged in glass cases and had real oil paintings on her walls.

Her Christmas Eve spread was glorious; the spinach dip was a perfectly uniform consistency, the honeyed ham glistened like lacquered hardwood, her pimento cheese tea sandwiches were cut with a circular saw, and the crispy onions scattered across her green beans were distributed with haunting precision.

Some would say her table was perfect. But not my father. Year after year, as soon as we got there, he said it could use a refrigerator drawer full of shrimp and noodle casserole. And then he would plonk it down. She was too polite to outright refuse him, but she always tried.

A few days after I refused to help my father finish the casserole, Aunt Rosaline stopped by our house with presents, and motives. Miles and I answered the door.

Merry christmas, she said, handing us each a gift.

It's not Christmas, said Miles.

Well, go put it under the tree and you can open it Christmas morning, she said.

It's not Christmas, he said again, but he took the gift and followed me to the tree.

Miles was obsessed with absolutes. Something either was or was not. We loitered in the kitchen where my mother and Rosaline were drinking ice water at the table.

I just picked up the ham, said Rosaline. It's so big this year. You really don't need to bring anything.

Well, we'll probably bring the casserole, said my mother. You know how John is.

It's really not necessary, said Aunt Rosaline.

My father came in through the back door. He'd been working in the yard. He said a brusque hello, and went straight to the refrigerator.

We were just talking about Christmas Eve, said Rosaline. There's really no need to bring the noodle thing.

We're bringing it, said my father, his mouth full of casserole. It's tradition. He walked to the counter to slice a lemon, then went back to the fridge and squeezed the juice into the drawer before taking another bite. Everybody likes it, he said.

I don't like it, said Miles.

Me neither, I said.

Dad ignored us. It's a really good batch this year, he said. Taste it. He offered Rosaline the spoon.

No thank you, she said.

Here Miles, he said. Try it. Miles covered his mouth. Just try it, said my father. Miles shook his head and left the kitchen. More for me, said my father. But there was no joy in voice.

We'll just bring a little bit, said my mother, unhelpfully. There was no such thing as a little bit of shrimp and noodle.

John, said Rosaline with as much sternness as she could muster. I would really prefer you not bring the noodle thing.

My father put the spoon back into the drawer and replaced the slimy Seran wrap tent.

We'll see, he said.

All week I plotted to sabotage the casserole. I could add baking soda. I could unplug the refrigerator. I could wash the spoon. But I couldn't work up the nerve. On Christmas Eve, my father asked me to bring it out to the van.

I went to the fridge and stared at it. This was my last chance. The mustard and the jar of pickle juice sitting beside it were tempting, but I knew that an outright attack would be going too far.

I slid the drawer out of the fridge. When it was almost out, the back edge caught on something, and I dropped the whole thing on the floor.

My father heard the crash and ran into the kitchen.

Oh no! he said. Oh no! Oh no!

He got down on the floor and began scooping up casserole with his hands and putting it back into the drawer. The sleeves of his dress shirt were smeared with mayonnaise. Noodles were scattered everywhere.

My mother ran in and said, What happened?

What do you think happened? yelled my father. She grabbed the ladle and got down to help him.

This is so disgusting, I said.

Did you do it on purpose? he said.

No! I said. It slipped. The truth was, there was a moment when I maybe, possibly, could have caught the drawer, but it was still maybe, possibly, sort of an accident.

Just help me! he said. There was desperation in his voice. I gave up trying to save my outfit, and got down on the floor to scoop noodles with my parents.

We can't bring this over there, said my mother.

We're bringing it, said my father.

He was frantic. His face was red and sweaty, and the vein in the middle of his forehead bulged out.

When it was all off the floor, we noticed Miles standing behind us, watching. This was very bad. He would tell everyone at Rosaline's.

To Miles, secrets were jokes. What reason could there be to pretend something that *had* happened *had not* happen, except to be funny? If you told Miles to keep something secret, he would whisper it immediately to the first person he saw, phrased as a joke.

As in, Remember when my mom's credit card didn't work at the GAP? That was funny.

Or, remember my sister used to have a boyfriend? That was funny.

He's going to tell everyone we dropped the casserole, I said.

You dropped the casserole? said Miles.

No, said my father.

Well, said Miles. I see the noodles. I heard you shouting.

We're not going to talk about it, said my father.

Is it a secret? said Miles.

No, it's not a secret. We're just not going to talk about it.

That's kinda funny, said Miles.

It's not funny, said my father. Nothing funny happened.

The ride to Rosaline's house was silent. Except for Miles, we had all gotten slimed by the casserole, and so we were wearing outfits we'd thrown on at the last second. We looked slightly disheveled. We wondered if and when Miles would let the cat out of the bag.

My father brought the drawer inside as usual and put it on the table.

