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We Heard Our Voices with the Hyenas and Other Stories: The Community of Strangers

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We Heard Our Voices with the Hyenas and Other Stories:

The Community of Strangers

Rebekah Washburn Olson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

We Heard Our Voices with the Hyenas and Other Stories: The Community of Strangers

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Community is often defined by the familial or residential relationships we have, such as family, neighbors or coworkers. But there is another vital and often unobserved community among strangers. These relationships are often haphazard, temporary relationships formed in a moment of necessity—customers trapped in a convenience store by a storm, orphaned runaway teenagers who band together for safety on the streets, miners trapped in the rubble of a collapsed mine, etc. These communities are spontaneous and often undefined, but have the potential to reveal more about our insecurities, reflexes, and emotional capacities than almost any other relationship. For many, they are the catalysts for transformation, epiphany and hope. The stories in this short fiction collection illustrate characters, settings and tensions that revolve around the formation, rejection or elevation of these vibrant and unfamiliar communities.

Keywords: short stories, fiction, community, strangers

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Critical Introduction

In August of 2010, in the middle of a typical workday, thirty three miners were suddenly entombed by half a mile of dirt and rubble as the Chilean San Jose mine collapsed around them. It took weeks to confirm if the men were even alive, a detail that still makes me shudder—what could they say to one another? What could they possibly do in the dark silence? When contact was finally made between the men below ground and the rescuers, newscasters from around the world traveled to the remote mine in Chile’s Atacama Desert to document the sixty nine day rescue of “Los 33.” I remember watching the footage as it was broadcasted and reading about the progress of the rescue in the newspapers. Five years later, I’m sure most people still remember the way we waited then, that we all wondered how the men endured the dark and dirt. When they were finally brought up one by one I celebrated with the rest of the world, of course, but I was also tremendously curious to hear the details of their abnormal confinement. How do thirty three relative strangers endure sixty nine days of living burial with one another?

My curiosity was never fully be satisfied, however, because as the miners explained, they had “taken an oath of silence not to reveal certain details of what occurred down the mine, particularly during the early weeks of desperation” (“Freed Chile Miner”). The only information we do have is that the men operated under a democratic voting system they developed among themselves, took turns in mandatory searches of their surroundings in order to find possible escapes, and instituted times for the older, experienced miners to teach and uplift the less experienced workers (“Freed Chile Miner”). They had, in essence, established a small community for themselves half a mile below the feet of the rest of the world.

The details of these miners’ accident—the sudden and insulating trauma between strangers, the deliberate choice to organize themselves, the eventuality and intimacy of their new codes,

oaths and habits—are perfect illustrations of what has motivated much of my craft choices throughout the Creative Writing Program. In my short fiction, I have often wondered how I might illustrate the way strangers, in a rather short amount of time and under unusual circumstances, can suddenly become familiar, even intimate, dependents of one another. Throughout my thesis project on these haphazard communities I have been drawn to create characterizations and plot tensions that attempt to answer questions, such as, “Who decides to step outside of social constraints in order to create a community? What circumstances motivate strangers to unite? Who might even reject unity during trauma and choose to remain alone?” These questions have ultimately led me to explore many different characters, settings, tensions, and point-of-view narrations. Therefore, while all of the pieces in the collection represent some form of the same struggle to create unity among strangers, the stories themselves can vary from a female first-person narrator in South Africa to a third-person narration of a young man’s misadventures in Colombia.

Ultimately, the stories in this thesis project offer a slightly different perspective for the meaning of “community.” Traditionally, the term meant the familial or residential communities we encounter in our own lives—extended family, neighborhoods, book clubs, etc. But how do you define the relationship and the hierarchy between the thirty three men in the mine, for example? They were co-workers, of course, but the community they created a half mile under the rubble was not dependent on the constraints of their employment. In fact, the circumstance they found themselves in was entirely new and uncharted, leading them to ultimately reorganize and redefine everyone’s responsibilities within their group. This community, then, has less to do with proximity or even friendship and more to do with dependency, survival and endurance. Barbara

Kingsolver, in an interview regarding her choices in fiction, explained her own reasons for highlighting community when she said,

I like to write about relationships between people and the things that attach people, rather than the things that drive them apart... We celebrate Independence day and heroes like Charles Lindbergh who flew across the ocean all alone. We even celebrate the single mother who can manage to do everything with no help. And I feel no kinship with that cultural value... I celebrate dependency. I love the idea that a lot of people have contributed to my life... (Perry 154)

Community then becomes a group of people, even mere strangers, who have “contributed to [each other’s] life.” This contribution could be as extreme as the Chilean miners’ survival or as common as the comradery between strangers in a long DMV line. Therefore, my stories revolve around tensions that highlight the moments in which characters must reorganize social constraints in order to endure, or even just understand, their new social community.

Other fiction writers have touched on this theme as well, highlighting characters dependent on rather untraditional communities. For example, Anthony Doerr, in his short story “The River Nemunas,” creates a rather unusual alliance between a lonely, American teenager and an old, mute Lithuanian neighbor. As the orphan teenager, Allison, grieves her parents’ death and adjusts to life with her grandfather in Lithuania, she and the old woman next door, Mrs. Sabo, begin to fish along the river behind their trailers every day. Over time, despite the fact that they rarely speak, Allison and Mrs. Sabo form an unspoken connection, a relationship that sustains and comforts them both. Without the formalities of a typical introduction and the societal expectations between most neighbors—for example, there was no official name swap or “where-are-you-from,” etc.—Allison finds herself more intimately connected to and aware of

Mrs. Sabo than anyone else in her life at that point. In fact, Allison observes that “Even when there’s not much of a person left, you can still learn things about her. I learn that Mrs. Sabo likes the smell of cinnamon. I learn she perks up any time we round this one particular bend in the river. Even with her little gold-capped teeth she chews slowly and delicately, and I think maybe her mom must have been strict about that...” (173). As Allison continues to think about her relationship with the old Lithuanian neighbor, she eventually admits that “[At night she] can hear Mrs. Sabo’s oxygen machine wheezing and murmuring...In half-dreams it’s a sound like the churning of the world through the universe” (174). For Allison, a lonely, grieving foreigner, the sound of the old woman’s oxygen tank—a sound which for most would be unsettling or even morbid—becomes as reassuring as the natural movement of life itself. What some would label an odd companionship between strangers is in fact a sustaining and vibrant community.

My personal exploration of community altered throughout the project. Initially, I was only interested in illustrating the moment people must step outside of formalities, the crucial transition from stranger to community. “Deep,” which was the first story I wrote in the collection, began almost like a case study—a distant third-person narration of three women trapped in a gas station, much like the thirty three confined miners. Who would initiate conversation between the women? Under unusual circumstances, which habits of conventional politeness would be ignored? What tensions would arise as they transitioned from outsider to community? While the story has been revised several times throughout the writing process—adjusting characterizations, altering the third-person narration, re-evaluating the underlying tension—these initial curiosities are still there. “Deep,” tries to answer what was hidden about the Chilean miners’ experiences in 2010 during those first traumatizing weeks. As such, the story became a catalyst, or a springboard, for much of this thesis project’s later motivations.

But, like most writing projects, the focus slowly shifted for each story. When I was required to write a re-telling of a story for one of my fiction workshops, for example, my husband had just started working full-time in his career. Much of the doubt and burden that the protagonist, Habib, expresses in the Jonah re-telling, “Ventre,” stem from conversations I had with my husband about his stresses in corporate America—the responsibility he feels to distant yet powerful authorities, the immediate impulse to leave, the ultimate and overpowering decision to provide for his family. While the tensions and consequences of my husband’s experience are dramatized in “Ventre,” the motivations of a foreigner in a strange land are still highlighted—instead of a husband in a powerful corporation it is a new doctor in a world at war. The question in “Ventre” then became less about a single moment of transition, as “Deep” illustrated, and more about the analysis of motivations and compulsions. What will drive Habib to endure, to keep trying? When he’s forced to leave familiarity, what will motivate him to survive, to protect others?

Besides the influences of my personal life, the project of community was also largely affected by the novels and short stories that I studied within the Creative Writing program. Many of my pieces, for example, explore the desperate yearning for not only a community but a stable family structure, a theme derived mainly from my curiosity with Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. In McCarthy’s novel, the father and son form a community separate from the rest of the world in order to survive, yet it is impossible to absolutely shield their family from the dangers of those around them. The desperate struggle of the father to shield his son in McCarthy’s novel made me wonder if a similar struggle could be seen not only in a traditional family but in a community of strangers. In my piece “Four Sisters,” the first person narrator is a young, abandoned teenager who yearns to create a family-like community with three other homeless women. However, as

she attempts to protect the other women against the pain of their pasts, she ultimately realizes that there are threats to her new family that she cannot control. One of the last stories that I wrote in the collection, “We Heard Our Voices with the Hyenas,” inverts the struggle seen in McCarthy’s novel—a family guarding against the world—and puts the main tension within the family. The unnamed protagonist in the piece narrates her attempts to connect with her father after the death of her mother. As the father and daughter tip-toe around the grief they both feel but cannot articulate, the daughter ultimately finds healing outside of her father in the relationships she builds with a feisty South African maid and her uncle.

While the impulses behind the stories in this collection have evolved over time, the driving question has remained the same--what is the importance of emphasizing a community of strangers? I believe the moments in which we are forced to reorganize ourselves within a new and temporary community have the potential to reveal more about our insecurities, reflexes, and emotional capacities than almost any other time. These haphazard and sudden communities often go against most social constraints and habits, forcing us to consider ourselves and others from foreign perspectives. They are powerful instigators of transformation, epiphany, and cultural diagnosis. Whether we recognize these haphazard communities by their sudden impetus, such as the three women trapped by the storm in “Deep,” or by the moment they are rejected and dissolved, such as the disillusioned detachment we see in the protagonist of “The Man without a Mirror,” we see how the forced connection with strangers propels us to change. Each of these communities represents the choice we have to either celebrate dependency—to seek out those confined in the rubble with us—or remain silent in the dark. As for me, I choose to add my voice to their echoes.

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Ventre

“The waters compassed me about, even to the soul: the depth closed me round about, the weeds were wrapped about my head.”

Jonah 2:5

When Habib stepped into the road in front of the Santa Marta Airport his shoes sank into the mud up to the knobby bone in his ankle. Two women selling odds and ends on the concrete beside him clucked their tongues.

“You see,” one whispered to the other in Spanish. “He is not Colombian. To step into the mud, and in white shoes...”

