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## Through Windows

Sarah E. Jones

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Through Windows

Sarah E. Jones, B.A., M.A.

A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing  
2009

## **Abstract**

This short story collection focuses on the female perspective and expectations based on a host of influences: familial, cultural, and mythical. Even in extraordinary circumstances decisions are made about how to live one's life. The collection explores the context in which women put their life experiences and personal relationships, and the space needed to consider these things. Readers familiar with Lorrie Moore's short fiction may find echoes of her solitary souls in these stories.

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## Acknowledgements

To paraphrase Shakespeare, I would be little grateful if I could say how much—but I will still give it a try. Thank you to the Kuntz and Pastorek families, who have always given me their love and support. My love and gratitude go to my parents, Nick and Carol, and to my brother and sister, Nick and Anna. I am grateful for my friends who are my writing community and more: Deb Garwood, Fred Venturini, Jessica Sausto (in absentia), and Erik Smetana. Special thanks to Dr. Jennifer Vogt for sharing her expertise with me. All of my instructors from the grade school teachers to workshop leaders have encouraged me (even in Algebra, thanks Mr. Hitpas) and taught me to be unafraid of working for the answer to any problem. I have been so fortunate in my family, friends, and mentors—it makes one feel rather spoiled!

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## Introduction

Once I took an undergraduate film class. When it came time to write our major critical analysis of the semester, I chose a film written and directed by Wim Wenders. I had long been a fan of his work and an admirer of his path to working in film (he left med school to be a painter, and spent all his time in movie theaters in Paris). The paper looked at the way Wenders used colors in the visualization in his film “Until the End of the World” to create associations with his characters. I loved that paper because I loved dissecting how all the different influences in his life led to how he approaches film-making; it was the best critical work I had written up to that point.

The due date rolled around, I turned it in, and was shocked when I got a “C” on the thing. It was the first and only time I received that mark. But the worst part of it was in the professor’s comments regarding the focus of my thesis—“It seems like a lot of trouble,” he wrote. He generously gave some of us the opportunity to revise the paper. With his comment clear in my mind, and still lingering more than ten years later, I hunkered down to prove to him that what I

was investigating was worth every iota of trouble. I got an “A,” and he asked me to present the paper at the undergraduate symposium that spring.

What does this have to do with my work as a fiction writer? Everything. It’s the small things that motivate me and the suggestion of boundaries that propel me. I’m not much of a rebel, but in my writing life I make stands in small rebellions as much as possible, quiet as the uprisings may be.

I grew up in a middle-class family, had a happy childhood and a happy family. I get along well with my parents and my siblings. I’m grateful for these things, despite the perception often put forward that you have to have some trauma in your family history to know how to write a meaningful, impactful story. My family didn’t give me emotional scars, but they taught me how to stand up for myself, how to seek out knowledge, and to enjoy the world. What I have not experienced for myself, I have experienced through the arts. Every painting, every film, every song that ever moved me is in what I write. But more importantly the books, stories, poems, and essays I have read inform what I myself write.

But it all began as these stories usually do— with a child who would rather spend time considering a world full of magic than one without. Whether it was in drawing, or in bossing my siblings around, I was making up stories for my sketches and my brother and sister. Each morning, when we would be having breakfast, I already had the plan laid out. I handed down the roles and the premise of the story we would play out for the day, whether or not they felt like going along with it was another story.

Then as I grew older, I put my creative impulses down on paper in stories, poems, and drawings. Outlines and discarded drafts of stories kept me occupied through summer vacations. And I read. A lot.

One of the books that changed my view of the world, or perhaps even shored up the direction I was heading, was *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Austen sustained my interest over the course with a simple plot (girl meets boy then faces countless obstacles including herself before girl wins boy) that was in truth anything but simple. While Austen wrote about the world of drawing rooms and balls, she did not paint a world without problems; there is plenty of the seedier side of Regency life in Austen's work, but we only see how it affects her characters, not the nitty-gritty details.