Rosaline sighed, but allowed it to sit in the usual spot. There were aunts and uncles and cousins to greet, and presents to exchange. All of that kept Miles busy. He was glad to accept gifts, now that it was officially Christmas Eve.

The family gathered in the dining room to say grace, and then everyone began filling their plates. That's when Miles made his announcement. I saw him looking at aunt Margaret, who was digging into the drawer. He didn't bother to whisper, because, after all, my father said it was not a secret.

Remember when the shrimp and noodle was on the floor and we put it back in the drawer with our hands? he said to aunt Margaret. That was funny.

Margaret let the noodles slide off her plate, back into the drawer.

You weren't kidding about the size of that ham, said my father, as though nothing had happened. But Rosaline had heard my brother loud and clear. And she knew that he never, ever told a lie.

Well I declare, she said. Fighting words. A hush fell through the room.

I don't know what he's talking about, said my father. It's just shrimp and noodle, same as always.

John, said Rosaline. We're not having it.

He tried to protest, but she put up a hand to stop him.

We're not having it, she said again.

The look on her face could make water freeze. Still, I expected my father to argue with her. There was nothing in the world that could make him back down from serving shrimp and noodle casserole on Christmas Eve. But instead, he took the drawer off the table and walked out to the back porch. He was beaten. At the end of the night, he brought the whole thing home, untouched, and put it back in the fridge. Worst of all, he said nothing to me.

Emotions pass, but facts remain. I did not help my father make the casserole. I did not take responsibility for dropping it on the floor. I did not try to stop my brother from telling everyone at Rosaline's house what had happened. And by the time we got home, I felt sad for my father. He suffered that night, and I did not help him.

It was still Christmas Eve, and despite how the night had gone, when Miles and I went to bed, Santa came. I felt rotten as I listened to my parents going in and out of the house, bringing presents I didn't deserve in from the garage. I was still awake when the house went quiet. There was still time. I crept through the dark house, to my brother's room.

I turned on his lamp and touched his shoulder. He sat up.

Is it Christmas? he said.

Not yet, I said. I have a special gift for dad. But you have to give it to him.

It's in the kitchen.

We crept quietly to the kitchen. Miles sat down at the table, and I got out a bowl and a spoon. I opened the fridge and scooped out a large helping of casserole.

I don't like it, he said, when I sat it down in front of him.

Miles, I said. You have to do this for dad.

I'm not going to eat it, he said.

Yes you are. And I'm going to help you.

We were up negotiating until close to sunrise. In the end, I managed to appeal to my brother's big heart. Once he understood what it would mean to our father, he gave it a taste. And once he tasted it, he actually liked it. Together, we ate the whole bowl. We went back to our beds with full bellies to wait for Christmas morning.

Mom had to wake us up.

Dad was in the living room by the tree, drinking a mug of coffee with a broken candy cane in it. Usually, he was as giddy as my brother and I when we emptied our stockings and tore through the gifts. But that morning he said, Merry Christmas, and stayed seated on the couch. The last drop of holiday spirit had been squeezed out of him.

When we began opening presents, I said, Wait. Something's missing.

Miles and I went into the kitchen, and came back with the drawer and four bowls. I scooped it out and Miles handed a bowl to each of us before taking the last one for himself.

My father looked weary, as though this might be a mean joke, but when we both started eating it, he began to laugh. He couldn't believe it. He took a big bite himself and soaked in the scene. He and his whole family, eating shrimp and noodle casserole, together. It was all he ever wanted.

Miles, he said. I thought you didn't like shrimp and noodle.

I didn't used to like it, he said. But I do now. Isn't that funny?

The year after Rosaline's Last Stand, my father bought a special glass serving dish, shaped like a shell, for transporting the casserole to her house. As long as it was in the shell, she would accept it on her table.

We are all older now. Christmas Eve has moved to Aunt Margaret's house, but traditions persist. When we get home on Christmas Eve, after my children have gone to sleep with full stomachs, my father dumps any leftovers back into the drawer, and he, Miles, and I eat the rest together with the same spoon.

The One Year Dog

When he was a child, Peter begged for a dog, but his mother said, you're allergic and you're not responsible.

He was a dutiful boy, and believed her on both counts. When he was around a dog, he resigned himself to giving it a few stately pats on the head, after which he would wash his hands to avoid itchy eyes and breathing trouble. It was not until he was well into his twenties that he realized he did not actually have itchy eyes or breathing trouble. But, he thought, he was still not responsible.

And in a way he was right. He was so busy with his studies through college and into the first few years of his residency that he wouldn't have had time to care for a dog properly, so it would have been irresponsible to get one. But the fear of being irresponsible kept him from getting a dog even as he became successful in his career, began working reasonable hours, bought a house with a fenced yard, and buried his mother.

When the price of gold was low, he bought a block the size of a die that he kept in a bank box along with a respectable diamond that he planned to have set in a ring when the right woman came along.