The other, on a bucket beside her, swatted at flies over the plantains. “Then he is a tourist,” she said, raising an eyebrow and pointing at the man with her chin. “And he needs new shoes.”

“Meester!” she cried in English, standing up to wave a long, saggy arm at the assortment of plastic sandals they sold. “Meester, we have shoes!”

Habib sighed. The clinic in Philadelphia felt very far away.

While he scraped the mud from his shoes on the concrete the women watched him. Habib was short, shorter than any of the other medical students in his year. His name and darker skin often led those in Philadelphia to believe he was Indian, but he wasn't. Habib was a name his mother found in a newspaper, a paper half submerged in mud. He was Colombian, he was home.

The women watched with lazy curiosity, one standing and the other seated. Once he had both shoes on and was clapping the mud from his hands, the first woman hobbled to his side.

“Meester, you need shoes?”

Habib smiled but shook his head. In Spanish he replied, “No, thank you. I can wash them.” Both women blinked in surprise, and then laughed and laughed, patting his shoulders, his back, his head.

“Where are you from?” they asked. When he just smiled weakly and looked at his hands, the women decided not to press the issue. They patted his shoulders again. “Welcome,” they said, and then walked back to their buckets.

Habib waited an hour for a taxi, a duffle bag with a few clothes and his medical supplies tucked under his arm. He looked down the road to the north. That’s where he was expected.

The medical clinic for the Red Cross was in the middle of the northern hills of Colombia, an area lush with bamboo, ivory nuts, and orchids. He had tried to apply to residencies everywhere else but here—the Cleveland Clinic, Duke University Hospital, Venice Regional Medical Center—but couldn’t outshine the competition. In the end, he used his birth certificate and fluent Spanish to secure a last minute position with doctors in the Colombian Red Cross Division. The country was always at war with itself in some way, and American medical volunteers and professionals had been in the country for years. Habib had avoided the memories and mud of his country for more than fifteen years, and within thirty minutes of his plane landing both were already firmly secured to his white American shoes.

When Habib was a boy, Colombia was always red. Mud, beans, blood. When he was nine years old, his father came into their shanty with a rusty revolver in the basket of goods he brought back from the village. Habib remembered that he watched his father’s short, square fingers as he lifted the gun and turned to his wife. “Sophia,” his father said, “I will go to Riohacha in the morning.” He put the gun high on a shelf above their matted blankets. “My brother is there. He’s in trouble.” Habib remembered that his mother stiffened, then turned away.

She picked up a plantain with her thin fingers and as she peeled away the thick membrane from the fruit she nodded her head without speaking. Three weeks later, when his father's body was sent home, they could not recognize it. Habib had to peel away the clothing before they could wash him for burial.

More than twenty years later, the memory still sent a dull buzzing down his spine and he shivered, looking away from the road toward his home.

When the taxi still had not arrived and the sun began to set, the two women pulled out great tarps to roll their goods in, placing the large parcels on their broad, bony backs. As they walked away one turned and called out to him.

“If you want to get somewhere, you should cross the street and ask the truck driver. He is taking a load of laborers to the fields in the south, and will help you if you ask.” She turned and waved her hand over her head. “Or wait for the bus heading north. It should be here when the sun sets.” Then she hobbled to catch up to the other, their bodies bent from the weight of their loads, old women bobbing through the crowd like wounded crabs.

Habib looked to the horizon and determined that the bus should be there in a few minutes. In just a few minutes he would head north and arrive at the clinic by midnight.

He followed the road with his eyes, the red of the mud diminishing into a needle-thin line as it got closer and closer to the horizon.

Red. It would always be red here.

His shoes, his father, his profession.

All red.

He felt the buzz in his spine again and realized, finally, that it was fear. He knew he was not strong, or talented, or determined. He'd known it a long time, but in this place he could not

hide from it. His father, and eventually his mother, died believing he would save his family, but he became a doctor to escape.

He was a doctor, and he was afraid of blood.

At this thought, he turned away from the horizon, away from the direction of the clinic and away from the bus that would carry him there. He couldn't get back on the plane but he could stall until he figured out what to do.

He stepped gingerly through the mud until he found his way to the other side of the road to the truck. A tall man, taller than any Colombian he had ever seen, stood at the back of the vehicle, connecting a large metal frame and tarp cover to the bed. As Habib approached him the man stopped, wiped the sweat from his sun-tanned forehead, and put a hand on his bony hip.

"A storm is coming tonight, a large one," The man said, grabbing the tarp cover and shaking it to check that it was secure. After a moment he wiped his hands on his pants and pointed at Habib's luggage. "They sent you over." It was more a statement than a question, but Habib nodded.

"The women said you were going south." Habib said. "I'll pay you to take me with you."

At that moment a group of young men in thin, faded shirts and dirt-stained jeans came out of the building in front of the truck, laughing and raising dust.

"If you can find a place in the truck," the driver said. "I'll take you."

Balancing himself on tools and old woolen blankets between the others, Habib gripped the side of the truck bed and listened to the conversations of the young men. The ribbed tarp above the truck shielded them from the cool night breeze. Most of the men casually ignored him. He could tell they had worked together for a while. They had a way of relying on nods and winks to tell jokes, hiding the punch line that everyone knew except for Habib. The sun set over the

hills and the jostling of the truck combined with the friendly banter of the laborers brought Habib to a fitful sleep.

In his dreams he saw himself at the clinic in Philadelphia, the blinds of the windows cutting strips of sunlight across I.V. drips, rough thin blankets, grimaced faces, empty chairs. He marveled at his hands, which seemed bloated and pink. He watched himself lean over a patient, a clipboard at his side. With a bump of the truck his dream shifted, and Habib found himself holding a torn cloth, blood on his hands. "They took her behind the trees," he heard behind him. He turned to face the voice and watched himself move as if in water. The cloth in his hand rippled in unseen currents. There was no one behind him but water flowed under the door of the office and swirled around his feet. Habib could hear the sound of the truck and the men, but could not escape the foggy hold of his dream. "Your mother was at the post office waiting for your letter and they took her behind the trees," he heard again. In his dream he took a step back and tripped. He stumbled, looked behind him, and saw his mother standing beside the hospital bed, her eyes closed, her fingers long and thin and clasped in front of her chest, her lips moving as if saying a silent prayer. She opened her eyes, looked at Habib, and said nothing.

"Amigo!"

Habib startled awake. The men were gathered around him in the truck. Habib felt his own forehead and closed his eyes. Rain thumped against the tarp above them.

"Here." A man across from him held out a bottle of clear liquid. "To bring you back to earth."

Habib nodded weakly, took the liquor, but did not drink it.

Another man, nearer to the cab, whispered under his breath, "He was whimpering like a child. Like a stray dog."

The man who gave Habib the bottle beat the side of the truck and pointed at the man near the cab. "Shut your mouth, Luis!" Luis jumped at the unexpected reprimand. After a moment he curled his lip in disgust and shrugged.

"Drink it," the man prompted Habib again. "It will help. I'm Ramon."

Habib shook his hand and took a swig from the bottle. He hadn't had a drink for ten years. He felt the liquor reach his fingertips and buzz beneath his nails.

"You're not a laborer," Ramon stated.

Habib nodded. "I'm a doctor for the Red Cross. I just got here from America this evening."

The men around him started to whisper excitedly. Habib lowered the bottle and looked around the group.

"Excuse us," Ramon said. "But we were just talking about the revolt in the north. We all have family there. We heard a doctor would be coming."

"It's getting worse there," another man whispered. "They say the revolt has left hundreds dead. They are left to bleed in the streets. The volunteers refuse to leave the clinic."

Luis brought a cigarette to his lips and turned to Habib, his eyes narrowed to thin dark slits. "If you are the doctor for the Red Cross clinic in the north, why are you heading south?"

The men were silent. Habib felt their eyes on his face, his shaking hands, his chest as he breathed. He looked down at the liquor he held. He thought of his dream, his own bloated hands. He thought of the bloody strip of cloth rippling at his side. He looked up at the men watching him.

"Because I am a coward," he said.

The wind whipped the truck around the slick mud road and the rain fell so steadily and violently that a metallic hum began to fill the truck bed.

“You should not be here,” Ramon said quietly.

Luis grabbed the metal frame of the tarp above his head and stood up in the truck bed. “This man is running away from our families. There are people dying because of him.” He looked at Habib, the cigarette between his thumb and index finger now. “You can be a man and choose to go, or we will choose for you.”

The men looked from Luis to Habib. There was a clap of thunder and the truck swerved in the mud. Each man grabbed the truck side. “Perhaps we should vote,” one man ventured. He looked at Luis. “To be fair.”

Luis sniffed and sat back down.

“Please,” Habib said shakily, putting out his hand to calm the men. “You—you don’t need to vote. I will get out myself.”

Ramon shook his head. “You can wait until we reach Cienaga. That’s where we stop tonight.”

“No,” Habib shook his head. “Luis is right. I deserve this.” He pointed at the storm, at the wind whipping the rain against the tarp. “I’m afraid of the north and the people there. I’ve been running away when I should be rescuing your families.”

Luis folded his arms across his chest and inhaled deeply from his cigarette. “Then jump,” he said. “Prove you’re not a dog.”

“Luis!” Ramon shouted. “That proves nothing—what’s the point of forcing him north if he dies before he gets there! We will stop at the next town.”

It was silent in the bed of the truck. The other men looked from Ramon to Luis, both men sat rigidly staring at the other from opposite sides of the truck. No one looked at Habib.

Eventually, Luis exhaled a puff of smoke and closed his eyes. “Do what you want. I don’t care about stray dogs. They carry disease.” Ramon stood up in a rage, one fist raised and the other rested protectively on Habib’s shoulder.

Habib looked down at Ramon’s hand. It was the hand on his shoulder that was the worst insult of all. In that instance he knew how the men viewed him. Despite Ramon’s kindness, he was not equal to them. More to prove something to himself than anything else, he pushed his way to the end of the truck, knocking knees with several men, and jumped head first into the storm.

The hum from the truck was instantly replaced by the gush of wind and rain. When his face hit the mud he felt the shock of sudden pain as his cheek bone and jaw absorbed the impact of his fall. He rolled violently for several feet, his arms and legs whipping wildly. When his mind caught up with him, he pulled in his arms and straightened his legs in an effort to reduce damage. He slowed down a few moments later, mud caked over his clothes, in his nose, his hair. He turned his head to look for the truck. Through the rain he made out red brake lights in the distance, and heard distant shouting. He did not move. He allowed the rain to beat his bruised face. A moment later, the lights disappeared and the sound of the truck’s engine bounced haphazardly through the wind.