Some of my favorite books, namely E.M. Forster's work and Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle*, are maturations of what can be found in Austen. In fact most of the stories I love are about acknowledging what keeps people apart and what the consequences are if the obstacles cannot be conquered.

While those are my favorite stories, they don't offer much in the way of practical guidance when it comes to the modern use of language. I have come to admire concise language, whether it is the stark language of Richard Yates, or the quiet and sometimes brutal prose of Michael Ondaatje.

This collection takes into consideration all of those influences, including others too numerous to name. The title is a nod to not only an early (and not so great) title for the first story in the collection, but also to an image used time and again in Wim Wenders films. In a majority of his work he shows us the main

character standing at window (often in a hotel) observing the world below. (He carries out this idea to its fullest in *Wings of Desire* and *Far Away, So Close* with angels following us around observing our daily tragedies.) I have always liked the idea of stepping back to observe and to pay closer attention to the world.

With this collection, there is a running theme about the relationships between people, the connections we crave, and often fail to make; in Austen, Foster, and Smith many of the obstacles stem from class issues, whereas in our current era, the obstacles are more closely related to the amount of control we exert on our own lives.

The short story "A History of Lies" grew out of a scene I had written several years ago about two old friends talking about religion when a meteorite lands in the room. I have a vague recollection of there having been some news report about a rock falling into someone's living room in Illinois or Indiana that sparked this premise for me. In the scene I originally wrote, one of the characters was struck by the meteorite, landing her in a hospital. That impulse led me to research the history of meteorites striking people, animals, and structures. The true story of Ann Hodges, an Alabama woman who was struck by a meteorite in 1958, is a fascinating one given the interest in UFOs and the space race between the U.S. and the Soviets. As with most of my work, that's where the story started. In many ways, this was a rare chance for me to contemplate the era of my grandparents, many details spring from what I know of my grandmothers' upbringing and manners, as well as near-missed fates.

Lately it seems inspiration strikes as I am drifting off to sleep. Two of the stories in this collection came from that fleeting moment. “Hiding in a Dark Room” grew out of a character that could only see the color yellow-green the same color as that couch that your aunt, best friend, favorite TV show had sitting smack dab in the middle of the living room. Beyond the quirk, this character, who became Kelly Burns, was immensely lonely and her own worst enemy. My approach to this piece was heavily influenced by Lorrie Moore’s “Community Life.” Moore’s story is about an orphaned naturalized citizen name Olena (an anagram of her name spells Alone) who is living with a womanizing man named Nick. In the end my story, echoes hers more than I thought it would

Stories that tie in to current headlines usually leave me cold, but when the swine flu was breaking news I found myself considering the implications of an epidemic. Close family friends have been on bird-flu panels for years, and as a result I am probably more aware than most of the actions the official bodies will take in the event of a lethal epidemic. Between that and reports coming out of Mexico that people weren’t kissing or even shaking hands, it got me to thinking: How awful would it be if you could not touch another person for an indefinite length of time? Thus began “Separations.” Even with such a different source of inspiration, this thousand-word story encapsulates what my work has been about to date—the need to connect with other human beings.

“Little Fish” found in its beginnings in my last trip across Lake Champlain from Essex, NY, to Burlington, VT. I was mesmerized by the pristine, eddying bubbles pushing through the water under the ferry. I wanted to say something

about this mysterious body of water replete with a lake monster named Champy. Before I knew it, I had written about a Russian family and how well the Northeast compliments the vestiges of Russian culture (perhaps Solzhenitsyn thought so, he lived out his exile from the USSR in Cavendish, Vermont). In some ways, this story represents a direction my work is growing—beyond the relationships between the sexes, and about human relationships in general and the ways we can isolate ourselves by drawing the wrong conclusions.

Save “Separations,” “Miracles and Maidens” was the last story I wrote for the collection, but it was also the piece I’ve been working on longest. Last year, I was visiting a close friend when she asked me if I had heard about the three children that had been found on a mountain-top in Argentina in the late 1990s. I hadn’t, but that was quickly remedied when she dragged me to the next room to show me photos online. She was obsessed with these children who had been sacrificed over five hundred years ago and had remained nearly perfectly preserved until 1999 when archaeologists discovered them. My friend asked me to write a story about them, and immediately fairytales like Sleeping Beauty came to mind, but a shelved that thought.