There was one woman. A pale, square jawed brunette who filled his prescriptions. After feigning a series of colds in order to have reason to see her, he worked up the courage to ask her out. One day, a few months after their first date, they went to the grocery store together. Shopping for oranges, for milk, for salad dressing– it convinced him. He bought her a small bunch of peonies as they were checking out, picturing a lifetime in her easy, comfortable company.

His mistake was telling her about the block of gold and the diamond in the bank box. She asked him not to make the ring.

He tried once afterwards to see her at the pharmacy. He thought he would bring her peonies, talk to her, beg her. But when he saw her, he lost his courage. He dropped the flowers in the trash bin outside the store and went home.

By any objective measure, Peter had become painfully responsible and terribly lonely by the time the smiling dog face caught his eye in the pop-up window at the corner of his computer screen.

One Year Dogs, originally bred as war dogs for use in ground combat, were now available to the general public. The hybrid retriever breed was being marketed as an ideal first pet for children. The dogs lived for exactly one year,

after which they simply dissolved. No mess. No long term commitment. No risk of ongoing genetic or behavioral problems. A year of responsibility in return for a lifetime of memories.

A few clicks later, and Peter had purchased his very first dog.

A trainer came to deliver it. The one year dog looked like a small golden retriever, with a puppy face, though the trainer said it was fully grown. It had silky blond fur, floppy ears, and a smile. The trainer gave Peter instructions on care. One scoop of kibble, twice a day, and access to fresh water. Let him out once in the morning and once in the evening to do his business.

What about walks? said Peter.

He'll adjust to your activity level, the trainer said.

And what about at the end of the year? What will happen then?

You've read the disclosure agreement?

Yes, but how will it work?

It's all taken care of for you. It's an automated process, you don't have to do anything to activate it. When the year is up, it will be like he was never here.

And that's it?

That's it, said the trainer, and he left Peter alone with his dog.

Magic. Peter chose the name because it was the name of the dog in his favorite childhood story book, *Magic Goes to Camp*. In *Magic Goes to Camp*, Magic the dog follows his boy wherever he goes. When the boy goes to camp, Magic tries to follow. He chases the car, but he can't keep up and loses sight of the family. He spends the summer searching for his boy, having adventures in the forest and talking to animals along the way. By the time he finally makes it to the camp, summer is over, the leaves on the trees are changing color, and the boy has gone home. Magic catches the boy's scent in the bunkhouse. He climbs up on a cot, heartbroken and forlorn, and falls asleep alone. He is awakened by the boy, who'd forgotten his toothbrush and had come back to retrieve it.

Peter's heart swelled each time he read the story. Poor Magic! Poor boy! He used to wonder what the boy's parents said to him when they came to pick him up from camp. Did they tell him that Magic had been missing all summer? Did they tell the boy about allergies and responsibility? When he reread the book as an adult, Peter wondered, why a toothbrush? Why come back for such an inexpensive and easily replaceable thing? But, no matter, thought Peter. The heart of the story was good. The dog that stopped at nothing to find his boy.

Magic, sit.

Magic sat.

Soon, Peter couldn't imagine his life without the dog. Magic slept at the foot of his bed and greeted him with a wagging tail every morning. When he went out, Magic was on the rug by the front door, already waiting for him to get back home. Magic was never intrusive, never impatient, never negative or anxiety provoking. He was equally happy to chase after a ball or simply to lie down quietly, for any amount of time, while Peter read or attended to his evening paperwork.

Peter began taking a daily walk, for exercise. Without a dog, he'd always felt rather foolish when he went walking about the neighborhood on his own, like an aimless child. He'd bought a set of walking hand weights to make it clear to his neighbors that he was exercising, but he could never bring himself to use them. Now, with a perfect dog on the end of his leash, he found himself stretching the walks into longer and longer excursions.

One sunny Saturday, Peter drove Magic to the beach and threw a frisbee for him. The two of them shared a swim and a picnic lunch, and then drove home listening to oldies radio. Magic fell asleep in the passenger seat and snored gently while Peter petted his soft head. For the first time in his career he began to use his

vacation days so he could take Magic to the beach as often as possible while the weather was still warm.

The routine of feeding, walking, and watering gave Peter's days a simple purpose. A bit of bacon on the kibble, a new path to explore, a dish of milk after dinner – it was so easy to make Magic's day a good day. And every time he did something good for Magic, Peter felt good about himself. He felt like a good person.

Of course, part of the reason Peter allowed himself to feel his joy so fully was because he knew it would come to an end.

His relationships with women, or even with his mother, might have been easier and more enjoyable if he had known from the beginning that they would not last either. The hope he had held for each relationship was what made it so unpleasant to think back on them. On every first date, he had hoped it was the last date—that this would be the woman for whom he would melt down his block of gold.

Only now could Peter see the enjoyment he had missed out on because he'd been fixated on the future.