Habib forced himself to stand. With the adrenaline he still had he began walking down the road in the opposite direction, rain pounding his shoulders, mud between his teeth. As he took a few steps he felt the air begin to vibrate with the sound of another truck. He saw the

headlights move over his back and light the path before him. With a screech, the truck swerved to a stop beside him.

“Are you crazy!” the driver shouted through rain. Habib was relieved to see it was not the driver from before. “I almost hit you!”

Habib raised a hand and apologized. “Do you have room for me in your truck? You’re heading north, no?”

The driver was a fat man, with splotched, stretched skin. Empty beer cans rolled around his passenger seat.

“You have a strange accent,” the fat man said.

“I’m Colombian. I studied in America. I need to go north.”

The driver rolled his small black eyes at Habib and jabbed a finger toward the uncovered truck bed. “You’re too dirty to sit up here. You can ride in the back as far as Santa Marta.”

Habib walked slowly to the back and pulled himself into the truck bed. A second later the driver sped off, the tail whipping in the mud. He struggled to grab the side of the truck. The driver seemed unaware of the wild slipping and jerking of the truck in the mud and wind. Habib felt himself grow green from the shifts and jerks of the drive and threw up as he grappled for a steady hand hold. Through the cab window the driver laughed and called out to Habib. “How are you feeling, little minnow? Are you done swimming in Colombia? Does it storm like this in los Estados Unidos?” He laughed heartily to himself again and drank from a can in his car.

Habib trembled from the effort to hold on in the rain. As the truck swerved along the road, Habib closed his eyes and wondered what time it was.

As the truck sputtered wildly up one of the hills a flash of lightening illuminated the entire landscape. The driver gasped and choked on his beer, twisting the steering wheel violently

to the left. Habib clung desperately to the rusted holes in the bed of the truck as it flipped through the rain. He felt the tires under him lift off the ground, his body floating in the tumble of dirt and metal. When the truck crashed a few yards downhill, it landed upside down, the cab crushed and the bed of the truck caging Habib in a box of metal and mud. Habib still held to the rusted holes in the bed of the truck, which were now above him, and realized he was still screaming.

When they found him later, Habib did not initially tell them his name. They found the truck three hours after the crash, when the storm had stopped, and it took eleven men to lift it enough for him to crawl out. They gathered around him, gently patting him on the back as he stumbled between them.

“You are a real hombre,” they said excitedly. “Trapped in a smoking truck for three hours!” They watched him intently, waiting for him to explain.

Habib looked at the mud on his clothes, his white shoes. He looked down at his hands, bleeding and raw. When he looked up at the crowd of men around him he noticed the pink of the distant horizon and imagined his hands in a cool, clear bucket of water, the blood trailing away from his skin as naturally as water colors expanding across a sodden sheet of paper.

Deep

The storm started in the late afternoon with a rosy glow, just a blush on the horizon. However, in a moment the colors deepened to a greenish purple, an airy bruise, and the sky vibrated in the hum of humidity. Before the violence of rain and wind there was only the hint of distant thunder, a rolling growl, and it was at this point that people walked indoors, a wary eye over their shoulder.

Martha leaned forward in her seat to peer through the rain at her headlights on the road. When she could see nothing but the frenzied blur of her windshield wipers she sighed and made her way to the parking lot of a small convenience store. She waited in the car for a moment, listening to the quick, heavy thud of rain. Outside her windshield she could just barely make out the shapes of distant trees beyond the store, shapes bending and thrashing in unison with the wind and rain. It was getting darker every few minutes as the storm intensified. After a moment, once she determined that the storm was there to stay, she began to gather her things. She checked her watch and a moment later threw open the car door. As she ran towards the convenience store in the downpour she gritted her teeth and hugged her things to her chest. Just as she rushed through the door she heard both a tremendous clap of thunder and the tinkle of a bell somewhere near the back of the store.

She brushed the hair from her face and stamped her feet on the plastic mat by the door. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the lighting but soon noticed another woman in the store leaning against the counter near the cash register and cigarettes. She was wearing a yellow and green apron, old tennis shoes and no make-up. She looked to be in her twenties, maybe a little older.

“Hello,” Martha said quietly, nodding and wiping the rain from her arms. The woman smiled and nodded back. Martha, after a moment of silence, then walked to the nearest aisle and began to look over the canned peanuts and beef jerky, more out of habit than anything else. When she felt the woman still watching her Martha looked up and smiled weakly. “I’m not really here to buy something,” she said. “I’m parked outside, actually.” She pointed behind her. “I just wanted to wait out the storm, maybe? Use the restroom?”

“Sure, go right ahead. I figured as much,” the other woman said, stepping away from the counter and clasping her hands in front of her. “The bathroom’s just down there, on the left.” As Martha smiled and put her purse over her shoulder the woman added, “I’d use the men’s restroom for now. The woman’s has a problem with the door.”

When Martha returned, the woman was sitting on the counter, swinging her legs and looking at her nails. Martha started to walk to the back of the store when the other woman suddenly noticed her and jumped off the counter, extending her hand.

“I’m Jillian,” she said.

“Oh,” Martha stopped. “I’m Martha.”

“Martha? You don’t hear that very much anymore.”

“Oh. Really?”

Jillian smiled and crossed her arms. “Well, nice to meet you,” she said. Martha smiled and looked toward the windows. The storm outside had intensified and it was difficult to even see her car anymore. Jillian brushed her bangs from her eyes and shrugged.

“It’s getting pretty rough out there, huh? We’ve been waiting for the storm since lunch. I could smell it as soon as I stepped outside to take the trash out.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah—hold on.” Jillian turned slightly and looked toward the farthest aisle. “Miss Cyndee, we have company.”

A short, pink-faced old woman poked her head out from behind the aisle and looked directly at Martha. “You should get away from the windows,” the old woman said.

Martha blinked and then turned slowly to look outside again, taking a small step closer to Jillian as she did.

“I’ve heard stories,” the old woman continued, “about windows popping from their frames in storms like this.” She nodded her head and looked from Martha to Jillian. Then she suddenly straightened up and clapped her hands above her fist-sized face. “Pop!” she shouted. “Just like that.”

Jillian nodded and smiled at Martha again. “She should know. She owns the place.”

Martha nodded, then tried to smile at the old woman. Miss Cyndee raised an eyebrow and disappeared behind the aisle again.

“I work here part-time, normally,” Jillian continued, motioning for Martha to lean against the counter with her. “Especially during school when my kid’s gone. But I pull some full-time hours sometimes. How old are you? Do you work full-time somewhere?”

“I’m an actuary,” Martha said.

Jillian nodded and wiped at her mouth. “Okay, sure. I think I’ve heard of that. So you have an office then?”

“Yes. I share one.”

“Well, that’s neat. You have a place for your picture frames and everything? That’s great.”

Martha looked down at her shoes and then back toward the dark windows.

“How long do you think it will last?” Martha asked.

“Maybe an hour. It’s hard to tell.” Jillian said. “Are you in a hurry to get somewhere? You can lean against this with me, by the way. We just have one chair behind the counter, but we can both lean against this for a while.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“So. Are you in a hurry or something?”

“Well, not particularly. I’m really just on my way home, but—well, I have about an hour in my trip so, you know.”

“So you’re not from here. I thought so.”

The old woman then shouted from her position several aisles away. “Now, just stay here in the store,” she said calmly. “Away from those windows. This storm is going to shake for a bit and then afterward we have to wait for the police to pick up the trees.” She paused a moment. “And they have to make sure no one has escaped from the prison during the whole commotion,” she added.

Jillian put a hand on Martha’s arm and shook her head. “Don’t worry about the prison,” she whispered. “It’s farther than Miss Cyndee thinks.” She winked.

Martha smiled and looked at her shoes. After a few minutes she grabbed some almonds from her purse and held them out to Jillian.

“Hey, thanks.” Jillian grabbed a handful and spread them across her palm. “I used to have a huge bag of almonds that I kept in my car.”

“Oh?”

Jillian picked up an almond, studied it between her fingers and then popped it in her mouth. “I left the car door open while I ran back inside to get my water bottle one time and a

raccoon ran off with them. Just hopped in the car and grabbed the bag like he'd been planning it for months."

A small branch flew against the window and they both jumped.

"Popped from their frames!" Miss Cyndee shouted from behind the canned beans.

"It's not a prison, really." Jillian said suddenly. "The one I was talking about before. More like a small jail. There's only one person in there now. A man. And I'm pretty sure it's for murder." She raised an eyebrow at Martha. "He's been in there since last week and they say," she looked around her. "They say he killed his own wife for a lover."

Martha shivered and looked down at the drops of water dripping from her sweater. "That's horrible," she said quietly.

"I know. I just heard about it."

Miss Cyndee didn't come out from behind the aisle but she spoke loudly enough for the women to hear.

"His name is Henry," she said. "He used to come in here to buy boiled eggs before his evening shift. I knew him as a child." She was silent for a moment. "He always said 'thank you.'"

Martha smiled.

Jillian munched excitedly on her almonds. "See, doesn't that just give you the creeps. He was probably a nice guy—the politest man you'll ever meet—and here he is, a murderer." She whistled and looked out the window. "I wonder what his lover thinks about all this." She turned to Martha. "You know what I mean? Just think about it. Could you love someone for that?"

Martha blinked at Jillian and watched her chew. When Jillian nodded her head, encouraging her to say something, Martha shrugged and said, "I just, well, I don't really know. Do they have any idea who the lover is?"

“I’ve only heard rumors, but I don’t think they know very much at all. Makes you wonder though, hearing things like that.”

Jillian walked over to the aisle, her shoes squeaking as she went. “Well, could you, Miss Cyndee? Could you love him?”

“He was a sensitive boy as a child, and a polite one as a man. That’s all I’m going to say about this whole conversation.”

Jillian shook her head. “It doesn’t matter what he’s been.” She looked out the window at the pull of the wind in the trees and the darkening sky, and then turned to look Martha in the eyes. “It’s what he’s *done*, right?” she asked.

Martha looked toward the aisle where Miss Cyndee was supposedly sitting and then looked back to Jillian. “Yes, in a way.”

“In a way? He killed someone. That’s it.”