I had been working on a story about a girl who perfects her physical self, only to realize that it doesn’t represent who she is or could have been. It was not going well, and I thought maybe somehow I could work in at least one of these children who was a symbol of what was considered perfection by the Incas. After a year of trying to make that work, I decided to go for the gusto and let the story work around a frozen girl who is brought back to life, and hoped to keep it from

stepping into *Encino Man* territory. It still took months to figure out how to make that work with writing a report about archaeological expeditions and anthropological studies about the Incan culture.

The last story in the collection was another almost-asleep flash, and amazingly I remembered it in the morning. It all began with Christmas day when, like all other major holidays, my father-in-law and I were watching old movies on cable. This past year, they had a marathon "Christmas with the Duke." So a few days later, I was considering what I could write next and wishing I could write a story that John Wayne might have had something to do with. Somehow that translated to Duke showing up on a woman's couch in the current century. My first thought was "I can't do that." But then I thought, if that gal can write a story about Spock stealing parts from school busses to get back to the final frontier with a depressed school teacher, why can't I write about John Wayne? I had a lot of fun researching this one, although it was difficult to decide how inclusive to be. Duke's politics were not always popular, and they certainly are not mine, but I read enough to have an inkling of what he was about, and much of what he was about was the John Wayne brand. Throughout the collection, I hope that is what I have illuminated, the point at which ideals stop or fall apart and human nature begins.

## A History of Lies

In those days Pierre, Illinois, was all peace and quiet, and that suited Odile Johnson just fine. Sure frog songs filled the night air, but it was the sort of noise that let a body be alone and not mind it much. But it was summer, and there was no school to teach, so the days were quiet, too. Sometimes she thought the rest of the world forgot she existed; she might even go half a week without seeing another soul. In order to remember that there was a “rest of the world,” she listened to the old cathedral radio on the table in the parlor, particularly in the evenings when the signals were strongest from St. Louis.

On that Saturday night in 1948, Odile was knitting a bedspread for the occasion of her cousin Betsy’s wedding. While she knit and purled, she listened to “Twenty Questions” and remembered how her mother would glare if Odile answered the riddle aloud. Then she thought, “Who will remember me when I am gone?”

And then it happened.

A lightning-fast series of crashes left the radio’s arched shape splintered and dust settling from a hole in the plaster ceiling. Odile struggled to piece it all

together. Her first thought was that, some of the older boys, maybe Johnny and Willie Krieger, were bored on a Saturday night and thought they'd give their teacher a scare. But then reason prevailed. Whatever it was had come through the roof, and not the window; it had fallen through the roof, struck the radio, and come to rest behind her mother's vacant chair.

She set aside her knitting and crossed to the corner of the room where she knelt to reach behind the wing-backed chair. She found a small object, but she yanked her hand back; the thing's warmth startled her. She gingerly wrapped her fingers around it a second time and dragged it out.

No bigger than a plum, the deep grey rock did not look like much in the cradle of her hands. One side was smooth, and the rest jagged and stony. She lifted her eyes to the ceiling again. Nothing made sense. She moved to look through the hole and up into a late-evening sky of periwinkle.

As her mind worked over the details, she heard the fire department's bell ring across the two miles from town. Panic flared in her blood; she knew they were coming to her, and she did not want that sort of attention. She went to her bedroom where she deposited the rock in the first box she laid her hands on and slid it to the back of her closet.

She came back to the parlor to discover a ribbon of smoke rising from the radio and an acrid hint of copper in the air. She hid the radio in the corner cupboard, then doused the light, and took her sweater from the hook by the door.

Out on the porch, the honey suckles covering the trellis released their perfume into the cool dewy air. She struggled to put her arms through the sleeves of the

woolen cardigan, but managed to regain her composure before she could see any headlights on the country road. Odile arranged herself in one of the wicker chairs facing the dusty road and took a deep breath.