Peter was ill all through October. It began with a low fever and sore throat, which developed into a hacking cough that kept him up at night and prevented him from healing. Even with strong prescriptions, he was unable to sleep for more than a half hour or so at a time, and had to take a leave of absence from work. He lived on soup deliveries and throat-coat tea and hardly left the house. He had never been so glad to have Magic.

Through his illness he always remembered to feed and water Magic, and to let him out twice a day, but the walks stopped. Magic didn't mind. He sat by Peter wherever he was, keeping his feet warm and licking his fingers when they hung down from the couch or over the side of the bed.

Midway through his illness, Peter got the chills, and took to keeping a wool blanket draped around his shoulders. One afternoon, he left the blanket on his bed and fell asleep shivering on the couch. Still, he slept deep and long, the kind of sleep he desperately needed, and when he woke up, he was warm and cozy on the couch. His dog was sleeping on the floor beside him and the blanket was covering his legs. Magic.

When he recovered, Peter realized that Magic had put down roots in his heart. He knew this was dangerous thinking, but despite himself, he began to wish that his

dog would be with him longer than a single year. A year seemed so short now that it was nearly halfway through. He tried to push these useless thoughts aside, and did his best to take up his old routines.

Magic loved the snow. When the first flakes began shaking out of the sky, he raced around the backyard, jumping up and snapping at the fluff. When Peter laughed, he jumped higher, then rolled on his back, tail wagging all the while. As the snow accumulated, their morning walks were transformed. Magic seemed to find every old corner fresh and exciting, and it gave Peter a thrill to watch him explore. He sometimes felt as though they were strolling together in an exciting foreign country, he the experienced traveler, Magic the wide-eyed first-time visitor. But, no. He lived here.

Peter planned to spend Christmas at home. He had family only a few hours away, an ancient uncle and some cousins and their kids. But this would be his only Christmas with Magic.

A few weeks before, he took the block of gold and the diamond out of the bank box. He would never have a better use for these. He brought them to a jeweler in town.

Somebody's about to get lucky, eh? said the jeweler when Peter put the

gold and the diamond on the glass countertop.

Do you do leather work as well? said Peter.

Some, said the jeweler. What did you have in mind?

I'd like to have this made into a collar, he said.

On Christmas morning, Peter presented Magic with his new collar. It had a wide, custom leather strap with a golden name plate attached, engraved, *Magic*. The dot of the *i* was the diamond. Magic wagged his tail and licked Peter's face as he fastened it around his neck.

I'll have this when you're gone, said Peter. That way, I'll never forget you.

By February, Peter was in a panic. He had called the One Year Dog company several times, and sent many emails, but everyone he spoke to directed him back to the disclaimer agreement. The dogs were bred to live one year, and that was that.

In war, this was a highly desirable feature because it allowed soldiers to send their animals into dangerous situations without hesitation. They were not bred to be lifetime companions. They were bred to be disposable.

They also worked out well for families, because most children soon tired of their pets, and then the parents were left with a decade or more of responsibility.

With a One Year Dog, the pet simply disappeared right around the time the child lost interest. And children have condensed memories. They would grow up with all the memories of having had a great dog.

But for Peter, caring for Magic had become his satisfaction, his joy, his reason to be. He tried to explain this to the people at the One Year Dog company, but it was no use. There was nothing they could do.

He tried not to let Magic sense his fear. He quit his job altogether to be with him as much as possible. Every day he took him on several long walks. He rented a beach cabin for a few weeks in April, and even though it was still cold, he hiked with him for hours on the empty beach, taking off his leash to let him chase after seagulls, and deer that wandered down from the treeline. Magic always came back. He wanted to be with Peter. Peter was his person.

Magic always slept under the covers in Peter's bed now. He had his own pillow. Peter tried to stay awake all night, only allowing himself a few moments of sleep in the early morning.

May first arrived like a death knell. There were only a few days left until Magic turned one. Peter prepared him elaborate meals – raw fillets, duck eggs, whipped cream – anything he could think of to give his dog pleasure. He ended

up making him sick.

When Magic vomited during their evening walk, Peter knelt on the sidewalk and wept. Magic nuzzled his neck. After a while, Peter stood up, and Magic led him home.

When he woke up the next morning, the empty collar was on the pillow beside him.

The Best Lovers in the World

They were sitting on their towel under the bleachers. The grass below, gone to seed and sticker burrs after a hot summer, was sharp as pins. Penny was a small girl with long brown hair, and Les was a thin boy with fat cheeks. If he was dirty, she didn't notice, not when they were thirteen. Steely blades of St. Augustine poked her legs through the sun starched towel, but Penny didn't mind. She was there with him, and he was holding her hand.

He brought it to his mouth and whispered into her fingers, meet me here again at gym.