“Of course. I didn’t mean—you can’t just ignore murder, but...” Martha blushed and adjusted her purse. “Well, you know. We can’t make generalizations.”

Jillian raised an eyebrow and laughed. “I’m not really generalizing here. Pretty sure the law agrees with me, you know what I mean? I’m just saying the guy *did* something unforgiveable, and he’ll *be* what he’s *done* the rest of his life. That’s it. No argument.”

Martha nodded and looked out the window at the storm. After a few seconds she suddenly shook her head and stood a little straighter. “But,” she said timidly. “It makes you wonder if just one decision, even if it’s intense, makes him something more than the rest of his choices—the good choices he’s made the rest of his life. It’s just interesting to consider. That’s all.”

Jillian blinked. “You mean, does murder make him a murderer?”

“No, well—that’s not exactly what I meant.” Martha crossed her arms. “I just mean, well, what if he’s not? What if in one moment, one instantaneous, jumbled moment, something made sense to him that would never make sense to us. He saw some virtue in his decision that he could never explain in words to someone else.” Martha shrugged. “Of course, that doesn’t make it right. Of course. But what if it was just a moment? A moment followed by something horrendous that he could never take back? What does that make him?”

Jillian sniffed. “A murderer. If he takes someone else’s life, that’s it.”

Miss Cyndee shuffled around the corner of the aisle so quietly that it startled the two other women when she appeared at their elbows.

“When Henry, that’s the man’s name, remember? When he was a child he looked everyone in the eye. I remember that because it’s rare for a little boy—they’re always smiling or sniffing. He looked people in the eye and you thought he was six years older than he was.”

Martha nodded.

Jillian wiped at the front of her apron, shaking her head, her lips tight with some unsaid offense, while the other women watched her. Eventually she looked up and raised a finger as if she would speak. Instead she suddenly turned and walked toward the window, her apron strings bouncing behind her.

“Sure, he was a cute kid.” She said curtly over her shoulder. She stopped in front of the window several feet away and put her palm on the glass. “But there came a point in this man’s life when he cracked, okay?” She hit the window with her open palm. “When he did just what this storm did. Things start out pleasantly, like a lazy breeze, just a hint of that rain smell in the air. He looks people in the eye like a real winner, sure. But after a while, the wind picks up. Slowly. Something changes. The trees start to sway back and forth, and the pile of grass

clippings you made in the front yard starts to blow over into the neighbor's, things get out of control. That's when you start to feel this momentum in the sky, like a pull that tells you..."

She trailed off and looked out into the dark.

"You can't stop a storm," she continued. "You just have to hide from it. I bet he was like that—by the time the rain smell comes it's too late."

They were all silent for a moment, the sound of the heavy downpour occasionally muted by a crack of thunder.

Then Martha wiped the hair from her face and raised her chin. "I admit I don't know the particulars," she said. "But I also don't think it's unreasonable that some people do things against their nature. He might have taken a life but that doesn't mean he's hard-wired to kill, or that he's some force beyond his own control."

"You're pretty protective of the guy," Jillian said quietly.

"I'm not talking about just him. I'm talking about the idea."

"You commit a crime, you get punished. The end."

"Of course. He should be punished but—"

Jillian waved her arms above her head and laughed. "What good comes from talking about the ideas, anyway? Do ideas protect us? Put food on the table."

"Yes, actually. They do." Martha's cheeks were pink with frustration and she shifted her weight slightly from foot to foot. "Everything comes back to some idea, and critical thinking protects us from more than you could possibly comprehend."

Jillian sniffed again and was about to respond when a squeal pierced through the sound of the storm. All three women jumped slightly and moved closer to the register, looking toward the

windows. The glass where Jillian had stood moved slightly with the buffetings of the storm, creaking and squealing with the wind.

Miss Cyndee made a noise, almost a gurgle, and grabbed the other two. With a speed remarkable for her age she marched them to her aisle at the back of the store. Martha allowed the woman to lead her away but was amazed at the strength in the grip of those small, thick hands. As they crouched, the two women on either side of the older one, Jillian made a move to speak but Miss Cyndee put a finger to her own lips and shook her head. Jillian pursed her lips, shrugged and leaned against the canned goods. The storm seemed to have reached some critical intensity and wind rattled the front door and the windows.

Martha was staring ahead at the opposite wall when Miss Cyndee started to speak, her thick hands in her lap and her short legs stretched before her. She spoke and the other women just listened.

“I didn’t think I would live very long,” she said. “I never did. My father—and we called him father too—he would tell me that. You be careful not to exert yourself, Binny, he’d say, and I always listened because I was afraid of dying. I saw a burial once on a cold day, and death was always cold after that, just cold, wet dirt and people walking away. I had this stutter in my heart, right here.” She grabbed Martha’s hand and placed it over her fleshy chest. “Right there, and it would act up if I ran too hard or something. So I didn’t. I just watched a lot of people do a lot of things I couldn’t do. And I became familiar with the way people look when they’re not paying attention to it, when they’re thinking about other things besides their face, because I was always just there in the background for people. Most of my life was like that.” She laughed softly. Jillian looked at Martha for a moment and then moved slowly so that she hugged her knees and leaned her head against the goods behind her.

“You get to know a person by the way they control their face when you live like that,” Miss Cyndee continued. “My father controlled every muscle he could, right down to the marrow, I’m sure of it. When he died—I was only thirty then, mind you—he looked as puffy and calm as a baby after a nap. It broke my heart, more than anything else. I would have loved that man more if he had showed me that face sooner. I was thirty and still hadn’t thought about anything but everyone else’s face and the stutter of my heart, so I bought a mirror and hung it in my room. Everyone has mirrors now, but not back then. I had to look at myself every morning and night for years before I finally knew myself. I can see my face right now in my mind’s eye and I feel comfortable with it.”

She looked at Martha. “Did you know I have three babies and seven grandbabies?” she asked.

“No, ma’am.”

“I do. I sure do, and they look slightly like me. Most have the same upper lip. Do you have children?”

“No, ma’am.”

“That’s fine. You will.” She closed her eyes and reached out to pat Jillian’s knee. Jillian turned her head and then looked at the linoleum at her feet.

“Those babies share a part of what I see in the mirror every day. That’s something I like to think about—that’s something I like to say to myself. I should write it down, don’t you think?”

Martha nodded.

“I should.” Miss Cyndee smiled and patted Jillian’s knee again. The storm still buffeted against the glass but the store seemed to muffle the sound to whistles and creaks in the florescent

lighting inside. Miss Cyndee, after several minutes of silence, fell asleep, her hand on Jillian's knee and her face turned toward Martha. The three women were quiet for a half hour before Martha felt her foot fall asleep, felt the trickle of pinpricks like cold water in her veins. She stretched out her leg and felt the buzz of blood return to her pale limb. Jillian moved as well, stretching her legs and cracking her toes. After a moment she leaned forward to see over Miss Cyndee and nodded her head at Martha.

“You say you're about an hour away, right?” Jillian asked.

“Yes, about that.”

“Things always look so green after a storm like this. I have a tree just outside my bedroom window that goes as green as a neon sign. You ever seen that?”

“I think so,” Martha said

“Well, there you go. I wonder if the storm made it all the way to your place. You think so?”

“It might have.”

“Makes you wonder what everyone else is doing, right?”

Martha nodded. In fact, it hadn't crossed her mind at all, but after a moment she couldn't stop thinking about it, couldn't shake off the feeling that she should think about it. She was still thinking about the whole thing even when her other foot fell asleep and the trickle of her own blood was nothing more than a buzz of warning.

Four Sisters

Cici puts a blanket over her lap when she sits cross-legged on the ground because she says that's what a lady would do. Should do. And we all laugh because, C'mon, Cici, look at us. I point at our circle sitting around the fire, and ask her to tell us what makes a lady, what makes her tick. She turns her head and sniffs because she knows I'm teasing her. But I really want to know. I do. I wait until the others are in their musty sleeping bags, when it's too late for the park authorities to come looking for us, and I ask her.

"Cici."

"What?" she says.

"Wake up. I need to know."

She looks at me and her eyes seem black. Old mascara.

"I'm serious," I say.

She looks away from me and I think she's crying. "I used to go to sleep thinking," she says. "I'd fall asleep thinking about something from the day." She turns in her blankets and I hear a twig snap under her hip. "Now," she says, "there's nothing. It's all black."

"C'mon, Cici. It's not like that."

She rolls over. She's quiet.

"C'mon," I say. "We're better off, remember?"

I wait for her to respond but the wind is cold, so I shiver and pull my blankets closer. It's September.

I don't know where they go during the day. There are four of us and we have different agendas. That's how Yubi says it. She has a notebook, one with a fake red leather cover, and she

writes her plans in it. We used to make-fun but then we all wished for one. Something to record what we thought, to show what kind of mark we make with our feet during the day. She tells herself what she'll do every hour in there. When we eat at night I like to ask about her day, and she says things like ship-shape or its all dandy. She learned those phrases from older men. She talks like a shy exchange student. Halting. And with large smiles. We all like her. Her English is like poetry. When she's hungry she says her belly cries. And we all laugh because Yubi learns words like a child. She hears it once and puts it where it works, but its wrong. Her English is bad but her notebook is real. She's just fine if she has that. Her life is secure between covers of fake red leather.

A lot of people point fingers at Detroit, but it's not so bad. In French it means something beautiful.

Belinda puts her big hands on her hips. "Uh huh, right," she says.

She gets sassy.

"It does," I say. "It means one small, twisting river between two great lakes."

She's still holding herself up on that hip and she blinks like she's waiting for the punch-line.

"That's what it means," I say. "We're just between two great things."

Cici looks down in her lap and I feel her get small with her great thoughts.

"The thing is," Belinda says, "we don't speak French here. Detroit only means what it means in English."

We wait for her because we know she likes to be dramatic. She grabs Yubi's notebook and Yubi squeaks.

“Knock-offs,” Belinda shouts. She waves the notebook in the air. “It means knock-outs and lay-offs,” she says. She looks at Yubi looking at her. She sighs and then gently tosses the notebook back to her lap. “Knock-offs,” she mumbles. “Fake leather.”

Belinda sees people with hate hazy eyes. Even us. It’s not a hatred directed at one person, really, but the whole world.

Sometimes I wonder what she was like as a child, just a small kid asleep in a big bed, and I can’t imagine it. Few people are like that. It’s easy for me to imagine Cici, of course, and Yubi and the cashier at the gas station and the old woman who wears too much sunscreen and the boy who swears at me at Taco Rio. I can see them as kids just sleeping away.