She expected the fire truck, but she was dumbfounded to see five automobiles following the pumper. There had never been that many vehicles at any one time on the gravel road that led away from town.

The men got out of their sedans and trucks and filled her yard. As accustomed as Odile was to having the attention of her students, these grown men staring through the June dusk embarrassed her. She was the school teacher, the "Miss," and an old maid at thirty years-old, sitting at home on a Saturday night, and the only person who would make them forget that was standing with them.

Without having to see his Studebaker with its painted doors reading *Pierre Feed Co.*, Odile knew that Ernest Palfrey would be there. When the fire truck headed down Main Street towards her house, and word spread more quickly than any flames that there was trouble at the Johnson place, he would not be able to help himself. Even if he were out with one of those Whorley gals at the drug store or the diner, Ernest would abandon his date and the congealing white gravy of his country-fried steak; he would come because he had not spoken to Odile since her mother's funeral. It took every effort not to squirm like one of her young students under his gaze.

She could see the other men as they looked at her and then back at Ernest; she didn't know what they expected, but she was sure their wives would want to

know all about it. Even the sheriff was curious, but it was a re-election year for Virgil Dietz, so he squinted as if he were inspecting her.

“Miss Odile?” Virgil said, motioning to his two deputies and the firemen to spread out over the yard. “Everything all right out here?”

“Of course it is.” She pulled her sweater together against spring’s last breaths. “What’s all this about?”

“Ma’am, in town we saw—” He stopped to cough a little, and put a hand on his hip. “What we saw was a ball of fire heading right for this place.”

“Is that right? A ball of fire?”

“Yes, ma’am.” His cheeks reddened. “It was green.”

“I haven’t seen anything like that around here.” It was getting darker by the second, and she hoped it was dark enough that they couldn’t see the hole in the roof.

The sheriff swallowed, then said, “We’ll still take a look around just to make sure nothing’s out of place.” He signaled that his men should fan out around the house.

“When was anything ever out of place around here?”

“We’ll take a look all the same.”

She thought she might vote for him after all.

As the men disappeared, Ernest remained and approached the porch steps. “How’ve you been, Odie?” he asked, glancing at Virgil as he passed. Ernest was pale, too pale, and with a twinge she realized that it was on her account.

"I've been well," she said. After eleven months, those words were inadequate like apple pie lacking cinnamon.

Tom Woehlk, one of the deputies, reappeared. "I smelled something burning at the side of the house, Virg."

All three pairs of eyes turned and blinked at her.

"One of the electrical outlets sparked." She was ashamed of how easily the lies parted her lips. "Shorted out my radio."

"Nothing serious, I hope," Virgil said.

"Just a spark."

The rest of the brigade returned to the front yard, each giving Virgil a nod upon his return. The sheriff cleared his throat and apologized for bothering her, and she thanked him for his concern; although she thought he was disappointed that there had been nothing to report. Ernest watched each of the men as they reassembled, his thumb tracing the ring that held his keys. As they turned back to their vehicles, he stepped closer to the porch, but he glanced over his shoulder at Virgil and swallowed whatever it was that he had wanted to say.

The men piled into their automobiles, but she waited until the taillights of Ernest's Studebaker were as small as pinholes before she went indoors.

In her bedroom, she opened the closet door, and knelt down on one knee. She stretched to the back and pulled out an old hatbox burned yellow with age. Sitting on her creaking single bed, she slid off the lid and extracted the still-warm rock, holding it in her right hand. It was silly to hide it, but her mother would have done the same.

The thought of her mother compelled Odile to look at what else was in the hatbox folded in the tissue. She lifted the paper with her left hand and ran her fingers over the revealed textures of brocades, taffeta, and charmeuse. There was the faint scent of lavender water, the only scent her mother allowed her to wear because it had medicinal uses, too.