Penny thought of his hands during all her morning classes, his hands and his eyes. At lunch, they kept watch on each other from across the cafeteria. During free period, Penny stood leaning with the other girls against the red brick wall, shifting from foot to nervous foot, in anticipation of gym class.

Finally, the seventh grade dressed out— in thick grey tshirts and blue polyester shorts, the girls with the waistband rolled twice— and rushed to sit in the gym, girls on one side, boys on the other, while the coach took attendance. Penny was the first girl on the floor, her long ponytail fixed high on her head, but she

didn't see Les. Her thighs stuck to the tacky gym floor, and sweat collected in the pits of her knees. She kept her eyes on the door to the boys' locker room, waiting for him to appear. When the coach finished marking the clipboard, he still wasn't there.

The sweat leaked down Penny's legs when she stood up. She took her time wiping it away, and left the gym as slowly as she could.

Walk with us, Penny, yelled a girl with blonde hair.

Penny waved her ahead. The rest of the class giggled and pushed their way past her towards the track where they would spend the hour in a coed promenade.

The plan was to duck under the bleachers. The coach came out to blow the whistle every fifteen minutes, but stayed in his office most of the hour. Still, they had to be discreet. Penny would go first, and Les would follow a few laps later.

But he wasn't there. The girls split off into pairs and triplets. The girl with blonde hair tried again to get Penny to join her group, but Penny shook her head no and kept walking alone. The boys were kicking rocks down the track, darting between the girls, looking for a chance to pull a ponytail or brush against a bare knee. But no one bothered with Penny, and nobody noticed when she slipped away.

She hoped she might find Les already under the bleachers, but no. She sat

on their towel and waited, peering through the aluminum slats, watching romance unfold without her. A group of popular boys were teasing the blonde girl and her friend. When the coach blew the second whistle and Les still hadn't come, she curled up and wept into the mildewy terrycloth.

You're crying, he said. She sensed him lie down beside her.

Penny pressed her tears into the towel, then sat up and said, No I'm not.

You thought I wouldn't come?

Penny pulled a golden blade of grass through the towel and peeled it to silk. Where were you?

My mom called, he said. I was talking to her in Coach's office.

What did she want? she said.

Nothing.

It's weird that she calls you at school, Penny said.

She has cancer, said Les.

Penny did not know this. She had never known anyone with cancer, and she was not sure how to respond.

Is she going to die? she said.

I don't know, said Les.

Penny squeezed his hand. She won't, she said. She'll get better. I know she

will.

They spent what time they had left lying on their backs with their fingers intertwined, listening to the sounds coming from the track. The sun shone through the bleacher seats, casting shadows across their bent knees. Penny was sure she had made him feel better. She was glad he decided to share something so personal with her. She thought it meant he loved her. She felt good about herself, laying there with him.

After school, Les was gone again. Sometimes he missed his bus to stand amongst the crowd of rowdy kids and watch Penny until she got picked up. But she didn't see him that day. She sat on the cold concrete steps in front of the school, waiting for her mother to come in the silver Windstar. When she arrived, she said she was taking Penny shopping.

I don't want to today.

We like shopping, her mother said. It was true. Shopping was what they liked to do together. They shopped at the Gap, at Eddie Bauer, at Old Navy, and occasionally at Target for the basics.

On the way to the mall, they saw Les walking by himself along the access road beside the highway. He didn't look up as they passed.

That poor boy, said Penny's mother. He looks lost.

Penny wondered if his mother really would die. He was always alone. She wanted to marry him.

One Bee, One Car

When I was in girl scout camp, some other girls and I climbed onto the roof of one of the cabins, pulled down our shorts and panties, and had a contest to see whose pee would travel down the roof the fastest. Another girl won, but mine was the strongest, widest streak. When the pee dried, bees came to lick the salt.

I thought of that when I saw the Big Gulp tipped over on the roof of my car. The stickiness made a wide streak down the driver's side window. There were bees in it.

It had already been a rotten day. Fell was mad at me about his travel mug. I'd used it for coffee the day before. I am never to put my coffee in his travel mug.

When I woke up and went into the kitchen that morning, I saw it sitting on the counter, and his tea steeping in a Ball jar. He was making two egg sandwiches on english muffins, but I knew I was in trouble.

I'm sorry, I said.

It leaves a lingering taint, he said.

I know, I said. I'm sorry. I washed it, I didn't think you'd notice.

Well, I did, he said. I don't want to have this conversation again, okay?

I could tell he was struggling to keep his voice calm. I felt terribly guilty and I'd been awake less than twenty minutes. I let out a big sigh.

I don't know why I did it, I said. I feel so uncertain of myself.

What do you mean? he said.

Just that, I said. I feel uncertain of myself.

I wiped my eyes, ate my breakfast and left for work.