I don’t know what it means, exactly, that I can’t see her that way. Belinda was probably born with a chubby finger pointed at everyone else. I can see that.

We sleep in the park but no one has found us yet. The forest is so large and thick that people don’t come close to our clearing. We hear them sometimes, distant honking or fireworks, but it seems miles away. We find our way here each night by following the creek from the blue dumpster in the parking lot and it’s familiar, like a home. I have a tree, so does Cici and Yubi and Belinda. They circle us like a small crowd, each tree holding some remnant of one of us—a blanket, a garbage bag, a Taco Rio apron. Four chosen trees out of the hundreds that surround us. It’s funny because they’re not special, they’re just four trees that we picked and can’t stop picking each day. I think when we find a new home I will miss this place because of those trees. When we leave I promise to come back and visit those trees.

But we’ll have to find a new place. A place with walls. It’s still a little warm during the day, but not for long.

We all met at different times. I came with Cici. Belinda found Yubi before someone else did.

Cici and I grew up in this apartment complex that was so old it leaned forward in sorrow. It'll fall apart any day now, I'm sure of it. We were saved from the sadness of that place because of Regina. She gave us what we needed to know about being mothered.

My mom walked out with a pair of high heels and didn't come back, and it was two days later that I knocked on Regina's door. I picked her because she smiled at me when we met in the stairwell. I was still wearing Velcro sandals so I was still little. Couldn't even tie my own shoes.

Regina was a woman to fill all of the empty in your soul. I brought my toothbrush, and she gave me a place to settle my heart. Cici would come with bruises asking if she could spend the night and Regina would let her settle too.

"He won't find you here," she'd tell Cici. And Cici would nod.

We ate crackers after school and drank from water bottles that had our names in black Sharpie on the caps.

"These are yours," she told us.

Cici Gomez. Big, bold print.

"And me," I said.

"Of course."

Elena Heath.

"You keep these here, now." She takes our names and puts them above the refrigerator.

"They're safe here."

Cici Gomez.

Elena.

We're safe here.

That's how I saw it.

For twelve years, that's how I saw it.

Belinda found our fire the first night we got it started. A bunch of boy scouts, that's what she called us. She walked right out from behind the trees with Yubi trailing behind and stood in the light so we could see her.

"You campers?" She asked.

"Yes," I lied.

"No you're not. I seen you looking through the trash back there."

Cici and I didn't say a thing. We just stood and dared her with our eyes.

"I want to share your fire," she said. "That's all."

It wasn't a question. That's Belinda.

Cici gave me the look that says I'm in charge, so I stood up and pointed behind Belinda toward the trees with my chin. "Who else is back there," I said.

She shook her head. "No one. Just us."

That's when Cici stood up and held my hand. She's wasn't afraid. She used to do that.

I looked at Cici and her eyes told me I was in charge again, so I said, "Sure. Sit. We just got the fire started."

"A bunch of boy scouts," Belinda laughed.

Yubi smiled. "Dandy," she said, and we all laughed because she's like a child.

Before I let myself sleep that night I thought, it's better with four. Cici was curled up next to me like a kid. She still had some bruises because it had only been a few days since we left at that point. July.

I looked at the four of us around the remains of our first fire then and thought, it'll be much better with four.

When Regina closed her eyes for a nap and never got up, they took her away in a long black car with the pearls she said every lady should wear to the grave. July. The grass gave easily as they buried her, I remember. Her family came, nephews and a cousin, people so distant they didn't have pictures in her apartment. They saw my things in there, though, and whispered to each other.

"These your things? Where's your mama?" they asked me.

"Out," I said.

"You have someplace to stay?" they asked me.

I said yes and put some of my stuff in a big black trash bag and walked out. They followed me with their eyes.

Cici and I were old enough not to cry. We're seventeen, both of us, together. Once I walked out with that trash bag and Cici saw it we knew we had plans to make.

"I can't stay here alone," Cici said, pointing at the apartment complex. She looked at her arms, at the purple that showed where he grabbed her, where he held her down.

"Your uncle will stay," I said, "and we will go. We'll go together. Our water bottles can stay above the refrigerator in that place, but we'll go."

She took my hand. She wasn't afraid.

I don't know what September means in French but it feels a lot like tipping back in your chair. It's warm enough at first but it gets cold soon, and it happens all at once.

During the day my agenda takes me to Taco Rio and I work with a yellow apron behind the counter. I use my paychecks to buy us fast food and juice boxes. I brush my teeth and rinse my hair at the gas station bathroom.

We need a place to sleep when it gets colder. A place with running water. I say it every night now. Belinda says she'll find a job. Yubi points at her notebook and we smile at her. I look at Cici and she looks down. She's not telling me something and she looks so small.

"C'mon, Cici," I say again that night, once everyone else is asleep. "C'mon."

"You don't have to take care of me," she says finally.

"What?"

"You don't have to. I can get money too."

"Sure," I say. "I know."

"I love you, I do," she says. She starts to cry but then wipes at her face roughly and points her chin away. She says, "but don't feel like you have to save us all. We can't live like this forever. It can't last forever."

"I know, I know," I say. "That's why we're looking for a place."

She shakes her head. "That's not what I mean," she says.

I don't know what the others do during the day, but one morning, in September, Cici comes with food. She has a smile, but she won't look in my eyes. She must have left during the night.

While Yubi is eating and Belinda is peeing behind the trees I ask, “Where did you go?”

Cici shrugs and pushes the bag of chips toward me.

“Did you steal it,” I ask.

“No.”

“Then how?”

“I got money. Someone gave it to me.”

“Who? Someone on the street?”

She blinks at me, then pulls her blanket over her lap. “I will still wear pearls to my grave,” she says. “Like Regina. I’m a lady.”

“What? Cici, what does that mean?”

“I’m okay, Elena. It’s okay. Forget about it.”

Belinda comes back and grabs the bag of chips. “Where were you last night,” she asks Cici.

Cici folds her thin arms and looks away from all of us. “I have a job,” she says. “I didn’t steal it.”

Belinda holds the bag of chips and raises an eyebrow. “A job,” she says. “At night?” And she says it like a question. Yubi stops eating and looks at Cici Belinda puts the chips down and says, “Cici.”

But Cici stands up and walks toward the trees to pee.

At night Belinda pulls her sleeping bag over to me once Yubi is asleep.

She says, “it’s getting cold,” and she says it quietly, which surprises me a little. I just nod because you’re never sure if Belinda really wants to hear you or not.

She looks around her, looks into the trees, and shrugs. “Have you thought of where we could go,” she asks.

“A little,” I say. But I mean a lot, every day, each breath.

“Me too,” she says. She doesn’t look at me.

We lay side-by-side and I feel her arm pressed against mine through our sleeping bags. I wonder for the first time how old she is.

“You know what,” she says. “This could be a whole lot worse. When I was a kid my dad had the biggest hands, as big as your head, and he was so spittin’ mean with them that as a kid I would cry whenever I saw those flashing red hands at the crosswalk. That red hand was just pulsing across the street like a sharp throb.”

Belinda laughs in a bitter way and thrashes in her sleeping bag. She says, “we could still be there, you know?”

I nod again.

“I’m never going back there,” Belinda murmurs. And then Yubi squeaks and Belinda gets up and moves back over there.

I look over at Cici’s empty sleeping bag and it feels a hundred miles away. I shiver deeply the way you do after you’ve been sick, like my lungs are humming and spreading to my hands.

Cici is late again tonight. She probably won’t be back until morning. I turn over in my blankets and tell myself, we will never go back there. She doesn’t have to go back there.

At Taco Rio there is a sign. Four Amigos, it says. Burrito, Chimichanga, Fajita, Taco. We sell them together. They are surrounded by beans and rice. Regina told me that beans and rice together make a complete protein, whole countries survive on just beans and rice.

“Perfect,” Belinda says. “Consider me the first lady.” She takes a plastic fork and eats with her mouth full. Belinda is always hungry because she has large hands and a big personality, but she loves Yubi and gives her the extra juice box.

It’s dark and Cici still hasn’t come back.

I say, “the flavors are supposed to mix.” I say, “you’re supposed to eat them together. They’re the Four Amigos. Burrito, Chimichanga, Fajita, Taco.”

Yubi giggles and tries to write them in her notebook.

“Where’s Cici?” Belinda says.

But I don’t answer. I don’t have to.

We all know that she will come home with the smell of money and meanness all over her.

The Man without a Mirror

I don't normally do favors for strangers but the young woman stepped out from behind my garage that morning so unexpectedly that I forgot all of my social habits. I was bringing out the trash from the kitchen when I heard this polite cough and looked up to see her standing there, a graceful, apologetic smile on her fresh face. It was only about eight o'clock.

"I'm so sorry about this," she said, clasping her thin hands together. "You must think I'm crazy—a perfect stranger showing up like this in your driveway." She was younger than me, maybe by seven or ten years—definitely not thirty. She was wearing a yellow, spring dress and delicate little sandals. I was surprised, of course, to meet a young woman so suddenly at eight in the morning, and by my trash bins for that matter, but she was harmless, I could see that instantly. And she seemed to have the posture of someone you could trust. Most people don't.

She blinked anxiously and stared at her hands a moment, continuing her apology. "And here you are in your pajamas. I'm so sorry—I really didn't mean to bother you."

I looked down at my garden clogs, which I had slipped on quickly without socks, and my gray flannel pajama bottoms. I hadn't talked to a woman in my pajamas since my wife left, and that was a few years ago. I probably wouldn't have made the connection, probably wouldn't have even realized I was in my sleepwear, if she hadn't apologized about it. I felt a stir of excitement at the thought of another woman seeing me that way and in a moment, just like that, our meeting seemed even more like the opening scene of a movie somewhere. Like she had showed up to my house for a blind date too early and caught me unshaven. I looked up smiling and shrugged.

"No harm done," I said casually, because there really was nothing shameful at all about the whole thing. Meeting a woman that way. I took a step to the side and threw the trash bag

effortlessly toward the metal bins to her side. The bag warped and twisted as it sailed through the air and then landed with a thump in the garbage bin beside here a moment later. I played basketball a bit when I was young. The yellow of her spring dress did wonderful things for her long, dark hair.