When Odile was sixteen, she sewed together silk and satin into a beautiful frock of rich browns, greens, and greys, with creamy lace cuffs, all from the scraps of the dresses her mother made for the fine ladies of Pierre. In that robe Odile had felt like a movie star, a beauty worthy of Ernest's attention. Her mother called Odile's handiwork an "atrocious extravagance" and forbid her to wear it. Even during the war's 'make-do' campaign when patchwork was patriotic, Odile was only allowed her old cotton dresses. So Odile had wrapped the frock in tissue and placed it in a box at the back of her closet, where she had all but forgotten it. Seeing it now, she allowed herself to smile as recollections surfaced.

That summer when she was sixteen, there had been a handful of clandestine Sunday drives out towards Hennessey's Pond. Each time they headed down the dusty road, Ernest smiled like the cat that had got the canary, barely able to speak he was so pleased. Odile remembered smiling, too, while the wind dragged its fingers through her hair. One night she came home without the red satin ribbon that tied back her hair and figured that it had been tossed by the wind to the side. At school the next Monday, Ernest had been playing with his key ring, twirling it around his finger at the start of class. The flash of red caught her attention; her

ribbon had been wound around the ring. Ernest winked at her, and she was glad that he had something of hers.

The weight of the rock in her palm pushed aside nostalgic thoughts. She didn't know what to do with the thing. It looked ordinary; she could just chuck it out into the yard and no one would be the wiser. But she liked the feeling of having a secret. She enfolded the fallen rock in a few lace-trimmed handkerchiefs, hung the frock in the closet to air out, and went to the kitchen for a glass of cool milk before bed.

The next morning, after an uneasy sleep, Odile woke to a low rumbling. Her eyes opened and blinked against the light. She reached for the clock and held it in front of her eyes. It was past nine; she had overslept and was missing the Sunday service. She got out of bed, went to the west window, and raised the shade to investigate the commotion.

A row of cars were parked along the road, some with the engines still running judging by the racket and the occasional puff of exhaust from tailpipes. There were two dozen people wandering her yard, studying the ground. Because her mother had not brought her up to yell out of windows, Odile scrambled to change into a blouse and skirt. Once clothed, she stepped out onto the front porch, gripped the railing, and hoped no one would notice she wasn't wearing stockings.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked the man closest to her, who was inspecting the hydrangeas. The others barely raised their heads.

“Looking for the meteorite,” the man said, not raising his eyes from his task. She may as well have been a fly for all he paid her any mind. “We all saw it fall last night, but it was too dark to go looking for it then.”

“You’re trespassing. If you would all leave, please,” she said, projecting her teacher’s voice into the yard. “You hear me?”

They were about as interested in her as cows crowded in shade on a sweltering July day.

“We drove the two hours from Maryville, and they told us in town that the authorities came out here.” The man returned his gaze to the ground with a shake of his head. “Somebody out there’d pay good money for a space rock, girlie.”

It had been at least ten years since anyone had spoken to her like that—back before she left for normal school—and she wasn’t having it. Odile slapped her palm on the green-painted porch railing, and none of the trespassers even lifted their eyes. She turned and went into the house letting the screen door clack behind her.

Her hand clutched the telephone handle. “Give me the sheriff,” she said to the operator. The pause between each ring seemed to draw out in a lazy and exaggerated yawn. She could just see Tom Woehlk wiping the biscuit crumbs off his large belly before shuffling over to pick up the telephone.

While Deputy Woehlk was still four steps away from answering, Virgil Dietz pulled into the driveway, throwing up a cloud of dust. She slammed the telephone into its cradle and went to meet him, muttering prayers that he wouldn’t look up at the roof.

“Miss Odile,” he said through the mesh of the screen door.

“Sheriff,” she said, clenching her jaw. “Are you here to ask these people to leave?”

“Well, I heard about all this.” He glanced over his shoulder at the line of cars. He turned back towards her. “I’d like to speak with you for a moment.”

She swung the door open, but as he moved to come in, she stepped out letting the door shut behind her. He glanced beyond her into the long hallway that led past the kitchen and bedrooms straight back to the kitchen. His eyebrows knit together for a moment. “You’re not in church,” he said. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Do I look ill, Virgil?”