I was lucky that whoever had spilled the Big Gulp didn't just take the car. I never lock my doors because here's a problem with the ignition. If I take the key out, it won't turn when I put it back in. As long as I leave it in, it turns fine. I can't afford to fix it, so I leave the key in. If someone wants to steal it, let them deal with it.

Fell says I don't care about the car. My grandmother gave it to me when she moved to the nursing home. He says that because I didn't have to pay for it, I'm not invested in it. His assumptions about me bother both of us.

I climbed over to the driver's seat through passenger side door. I didn't feel that any real harm had been done. But I used to piss on Girl Scout cabins for fun, so who am I?

I could send Fell a text with a picture of the Big Gulp, and the streak, and use words like *reckless* and *senseless* to show him that I did care about the car. But when I took my phone out, I saw that I already had a text from him. If I sent my upset text, I would either have to preface it or conclude it with some response to whatever he had texted. It would seem as though I was only texting about the soda as an afterthought.

So later that night, when I said, I'm so mad about what happened to my car, he would say, don't pretend you care about it, and I would say, I do care! that's why I sent you that text, but he would say, you wouldn't have even told me about it if I hadn't texted you first.

I put my phone back in my bag without reading his message.

From the driver's seat, I could see the bees up close. The underside of a bee is something you don't get to see too often.

When I was a kid, my aunt worked at a children's museum where they had an indoor beehive. The combs were flattened out between two big sheets of plastic with a clear tube that went through the wall, out to the wildflower field behind the building. You could see the bees dancing between the sheets of plastic and going in and out through the tube. I loved to see their bellies. Not that a bee

belly is exciting. It's just fuzz and scrambling legs. But as I said, its something you don't get to see too often, and I used to think that made it special.

I was trying to decide if getting to look at the undersides of bees through soda on the car window was at all special. It became important to me to make a decision about this. Was this experience noteworthy? Would anyone else want to know about the fuzzy bellies and the scrambling legs, or about how the mouthparts looked as they sucked soda? Would this make a good story? Or was it unimportant? Weird? Sad? I was deep into this debate with myself when I wondered what Fell's opinion might be. Then I thought, There is something wrong with me.

It's a thought I have a lot. I've said it out loud a few times to Fell, when I've done something that didn't work out right. Like when I broke the measuring cup. I dropped it in the sink and the handle came off.

There's something wrong with me, I said.

Don't say that, Fell said. It's not healthy to think like that.

It was as though I had always had a broken arm, and he simply said, your arm is broken. It was a realization, but not the helpful sort. It didn't erase the thought that there was something wrong with me. It just tacked itself on.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, I heard the Big Gulp roll down the roof of the car, then bounce off the trunk and fall to the ground with a satisfying plastic clatter. Another soda streak had washed down the back window. I got a little rush, watching the mess spread, but Fell would say I should have thrown the cup in the trash, or at least taken it off the car before I started driving. But with all those bees, what could I have done?

I got mad thinking about how Fell would assume I'd been careless. When he saw that second streak, he would use it as evidence. I couldn't go home with the car like that. I would have to stop and wash it even though I had just worked a nine hour shift. My unhealthy thinking sped me down the wide road away from Fell, and my low paying job, and my whole stupid life. I hoped this would be the day I had a seizure, while driving. That would show him.

The bees stuck with my car as I drove towards the highway, then blew away when I accelerated onto the entrance ramp. I was sad to see them go.

I pulled off the highway and went to the drive through car wash place down the street from our apartment. Fell had put quarters in my ashtray, for emergencies. This counted.

I drove onto the car conveyor, then parked and leaned my seat back. When the wash started, I relaxed. Rainbow suds coated the windshield, then the big blue rollers swept over me. That's when I saw the bee.

It was sitting on the dashboard, not moving, but I was trapped. There was no way to get it out of there, and nothing I could do until the carwash ended. I stayed as still as I could, keeping my eye on that bee. I got the feeling she was watching me too. I started feeling like maybe we were in this together. Me and this bee. She didn't want to be in there with me. If she stung me, she would die.

The carwash ended and I slowly reached to turn the key. But then a loud beep and a flash of green light agitated the bee. She flew straight at me. I screamed and jerked my hand away from the ignition, yanking the key out.

The bee disappeared into the backseat, and the car was quiet except for the beeping sound of the car wash letting me know it was time to drive away.

I put the key back into the ignition, but of course, it wouldn't turn. I tried as hard as I could, but I couldn't get it. A line of cars piled up and started beeping behind me.

What is wrong with me? I thought.

I took out my phone. I would have to call Fell. I opened his text from earlier and read it.

It said, I'm certain of you.

Good Day

The three of us were in the kitchen, my wife and son arguing with me about the milk. It was the hottest summer on record, and on top of that, a cicada year. We had the wooden kitchen table pressed against the window for air, and their exoskeletons clung to the screen beside us. Live green ones with chalky white sides buzzed against it, knocking their own old skins off into the mulch of dead things below. More of them surrounded the house, burdening the hawthorne and keeping up the chorus that faded for a moment, only to rise again the next moment to resonate throughout the house.