“You see,” she continued, taking a few steps away from the garbage bins. “I’ve just moved here, to this town, and I got so terribly lost last night coming home from the bus that I found myself at your house, without a phone or map or anything, and eventually ended up on your hammock. Over there.” She pointed behind her to my backyard then blushed slightly, moving her hands over her dress as if she were smoothing away wrinkles. “I would have asked permission but it must have been four in the morning by the time I got here and the house was so dark...” She blinked away sudden tears and her cheeks flushed with shame.

“Please,” I said. “No harm done, remember? Would you like some coffee? I have cereal too, I think. My telephone’s inside. You can call anyone you need to.”

She sniffed bravely and wiped away her tears. “Thank you, but I really must be going. I was on my way when you stepped out of your house. I should be able to find my way now that the sun is up. Only, I was wondering...” She clasped her hands again and looked into my face.

I wondered if I should put a hand on her shoulder to reassure her. The poor thing was obviously distressed, but I was pleased to see she had the grace and manners of a well-bred woman. Something my ex-wife would not have appreciated. I felt that we were friends already, that one day we would look back at this morning and see how charmingly we were brought together. She had slept in my yard, after all, and I had instantly been so kind to her.

“Would it be possible,” she continued. “If I left some things here while I found my way home? Just in the back yard? I could carry them with me, I suppose, but I still feel a little tired

from last night and it would be so convenient if I could--." She suddenly covered her face and sighed. "Oh, this is so embarrassing! You're a perfect stranger. I can't believe I'm doing this." She took her hands from her face and waved her thin, white arms before her as if she were clearing the thoughts before her face. "I'm not normally like this, I promise." She laughed and shook her head in disbelief. Her long hair fell over her shoulders and I imagined the neighbors watching us smile and laugh with one another.

"I absolutely understand, I do," I said. "Keep your things here as long as you need—or," I suddenly realized, "I could give you a ride home. You don't need to walk." I thought of my ex-wife suddenly and smiled. "I could take you to breakfast, maybe? Welcome you to town?"

She smiled and looked down at her hands. "That's so kind, but I need to learn the way home on the bus eventually. I'm sure I can do it now that the sun is up. If I could just leave some things here that would be wonderful! I'll come back to get them—it won't be a burden, I promise!" She smiled joyfully and clapped her hands together. I was about to ask if I could escort her to the bus stop when she suddenly took off down the driveway toward the road, her spring dress swishing around her calves and her hair swinging across her back. She turned one last time to smile and wave and then disappeared around the corner.

I stood a moment by the garage after she had left. I needed to get ready for work but I felt compelled to remember the specifics of our conversation by the trash cans for a few minutes. I looked at the place she stood and imagined what she would remember about me—my shoulders? The way I stood, or some liveliness in my eyes when I spoke? I chuckled to myself and looked toward the windows of my neighbors. It was a strange and wonderful meeting. And the whole time I was in my pajamas!

I was walking back to the side door when I remembered that she had left some things in my backyard. I rolled up the bottom of my pants to avoid the dew from the grass and made my way behind the garage to the lawn. She would probably come back for her things that evening, I thought. I decided to keep her things in the kitchen where we could sit and I could make her coffee. I was making plans to buy some flavored creamers when I rounded the corner and found a young girl sitting on the small brick hedge around my garden. She looked about eight or nine, or older—I couldn't tell. She was a chubby little thing with a dirty face and pink knees. I thought she must be a neighbor child. We looked at one another a moment before I turned to search for boxes or a suitcase.

“There ain't no one else here but me,” she said. She stood up and hefted a small green pleather suitcase to her chest. “Just me. You had breakfast yet? I could have some breakfast, I think.”

“Do you mean...are you with the woman?” I asked. I pointed behind me to indicate that she had left and the girl lazily rubbed at her nose.

“You could say that,” she said. “Do you have things other than cold cereal? Like sausage or bacon? I've seen people with sausage that goes in the microwave and cooks in two minutes. I'm not picky or nothing, so microwave stuff is fine for me. Have you heard of that? It tastes the same.” She looked up at me dully and blinked her eyes.

I struggled to find something to say. She really was an unattractive child. And then I imagined what the bright, young woman would think if she saw me so muddled. She probably didn't tell me she had left a child because she thought it such a natural thing to do. Was it? I hadn't been involved with very many people lately, by my own choice—I get so bored normally with people in general. But was this normal? Well, to be fair, my relationship with the young

woman had been so sudden and intuitive—she seemed to trust me so quickly. I’ve always been so adaptable anyway, which she probably sensed.

I smiled. Saluting the child playfully I said, “Right this way. Follow me.” I looked around as I marched toward my back door, half-expecting the charming young woman to walk around the garage to prove I had passed some preliminary test. The girl trudged along behind, scratching at her knee.

Once we were inside I had her sit at the table and poured her a glass of milk. “Now,” I said. “I only have cereal, but there are quite a few options here.” I turned to get several of the cereal boxes from the top of the refrigerator when she sighed.

“I ain’t going to drink this,” she said, pointing at the glass of milk. “It gets thick in the back of my throat and I can’t stand the taste. I’m not rude or nothing, that’s just what happens. Do you have bacon, maybe? Or eggs?”

“Well,” I said slowly. “There might be eggs, I think.”

“I’ll have eggs and toast then,” she said and turned to look out the window.

A moment later I placed a plate of steamy eggs with two slices of toast in front of her and she looked up into my face. “Thank you,” she said and grinned wide to reveal all of her stubby, little teeth. What happened next surprised me tremendously. She ate her meal methodically, the way my father used to, taking slow, controlled bites, placing her fork down gingerly between each mouthful of eggs in order to take a bite from her toast and then wiping her finger tips on the napkin in order to pick up the fork again. We were silent as she ate. I sipped my coffee and watched her eat, mystified and slightly unsettled by her adult-like manners. She didn’t look up until she had finished her plate and had set her fork down for the final time.

“Thank you,” she said again.

“Would you like anything else?”

“No thank you, I’m good. You probably have to go to work or something. You have a job, right?”

“Yes.” It occurred to me then that I might have this child in my custody until the evening. Could I leave her at my home unattended? I looked at her small, chubby fingers and imagined her looking through my things, touching my windows. But could I take her to work? How could I explain her to my associates? What do you do with children during the day?

“You don’t go to school or anything?” I asked, setting my cup of coffee down on the counter.

“Sure,” she said slowly, eyeing me strangely. At first I thought her look seemed almost clever, as if she were studying me, but then she sniffed and the dull gleam in her gaze was back. She really was an odd looking child.

“I normally go to school downtown. But, like you already know, it’s the middle of March break so no-can-do, right?”

I nodded and picked up my mug again. “Oh yes, of course,” I said. I thought briefly about holidays and things like that—I really haven’t been that involved with children—when I realized what a fool I was! Of course! This was the perfect opportunity for the young woman to see what a kind friend I really was. She had, after all, left the child in my care for the day. I couldn’t possibly pawn her off to someone else. I smiled at the child and picked up the phone.

“I just need to make a few calls,” I said. “Then we can discuss what you’d like to do today. Anything you’d like.” She blinked slowly and then nodded her head, eyeing the phone in my hands.

After a few rings my manager picked up and I heard the familiar beeps and buzzes of the office in the background.

“Hello? Who’s this?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Hamblin, this is Terrance from marketing.”

“Okay. Terrance, you say?”

“Yes, from marketing.”

“Okay.”

I cleared my throat and turned away from the child. She was watching me intently and it was making me anxious. I moved toward the window over the kitchen sink.

“Yes, well, I’m afraid I’m not feeling very well this morning. Some sort of flu, I think.” I closed my eyes. “I don’t think I’ll be able to make it in today.”

“Sure, sure,” he said. “Those things go around. Terrance—it was Terrance wasn’t it?”

“From marketing.”

“Just be sure to indicate the sick day in your account on the Declon website under the Payroll Manager, alright?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright then, there you go. You don’t really need to call me, actually. Did you know that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sure, alright then. Feel better, Clarence.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hung up the phone. I really was lucky to have my job, really, I was glad. Mr. Hamblin was a very knowledgeable man. He must get so distracted with all of the employees on our floor.

I stared out the window as I thought. The girl was silent behind me and, to be honest, I had quite forgotten about her for a moment. As I stared out the window, she must have climbed down from her chair because a moment later I realized she was standing next to me.

“We could go to the big dock,” she said.

“Huh?”

“You know, the place with all the games and peanuts. The place that juts out over the water.”

“The pier?”

“If you really wanted to take me somewhere, we could go there.”

I wasn't feeling very energetic at that moment, in fact, I wouldn't doubt if I was even a little ill from all the excitement that morning. I rubbed my eyes and sighed.

“Let me get dressed. Wait here.”

As I walked up to my bedroom I looked at the bareness of the walls. I have no paintings, no photographs. I have no real need for material things. My ex-wife on the other hand was extremely vain. She wanted pictures and colors everywhere. When she was here, pictures lined the whole wall leading to our bedroom and there were little frivolous decorations in every corner. I remember that there was this small ceramic frog that sat on our bathroom counter because every time I would lean over to spit in the sink we made eye contact. It was very unsettling. I was quite glad when she left and took it with her, all of it. It was a relief actually. It was.

When I had dressed, the child and I got into my car and headed to the pier fifteen minutes away. My mood lightened gradually as we drove, due in large part to leaving the bare white walls of the house and also remembering that the young woman would return that evening. When I had finally found a parking spot I paid the parking meter and walked with the child toward

tilted barbeque shacks, cotton candy vendors and the scratchy hint of distant carnival music at the pier. Not very many people were there, which made sense considering that it was still late morning at that point, but I was sure to take the child to each of the most interesting venues—the Ferris wheel ride, the dollar movie, the binoculars that looked out over the ocean, the small puppet theater behind the crab carts, the monkey by the salted peanut cart. She was silent for most of it, nodding her head occasionally or smiling at odd moments during the puppet show. She seemed, at one time, to have waved at one of the midgets that ran the fun house, almost as if they knew one another, but he simply smiled and ushered us in. By the time we were finished it was nearly five o'clock and I was desperate for something other than popcorn and gumballs. When we passed a small Korean restaurant the smell of steamed beef overtook me and I grabbed her shoulder to stop.

“How about we get ourselves something to eat, huh? Maybe stop by one of the barbeque places? You could get some chicken nuggets?”

She looked at me and then turned to look at the Korean place. After a moment she shrugged and walked passed me into the restaurant. I followed quickly behind.