“You have me there.”

“I could hardly leave the house with all these people on my property,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

“I know we didn’t see anything out here last night, but I have to investigate this meteor sighting. There’ve been reports from three counties.”

“Meteor?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She leaned back. “What happens if you find what you’re looking for?”

“There’s a procedure,” he said. Then she saw an idea had popped into his head. “You would probably get a lot of attention from the papers, maybe even the radio.”

She turned her gaze to the hay fields. "Could you at least send those people away?"

"I could use the extra eyes." He shifted his weight. "I am sorry for the intrusion upon your Sunday, Miss Odile."

Virgil turned to the railing, just as she'd done minutes before.

"Listen, here," the sheriff said, and with their bovine movements the trespassers turned their heads. "I know you all heard about the meteor that was seen falling in this vicinity last night. Due to public safety concerns, the sheriff's office is conducting this investigation. If you choose to help out, anything you find of an unusual nature should be brought to me or one of my deputies."

He stepped away from the railing and tipped his hat to Odile as he left the porch.

She rubbed her eyes, and stared out at the road. It was only a matter of time before he saw the hole in the roof. Virgil Dietz was more with it than his predecessor who had been interested only in investigating the contents of pie plates. A few weeds were trying to come up through the tulips under the mailbox, and she saw her opportunity. Distracted as she was, she couldn't get a good grip on the dandelions, but she yanked out what she could. After pulling herself back up, she turned and did her best to look at the house without drawing attention to herself. The hole was hidden in the chimney's shadow and the search party had made its way past the house. It wouldn't be hidden from serious scrutiny, but it'd do for now.

For the remainder of the morning, Odile sat in the parlor. Normally, she had a number of chores to deal with on Sundays such as weeding the garden, but she thought better of being outside with the trespassers, watching their every move. It was bad enough she had to put up with the chatter and shouts from the yard; she found herself sorely missing the static of the radio. By late morning she had dug out her Billie Holiday records to distract her from her loss of control.

Since her mother never let her listen to the albums she brought back from visits to her cousins in St. Louis, Odile used to wait until her mother went into town to play bridge with some of the other women, and then she would listen to records and practice dancing—something else her mother forbid. When her mother quit the bridge club after Reverend Froelich gave a sermon about the evils of card-playing, Odile tried to make her mother understand that he meant gambling on cards, but Odile finally had to put her records away.

Listening to tinkling pianos and syrupy strings behind that unusual voice, Odile read a library book, but she had a difficult time staying focused.

She hadn't expected all this fuss; now in the daylight, she regretted her decision to hold onto the rock. She should have taken it from her closet last night and walked over the road to the Meiners' property to toss it among the corn just pushing up through the soil. Then it could have been someone else's nuisance. Now she was surrounded by lunatics who wanted nothing more than to get their hands on what she had hidden, and the biggest clue to finding it was right over her head.

She was nauseated. No way, no how, did Odile want to be front page news thanks to a meteorite of all things. It was bad enough that Lettie Samuels probably already had several items for her gossip column in the *Pierre Recorder* about all the goings-on at the Johnson place. From her childhood, there was nothing more horrifying than seeing one's name in print. When Odile won a mathematics competition in high school, and the results were in the paper, Mrs. Johnson sent Odile to the reverend everyday for a week for personal lectures about humility.

Then after her mother died an item appeared in Lettie's column after the funeral notice: "It is expected that Miss Odile Johnson will soon be selling her property on Mapleton Route 3 after her impending marriage to Mr. Ernest Palfrey of Pierre."

How Lettie ever got that into her head, Odile never knew, but Odile was humiliated. She knew Ernest must have been, too, especially when he had never said that he was ready to apply for the license. But once the item was in the personals, he drove over to speak with Odile. That night folks throughout Pierre saw Ernest heading out to Odile's; that sewed it up that Odile and Ernest would be married. But they had it all backwards, Ernest proposed because of the item. And Odile had to tell him that she wouldn't marry him.