The thing with the milk: Miles knows how to pour his own milk, but he likes Theresa to do it. He plays his disability, and she buys it. He gets her to spoil him like you wouldn't believe. If it weren't for the Down syndrome, he would've been a genius.

He's thirteen years old, he should pour his own milk, I said for the fortieth time.

Theresa poured the milk. Miles took a gulp, then another, then another, then held the half-empty glass up for me to see.

I drink a lot of milk, he said.

Wipe your mouth, I said.

His small eyes were magnified behind the thick lenses he wears for his astigmatism. He made them as wide as his could and tilted his head towards me, to accentuate his plaintive face. It's hard for me to pour milk. Because of my Down syndrome.

It's all an act. If my father were alive, Miles would be put to work, forget all this nonsense schooling for someone like him. I know he's capable, so I push him. I don't let him get away with that stuff.

Don't give me that, I said. Fill your own glass next time.

It's hard for me, he whispered.

My phone rang and I stood up to fish it out of the front pocket of my jeans. It was the principal of his school. I stayed standing, picking at the window screen, as she told me that when classes started back up, Miles would finally be placed in a "regular" classroom. I was glad to get the call, sure, but it pissed me off how chipper she sounded, as though she were giving me a gift.

We found a teacher who's willing to take him on, she said.

Finally, I said. With my thumbnail, I scraped off a set of crackly barbed insect feet poking through the screen, then gave it a flick and watched the hollow

body fly into the darkness.

This is good news, said the principal.

Sure, I said. It's just that he should've been in there a year ago.

Well, we're ready to try it, she said. That's all I can give you. Now Miles has to show us that he's ready. We're all hoping he continues to show progress in his development.

He's developing great, I said. Thanks for the call. I hung up without waiting for her to say anything else. She's said things about Miles that I can't forget. Like that he's 'several grades behind level,' 'unprepared for the discipline of a regular class setting,' 'not aware of social cues.' I fought for him anyway. The public schools in this town are a joke, and the special classes they stick him in are the worst part of it. No money for fancy teachers or anything special that might help him learn. His classroom doesn't even have a computer. But at least Miles can read. There's meth-teeth people whose kids can't do that much, and they think their kids are better off than him.

Well? said Theresa. I turned around and looked at her. She has those round eyes that seem to sit in front of her other features, black and shiny like billiard balls. Miles would have eyes just like that, if it weren't for his condition. His are the same color, but they don't stand out the ways hers do. His are small and flat,

and pressed into his face so they seem even smaller. I nodded to Theresa, then turned to Miles.

This is great news for you, I said. You're going into regular fifth grade.

He stared at me and finished his milk.

* * *

The last few weeks of summer felt different after that phone call. Now they were leading up to something, or counting down as it were. We did what we could to help Miles prepare - vocal exercises, table manners, new shoes.

The evening before his first day, there was a rain storm. Warm humidity rushed in and made the whole house feel pleasantly damp, like the plant nursery where we used to buy sod each spring, before the price of water got so high. It felt as if the walls were made of mossy stone. Theresa made tortilla soup from some of the frozen elk I shot last fall, and served it with grated Velveeta and sour cream melting on top. Miles filled the blue pitcher with ice water and handed it to me. I poured it into three glasses. No milk that night. And no cicadas either; the rain had silenced the bugs for the first time all summer. We had a quiet dinner, listening to our spoons clink against our bowls and fat rain drops splattering on

the concrete outside the kitchen window.

After dinner, I went with Miles down the hall to his room to practice talking. We were both barefoot, walking silently on the cool glazed terracotta tiles. The tile floor is Teresa's favorite thing about our house. She and I both grew up with the peeling linoleum.

Miles' room is dark green with white trim that looks nice against the orange tiles. There is no overhead light, just a couple of lamps. Theresa had framed a painting he did in school, and it hangs on the wall above his bed. It's an oval orb with blue and white streaks on a black background, titled at the top in red paint, *Miles Planet*. It's a simple painting, but striking somehow, especially in the lamplight. I sat down on his bed and tried to get him to focus, but he wasn't having it.

Listen to me, I said. This is important. It's your first day tomorrow. Don't you want to be ready?

I'm ready, he said, then looked down and whispered, *I'm ready*.

Why do you do that? I said. Why do you whisper to yourself?

I'm not whispering, he said, but then he did it again, *I'm not whispering*.

Speak up, I said. You have to talk loud so people can hear you.

He kept mumbling softly. He can't help it, it's a tic he has, but it's always

bothered me. I just wanted him to practice pronouncing a few words, to be sure he wouldn't have trouble communicating on his first day. I kept thinking that if would just quit whispering, he'd be a heck of a lot more normal.