We ordered enough for five adults. The child, amazingly, seemed to already know what she favored on the menu and ordered dishes like bibimbop, bulgogi, kimchi chigae—all of which were full meals in and of themselves. I ordered what looked like a spicy vegetable soup with beef and rice and then we sat next to each other in silence on a slanted wooden bench by the counter, waiting for our order to come out in white Styrofoam containers. When a small woman finally emerged from the back kitchen with our meal the child turned and said, “Let’s eat this in your car. I saw a place under the dock where cars can drive over the sand. I want to see that.”

So we headed back to the parking meter and my car. She held the bags of food on her lap while I maneuvered around the pier, finding a discreet dirt road about a half mile away which led to a bumpy path back along the beach and below the pier. I turned the car off and she arranged the containers along the dash board. After a moment of eating silently she asked, “You ever been married to someone?”

I was caught off guard by the question, mainly because she had for the most part been so quiet most of the day.

“I was married once,” I said. “A few years ago.”

She nodded. “So she left you then?”

I laughed harshly and looked into my soup. “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

She took a bite of some beef and limp-looking cabbage. After swallowing she turned and looked at me directly. “You seem like a nice guy, Terrance. A few quirks, sure, but we all do. I wouldn’t care so much about her if I was you. People can see it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You stare off a lot. You get lost up here.” She pointed at my head and I ducked. Her voice seemed to have changed, and I suddenly felt uncomfortable being alone with her.

“She didn’t leave me, for your information,” I said. “We made a decision, as adults do, and decided we were happier away from one another. That’s what happened. As a child it would be difficult for you to understand.”

She shrugged. “I’m just saying you’re a nice guy. I’m doing you a favor.”

I laughed harshly again and looked out the window. I wasn’t sure what to say—she was a child after all. I couldn’t speak to her like an adult, obviously, so I looked out at the sun setting over the water instead. I wanted to be anywhere but in that car.

“Listen,” she said. “There are a lot of people—not me—that see other people so good it becomes a job, like a way of making money, you see? Sometimes knowing other people that good becomes a kind of meanness, okay? Do you understand?”

She was making absolutely no sense so I poked around in my soup and continued to look out the window. She was a horrible, nosy little child. She must be a cousin or a niece to the young woman.

She sighed. “All I’m saying is be careful, okay? I’m doing you a favor this time.”

We ate the rest of our dinner in silence, threw away the containers in a garbage can near the pier, and then drove back to the house. It was dark by that point, but still relatively early in the evening. I was ready to hand her over and take a large sleeping pill but as we walked in she said, “The woman won’t be here tonight. She’ll come looking for me in the morning. We might as well sleep.”

I felt a migraine coming on—I must have been coming down with something—so I nodded and led her to the guest room on the main floor. She grabbed her green pleather suitcase from under the table, walking silently behind me, and then set her things beside the bed. She looked around the room and then nodded.

“Well then,” she said cheerfully. “Good night, Terrance. Thank you for everything.” I smiled weakly and walked to the stairs that led to my bedroom. I felt ill and unsettled, probably something I had caught from the child. I took a few aspirins, turned off the light in my bedroom and turned away from the blank walls.

When I woke up in the morning I stayed in bed a few minutes after the alarm went off, staring at the way the sun came slanting through the blinds. After a moment I remembered the child and the beautiful young woman and threw the covers out of the way in order to quickly

shower, shave and put on a clean shirt with the pajama pants the woman saw me wear the morning before. As I went down the stairs I listened to see if the girl was awake and when there was nothing but silence I quickly went to the kitchen on tip-toe and started a pot of coffee for me and the woman. I sat at the table and read from yesterday's newspaper as I waited, occasionally looking out the patio window at the backyard. After about forty minutes I opened the front door to look down the street and then went back to the kitchen to wait.

When it was getting close to the time I would have to leave for work I made my way down the hall toward the guest room and was surprised to find the bedroom door open. A quick look inside confirmed that the girl was gone. On the bed, which was neatly made, was a note that read: "I didn't take anything, I wouldn't let her. You can look if you want. I did you a favor this time, so remember what I said."

I stood a moment looking at the paper. Then I dropped the note on the bed where I had picked it up and walked slowly back upstairs to change into my work slacks and shirt. Grabbing a travel mug from the counter I filled it with the coffee I had made. As I sat and closed the door to my car a few minutes later the smell of the Korean meats and rice from last night became apparent in an instant, almost as if they were released from the fabric of the seat. I sat there, staring at the garbage cans positioned beside the garage in front of me, and then backed up to go to work, the scent of steamed beef mingling with the "new car" scent of the air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror.

We Heard Our Voices with the Hyenas

I imagined as a child that the mound of red dirt just below my window would someday erupt with flies, a flurry of sticky eyes and wings. In the inky blackness of those African nights I would hear a dull popping, a rustle of pebbles, and my feet would get cold. It was my worst fear. I'd hear that sound and slowly pull the netting away from my bed, away from the window, and lean my head out to squint at the mound in the moonshine. Most nights, I swear on my life, I saw the mound vibrate like a crusted bubble.

When we first arrived at my uncle's lodge on the Amakhala Game Reserve I was ten years old, and the ticking of insects was so loud I could feel the fine, thin hairs inside my ears hum. My uncle was a large man, tall like my father but wider, and as soon as my father and I stepped out of the truck in front of his home he ran to us with his wide gait and picked me up. He squeezed my arms into my sides, set me down, and put his large hand on my shoulder as he talked to my father. As they talked I noticed a layer of grit between my teeth and lips from the drive and looked away from them toward the road where the up-turned dust still swirled lazily in the air. I didn't know him as my uncle then. He was just a man that looked like my father. But I remember deciding to try and like him when he didn't mention my mother the first day. Instead, we ate trail mix for dinner and he taught me how to check the locks on the steel chain-linked fence around the compound. When a lion roared in the distance as we walked back in the dark he said, "Consider those your new house cats." I remember thinking that must mean I was home.

When my mother died we lived in Pittsburg. The week after the funeral my father packed up strange things from around the house and put them in the attic. The rainbow refrigerator magnets, some of the movies, the toothpaste in the master bathroom. Every time I came home from school I'd find something else missing. The white lily bowls, the comb in the junk drawer,

the notepad by the hall phone. We didn't talk about it. We both knew why he did it. It was winter then, so everywhere we went it was still and grey like a funeral. Day after day. I sanctioned his choices with my silence and he knew that.

My father lost his job soon after my mother died and couldn't find another. We behaved like hermits during those few months, eating canned chili in the plastic bowls he hadn't put up in the attic yet, and taking turns with the old Reader's Digest. When my uncle called long-distance to offer the accountant position on the reserve, my father walked into the bathroom with the phone and shut the door. As soon as I heard his stifled thank-you's and the wet, restrained way men weep, I knew we were leaving Pittsburg.

In the beginning, I was frightened of Africa. I wasn't a timid child, by any means, but I knew when I was unwanted. The ticks and hums of the landscape seemed to murmur behind my back, to be perpetually behind me no matter how I turned my head. That first week, I wandered around the enclosure surrounding the house, kicking at shrubs and exposed rocks. There were no trees. As far as I could tell the whole world was made of hard-packed red dirt. "It's called Karoo," my uncle said one night as we checked the housing compound locks again. "It means desert in Khoekhoe."

"Where are all the animals?" I asked.

He pointed through the fence at the blackness beyond the housing compound. "Where ever there's water," he said. The wildlife reserve that he managed was a few hundred acres of wilderness, which boasted to safeguard Africa's "Big Five," the lion, elephant, rhino, buffalo and leopard. In the housing compound, which was entirely surrounded by steel chain-linked fences, eleven luxury lodges accommodated guests, which were normally middle-aged couples with shiny faces or men's clubs who brought their own cigars. During the heat of the day, when the

animals were sleepy and least likely to be offended by the glare of binoculars and cameras, the staff hosted wildlife drive-by's for the daring. My uncle's lodge was near the road that led through the only opening in the fence. After accounting for all of the guests at night, and after the last of the staff had left for town, he locked up the gate and took a hose to the jeeps. I followed him in this ritual every evening. The excess water that pooled beneath the vehicles from our hoses attracted scores of flying insects, their heavy, humming bodies bumping into our faces and hands as we swatted them. Some nights my father even came out to watch.

The first morning in Africa, I woke up to the sound of my own screaming. I had been dreaming about the funeral. A thousand miles away her body was under the grass. I heard the metallic clicking of the machine as it lowered the casket through layers of color—green, brown, black. In Pittsburg I was prepared by the time she died, I knew it was coming. Nights when she was in the hospital I'd imagine her gracefully slipping away from her pain, like slowly standing up from a warm bath into the cool air, refreshed and clean. I was prepared for her death. But in my dream I saw her body settling into the mud, surrounded by smells, living things. I saw the dirt get heavy with moisture and expand around her, felt the squeeze and pressure around my own limbs as it dried. I heard my heart and her heart beat like two muffled drums under miles of earth and I trembled with the pressure of packed clay and mud against my own eyes. My skin ticked with the sensation of tiny, burrowing insects across my thighs, my face, my feet. We were entombed in our living, beating, thrumming bodies in the mud and no one would come for us. I saw the earth as a simple mound of dirt above us but we were alive, humming with sweat and pumping with blood beneath the surface. Months after that first dream, I'd lie in bed at night beneath the netting and listen to the indistinct rustling of Africa. To me it seemed to be the sound of swarms, life, trapped in neat piles of packed red dirt.

In the mornings, when the sky glowed orange and the dirt still felt cold, my father left for the offices down the road and I helped the morning staff clean the lodges. I mainly followed Chiku, a skinny, elderly African woman with wide fingernails. Her name, when translated directly, meant chatterbox and she embraced her mandate. Having lived on the reserve for many years she spoke English well enough to be constantly involved in every conversation that interested her. The first day we met I had wandered to one of the other lodges to spy on the guests and found her shaking out a small, white rug on the patio. She looked up, saw me peeking from behind a gnarled tree, and shouted.

“Come out here! Get over here and tell me what you plan to do, huh?”

I was shocked because I hadn't meant to be mischievous, and walked toward her slowly, my face red with a nervous blush. When I stepped up to the patio she put the rug on the railing and leaned down to look in my face.

“You're not a guest,” she said quietly.

“No, I'm Walt Trenton's niece. I just moved here.”

“Hm.” She nodded and looked me over from my toes to my eyebrows, then shrugged and moved back to the rug on the railing, waving with her long, thin arm for me to follow her. “Grab that rug and follow me inside.”