As soon as she said it and saw him swallow back tears, she wished she could take it back. But she didn't. She couldn't. She did demand that Lettie print a retraction, and then the whispers were inescapable. Even one of her students,

Billy Woehlk, asked her if she was going to be an old maid. "A spinster," she answered him. "That's the polite way of saying it."

From that moment Odile had accepted the life she had created for herself, a life now disrupted by the noise of cars slowly rolling past, gawking at the activity in her yard. She was trapped until nightfall, but that gave her plenty of time to decide how best to patch the roof after they'd gone.

At lunch time when she had only read about five pages of her book, there was a knock on the screen door. With a huff, Odile closed the book and went to the door to find Ernest Palfrey in the shade of the porch roof. She wondered if all this thinking about him and brought him to her. Color rose right up to the tips of her ears.

"I thought I'd look in on you," he said.

"I don't know why." She scratched at a scuff on the jamb, so as not to see that he was freshly shaven, though she could still smell the soap.

"For one thing I was on my way to the Boldts. I told Larry I would drop off some corn meal this afternoon."

"I see," Odile said, now examining the mesh of screen door. She was disappointed by the credibility of his excuse. The Boldts, to whom her mother had sold the farm when Odile finished school, lived on the next property up the road.

"For another you weren't in church this morning. I can't remember the last time you weren't at church."

“How would you know, Ernest Palfrey?” She raised her eyebrows. “You hardly go yourself.”

“I go when I need to.” He shifted his weight. “Something’s going on with you, Odie Johnson.”

“Nonsense.” Then before she could stop herself, she said, “Have you had lunch?”

“No, ma’am.”

“I was going to eat out here.” She nodded towards the wicker table and chairs on the porch. “It’s such a beautiful day.”

“It is that.”

“Cold chicken all right?”

“My favorite.”

She had the presence of mind to keep him out of the house, from seeing the hole in the ceiling, but it didn’t occur to Odile that she could have sent him away entirely until she was in the kitchen, pulling food out of the icebox.

She prepared their plates, giving him an extra helping of German potato salad, and poured some iced tea. When she made her way to the front porch with the laden tray, she found him sitting in one of the wicker chairs turning his hat in his hands.

“Everything all right, Ernest?”

“I beg your pardon. It’s just that I keep expecting your mother to shoo me off.”

“No danger of that.” She put their plates down on the table and settled into the seat opposite him. She said grace, but she wasn’t present in her thanks, she had spied the key ring lying on the edge of the table. The red ribbon was faded, grimy, and frayed in spots.

She thought of those days after she had returned to Pierre with her teaching certificate. Ernest Palfrey came by every Saturday evening, but as soon as he set foot on their property Mrs. Johnson, sitting on the porch snapping peas or shucking corn, would tell Ernest that Odile had more important things to do than waste her time with him. To her mother’s mind, her daughter was obliged to be her caretaker not somebody’s wife. That’s what the women in her line had done for generations. It was very well for her Mrs. Johnson to expect that of her when Odile’s grandmother hadn’t lived past forty-five. But Mrs. Johnson was as healthy as an ox, and Odile had thought she would stay that way forever.

There was a movement at the edge of the porch that brought Odile back to the words she was saying over her folded hands. Virgil Dietz stepped into view and nodded at Ernest. “Miss Odile?”

Resisting a glance at Ernest, she straightened in her seat and addressed the sheriff like he was one of her students. “Yes, Virgil.”

He reflexively squirmed, if only a little. “We’ve found nothing yet, but I promised Jenny I’d be home for lunch.”

“Will you be coming back today?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be back here in a bit.” He moved to go, but then stopped and turned back to them. “We probably won’t find anything. They tell me that

these things often break up into pieces small enough no one notices them unless they see them hit the ground or the barn or what have you. If we can't find anything by the end of the day, I'll make sure everyone goes home."

"Thank you, Sheriff."

Virgil nodded and walked down the drive. Odile and Ernest ate in silence until Virgil's truck was no longer visible.