One more time, I told him. Say, 'May-I-please-be-excused.'

I'm done, he said. *I'm done.*

Say it, I said. Say, 'May I please be excused.'

I doesn't want to! he shouted. There was no use trying to force him, so I got up. I was leaving his room when I heard him whisper, *I doesn't want to.*

I turned around and said, You *don't* want to.

Stop! he shouted.

Say 'I *don't* want to,' I said, trying not to shout. Say it.

He went catatonic. His held his breath and kept his whole body completely motionless, eyes open but vacant behind his glasses. I left him like that. Theresa was standing in the hallway when I closed his door.

What was that about? she said.

He's frozen, I said.

What did you say to him? she said.

What were you? Spying? I said.

She followed me back to the kitchen. The rain was getting lighter. The

cicadas were still silent. I opened a bottle of beer and poured half into a juice glass for her. We sat down together at the table. We were on our second when she said, What if he can't handle it?

He'll be fine, I said.

But what if something goes wrong and he doesn't know what to do?

Something with the other kids. Or if he can't keep up.

I'm sick of that attitude, I said. You sound like the goddamn principal.

He'll never get anywhere if we treat him like a retard.

Theresa looked like I'd hit her in the face.

It's true, I told her. We know it's true.

She stood up quick and knocked her glass over. It smashed on the tiles and the tiny shards scattered around our barefeet. She tiptoed her way out of the glass and left me sitting there alone.

Are you going to get this? I called after her.

Sometimes I wish that I was the one with a diagnosis. That I could say, it's hard for me. But just the way that sounds in my head makes me want to tell myself to suck it up, so I do. Miles doesn't have to do that. He's got a clear reason when things don't work out.

The day he was born, the doctors took him away and didn't bring him back

to us for hours. Theresa wept the whole time, afraid her baby was dying. When they finally brought him back, his face was bleeding. He was born with these long nails that they hadn't bothered to trim. That's what really got Theresa, that they let him scratch his face up like that. But me, I was focused on the diagnosis.

See the way his eyes are formed? said the doctor. See how small his ears are?

The rain quit and the pink evening sun came out from behind the clouds. As if they had never been interrupted, the cicadas kicked up to full volume. I got the broom from behind the refrigerator, and did my best to get all the glass up while trying not to step on any. The beer soaked the bristles and I got a sliver in my heel.

I opened another bottle and hobbled outside. I sat on the damp porch steps, letting the water seep through the seat of my pants as I picked at the sliver in my foot. I got it out and a trickle of blood dripped onto the steps. Despite the rain, the wet concrete was still radiating heat from the sun earlier in the day. The insect hum and the steam coming off the muddy ground in the twilight made my skin itch. A glistening cockroach came out and tried to run under my legs. I stomped it reflexively with my good foot and ruined its glossy brown wings.

I stood up to wipe my foot off in the grass. The lawn was all hay and

sticker burrs. Matted down from the rain, it was a perfect home for flying roaches. We'd find them in our slippers soon. Our bedroom window is right by the front door. I reached over, picked a soggy cicada shell off the screen, and rolled it back and forth between my fingers, crushing its torso. I always wonder if they recognize their old skins once they're out. If they take one last look before they leave those perfect empty images of themselves behind.

I could hear Theresa inside. I leaned against the house, listening to her cry.

When it got dark out and my foot had stopped bleeding, I came in. I found Miles in his room playing a video-game. I sat back down on his bed, under the *Miles Planet* painting, crossing my legs and leaning way to one side to avoid getting his covers too wet from my soaked jeans. He took one look at me and then turned off his game.

You don't have to do that, I said. It's okay, keep playing.

What's wrong? he said, coming to sit by me and putting a small warm hand on my knee.

Nothing, I said.

What's wrong? He looked into my face with those plaintive bug eyes.

I'm just having a bad day, I said.

He let that sink in for a while, shook his head, and said, There's no bad

day. *There's no bad day. There's no bad day.*”

My son is slow. Sure. But sometimes slowness and enlightenment look awful similar.

Thanks, buddy. I got up and turned his game back on. Miles? I said. Do you *want* to be in the regular class?

He shrugged and said, Sure.

What do you want? I said.

Play my game, he said.

I left him to it and went back to the kitchen.

Soon I heard Theresa come out and go into his room. She was with him for a while, then I heard his door open and shut again. Her barefeet were silent on the cool tiles as the house lights clicked off one by one behind her, until I sensed her standing over my shoulders.

I was watching a live cicada, trapped on its back on the window ledge, buzzing and flicking its round body into the air, unable to right itself. The stripes on its sides flashed white each time it tried to flip up. Theresa was standing above me. She could murder me, I thought. Smash my head with something heavy and be done with it.

Did you get all the glass? she said.

Most of it.

We have to relax, she said. He'll have a good day. He'll have a good day.