I picked up the rug with both hands and walked behind her into the house. I helped her clean three of the eleven lodges on the reserve that morning, and returned almost every morning after that to hear her stories, her gossip. My uncle said Chiku was spiritual and warned me not to get scared by her stories. After that I was too embarrassed to tell him how much I craved her stories, her beliefs, her insights into things I had never given a name to.

One morning, as we changed the rough, cotton sheets on the beds, I picked up a pillow and tossed it onto the armchair beside the bed.

“Don’t!” Chiku cried, picking up the pillow and holding it gingerly in her open palms. “There are hopes from the night before still nestled here.” I looked at her strangely and she clucked her tongue reprovably. “Don’t you know anything? A sleeping man’s dreams are like new born babies. They are born in our sleep and find safety curled against our bodies as we sleep.” She placed the pillow gracefully on the armchair and nodded her head. Then she looked at me and flicked my nose hard. “They curl up in a hopeful man’s pillow until they are grown and can walk away on their own. It is a great crime to destroy another man’s hopes before they are grown.”

She clucked and rolled her eyes, turning to straighten the sheet on the bed.

“But, Chiku,” I said, and then stopped, uncertain if she would have an answer. She didn’t stop working on the bed but she nodded her head and straightened her neck so I knew she was interested.

“Chiku,” I said. “What if it was a nightmare?” I crossed my arms and cleared my throat. “What if it was fear he woke up to?”

She tucked the corners of the fresh sheets into crisp triangles on each end and then smoothed the sheet with her wide palm from the baseboard to the head board. The wrinkles rippled away from her hand like water.

Then she turned to me. “There are no nightmares,” she said. “Every dream has some hope even if it is surrounded by fear.” She walked to me and put her finger right in the middle of my forehead. “Don’t you ever forget that fear makes us move. Fear makes us run to hope.”

In Pittsburg, my father sold all of the things we had stored in the attic before we came to Africa. We couldn't bring much with us on the plane. The morning before our flight left he walked into my bedroom and stood in the doorway.

"Are you packed?" he asked.

I nodded and showed him my suitcase. I had a few shirts and pants, a pile of socks and underwear. My books and shoes were in a box at the foot of my bed. When I asked him if he was all packed he nodded.

"I have been for a while," he said.

I wanted him to talk to me about mother, right then, while he stood in the doorway with his wrinkled flannel shirt and tired eyes. I stood up and he seemed startled from some thought that had carried him far away. When I opened my mouth to speak, he closed his eyes and took a step back. He put a hand up as if to steady himself.

"Bring those downstairs, okay?" He opened his eyes, smiled sideways and walked down the hall. I sat down on the bed and threw my pillow across the room, hard.

After about a month on the reserve my uncle and I took one of the jeeps to the other side of the park. We bumped along the uneven trails and I closed my eyes, letting the breeze sweep across my face. As we neared a dip in the road, he slowed down in order to avoid several large rocks that had been swept onto the trail by a flood. In the quiet crunching of tires and rocks I heard the sound of distant yelps and squeals. I peered beyond the shrubbery and tried to find shapes in the distance.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"I thought I heard something."

We slowly made our way around the rocks, up through the dip, and back onto the bumpy trail. A moment later he turned to me again.

“Hyenas,” he said. “We have several different packs here.”

I shook my head. “Shaggy, greedy dogs.”

“You think so?”

I nodded.

“You know,” he said. “Hyenas used to be eaten for their medicinal qualities. People thought they warded off evil and protected the things they loved.” He raised an eyebrow.

“That’s gross, Uncle Walt.”

I later asked Chiku and she nodded, her whole head banging to the rhythm of her mopping. “They are powerful creatures.”

“But they’re greedy animals. How can they fight evil and protect what we love?”

Chiku smiled and flicked my nose again. “But that’s what I mean. They have drive to fight for what they love. Hyenas are greedy to protect what should be theirs.”

That night I waited for my father on the patio of our lodge. When I saw him walking up the road I raced to him.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as I slid in the gravel and stopped at his side.

“Nothing.” I tried to catch my breath. We stood in the road and stared at one another for a moment.

“Good,” he said. He smiled at me, then reached out and patted my head as an after-thought.

It wasn’t time, I said to myself. We’re not ready. He’s not ready.

We had been there a few months when my uncle asked me if I wanted to go to school. We were filling the jeeps with gas early in the morning. “Your dad says you’re pretty sharp, that you do really well in school.” He smiled at me. “There’s a good school about forty five minutes away, it starts in a few months, when things get cooler.”

I shrugged and twisted the cap tighter on the jeep.

“There’ll be kids your age. You probably won’t be able to have very many sleep-overs here but you’re okay with that, right?” He nodded toward the animal reserve beyond the compound. “Kids get me all nervous when they’re out here.” He thought a moment to himself while he picked at mud on the windshield and then waved his hand above his head. “Well, other kids, I mean,” he said.

I nodded and we walked toward the garage to drop off the gas. He lifted them to a high shelf and then turned to stare at me.

“What?” I said.

“I was just thinking—do you want to come on a drive-along with me today? I’m taking the Worthingtons through the reserve. We’ll be back before your dad gets home, absolutely.”

We loaded the jeep with water and granola bars, the Worthingtons brought their own flasks of “spirits,” and we were off. The safari jeeps had tall cage-like bars that replaced typical walls and windows, and the wind that swirled through the cabin cooled us off better than any air-conditioning. I remembered my first trip to the reserve when we first arrived months before and how disconcerting it was to have dust and dirt between my teeth, but at that point it was as natural as goose bumps. We bumped along rough dirt roads while my uncle smoozed with the Worthingtons, who by that point were bubbling with giggles and alcohol. We had been driving for twenty minutes when we heard yelping in the distance. I perked up and searched the horizon.

“Oh dear!” Mrs. Worthington gasped. “Are those the natives?”

“They’re hyenas,” my uncle and I said simultaneously. He smiled at me and then looked in his rearview mirror at the Worthingtons. “They’re far away, it sounds like—we might not get a look at them. They’re pretty tough to surprise.”

Mr. Worthington nodded in agreement and patted his wife’s thigh. “Pesky little critters, darling. You won’t want to see them anyway.”

I thought of Chiku. She would have flicked Mr. Worthington’s nose hard for saying that. I knew it.

We bumped along the reserve for an hour or so, and the Worthingtons grew silent shortly after their flasks were dry. With each bump after that Mrs. Worthington moaned and put a thin, pink fist gently to her forehead. Mr. Worthington, whose skin had grown oddly yellow in the sun, patted his own knee limply every few minutes and said quietly, “Quite a bit of country out here, isn’t there? Marvelous. I can hardly imagine an end to it, really. Quite marvelous—yes.”

Before we headed back to the reserve we stopped under a gnarled tree and ate the trail mix that Uncle Walt had brought along with us. The Worthingtons seemed to recover slightly with some peanuts and chocolate and for most of the break asked my uncle questions about possibly expanding the room service options on the reserve. As they talked, I looked out into the glare. I hardly ever saw the actual animals that were on the reserve. I craved to see them, really. I heard their sounds and warnings and squeals, but I never saw them. I only knew the wall that separated us—I closed it every night. I thought of my father, and turned back to the group.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mrs. Worthington said suddenly, taking my hand. “You really must wear a visor or something. I’m sure I’ve just seen a freckle form on your nose this very minute!”

We saw nothing besides a few distant gazelle along a large watering hole. “Better luck, next time,” my uncle yelled over the wind. We headed back to the compound before dinner, the sun growing red in the sky and the dirt vibrating the day’s heat.

That night, after we had eaten dinner, my father and uncle stayed around the table discussing past baseball games. When the sun went down, my uncle suddenly shot up from his chair and looked at his watch.

“I have to check on the guests—it’s already sunset.”

“I’ll check the gate,” I said. “I can stand by the fence to make sure all of the staff leaves and then lock it.”

“Well,” he looked at my father, who smiled and reached for a napkin. “Well, alright then,” he said. Go and grab the clipboard and check them off one by one, okay?”

I nodded eagerly and jumped up from my seat. As I raced to the gate I saw Chiku walking toward the entrance. A bus came a little after sunset to pick up the staff at the same time just outside the compound every day. She shook her finger and raised an eyebrow.

“So you’re taking over, huh? I won’t take orders from you.”

“Just tonight, Chiku. Uncle Walt is checking on the guests.”

She shrugged and joined the mass of people waiting for the bus. She set down her bag and lifted her chin. “Little Adah is boss tonight, so listen up,” she shouted. They nodded and I timidly walked around the group, checking off names. When the bus came, Chiku turned and grabbed my chin.

“You are boss every day, you hear. You are your own boss every minute.” She looked down into my face until I blushed and then patted my cheek. “Close the gate—there you go. See you tomorrow.”

As the bus drove away I watched the dust settle slowly behind it. The sun had set fully and the lights from the compound turned on outside the lodges. I closed the gate and was about to turn when I heard shuffling about a hundred feet away. I stopped and peered through the dark beyond the fence. I could just barely make out darting shapes on the opposite side of the fence. I leaned forward.

A few hyenas, thicker and larger than I had imagined, quietly darted just outside of the compound's pool of artificial light. They were silent and sporadic in their movements, but I could see their exaggerated haunches and their lowered muzzles. It seemed odd that they would come so close.

"They're looking for food."

I jumped and turned around. My father stood with his hands in his pockets. He smiled shyly and pointed with his shoulder at the hyenas. "The staffers leave wrappers and stuff from their snacks on the ground before they get on the bus. The hyenas come some nights and explore the leftovers."

"Oh," I said. I never knew he had come out here at night.

"They'll hunt animals three times their size and get away with it," he said. He looked down at me. "Could you do that?"

"No."

He nodded. "Neither could I."

We stood silently side by side, watching the shapes of the hyenas dart back and forth beyond the fence. The buzz of insects and florescent lights hummed around our heads and I imagined Africa as a compound even larger than ours, where Chiku and Uncle Walt and my father and I were all there was to see. I imagined that the whole world itself was a fenced-in

reserve of life where we all traveled—ooing and ahing at life as it slept, ate, licked itself. The whole world unlocked and locked their fences every day, listening intently for the voices that rang behind the tick of swarming life beyond their fences.

My father turned and motioned behind us. “Let’s head in,” he said. “Before it gets too dark.”

“Alright,” I said. We walked together in silence back to the cabin, the scurry of the hyenas’ feet in the shadow behind us growing more and more distant with each step.