"Are you going to keep denying they'll find anything?" Ernest said.

"What would they find?"

"You're hiding something."

"What do meteors or space rocks have to do with us?"

"Not much, I guess."

"Why does everyone want there to be something extraordinary in a hay field? It won't change anything." She pushed the potato salad around her plate. "Not for the good, anyway."

"It's nice to remember that there's more to life than what meets the eye."

Ernest had put his fork down. "It was something else, that fireball. I was coming out of the drug store with a mint and chocolate-chip ice cream, when that light popped up out of nowhere, and burned its way down. I thought for sure this house would be in flames by the time we got to it."

She heard the shift in his voice and met his eyes. She found herself wishing he would look at her like he did when she dropped pencils off her desk in high school. His eyes would raise to her as he retrieved the pencil, and the light would pool in them, looking for all the world like the purest honey and she was the bee.

She knocked things off her desk so often, other kids called her a klutz and butterfingers. But his eyes didn't look like honey now. They were fire, banked and smoldering. They had been that way since he came back from the war in Europe and found that Odile had given in to her mother's wishes.

"You didn't have to come out here," she said. "In fact, I thought that was the agreement."

"But you've got nobody to look after you now."

"I've got myself. I am capable, you know."

"All too well, I know it."

They were silent a moment, then Odile asked, "What happened to your ice cream?"

"Melted in a puddle where I dropped it in front of the drugstore." He gazed at the rows of young green corn stalks across the road, and then he picked up his keys and pushed back from the table. "I guess I'd better be moving on to the Boldts."

Odile pursed her lips, but couldn't find anything to say that was fair.

He put his hat on and peered out into the sunny day. "I sure hope they find something out there."

After he had gone, Odile tidied up the dishes. Neither of them had eaten much of the food. She returned to the parlor, thankful for the breeze that blew through the windows carrying a cool from the river valley. With lunchtime there was a hush in the air that had been absent all morning. Her attention drifted to the place where the radio had been.

The last argument between Odile and her mother had been about buying a new radio. Odile had been saving her money, but her mother thought it an extravagance when the old one still worked.

“Mother, we only get one station and it’s so staticky during the day,” Odile had said.

“What do you need to listen during the day for? One station is plenty in the evening as long as we can still listen to Dr. Fuller’s revival hour.”

Not another word was spoken by her mother all night, and Odile’s frustration seethed and boiled under the surface as she ate dinner, tasting only bitterness with each bite of ham and beans. Odile washed the dishes and turned in early. As she lay in bed, she let herself consider what life with Ernest would have been like. She had once hoped that she could convince her mother that it was possible to look after a husband and a mother. And then when she came up against the brick wall that was her mother, she at least would have had him to turn to.

But after Pearl Harbor, Ernest felt compelled to join the army and was sent to England. He wrote letters that talked about a life together, but they couldn’t keep her from fetching shawls and water bottles for four years, sitting home listening to radio programs, going to church on Sundays, while other young women were being wooed. When Ernest came back, she thought he would be able to get on with his life without her, but she knew her mother couldn’t. Odile was the only one to look after her. She made the choice her mother expected of her, and hoped Ernest would forgive her.

The morning after their quarrel over the radio, Mrs. Johnson was not yet up when Odile came into the kitchen for breakfast. She found her mother in bed, her skin cold and her condescending smile a faint ghost over her mouth.

Her mother's final and lasting punishment was meted out in the guilt Odile harbored. She couldn't bring herself to order a new radio let alone accept a marriage proposal spurred by newspaper speculations. She had begged Ernest to leave her be—he would be happy with someone else, maybe one of the Whorley gals? He left her alone as she had asked, but every day she was relieved that there was no news of his being engaged to anyone else.

Her face grew hot. She didn't want to think about the past anymore. She didn't want to think about the ways she had let herself down to follow her mother's wishes.

She heard the sound of tires on the drive, and reluctantly stretched to get up and see how things were going outside. The Studebaker was there on the gravel, but there was no sign of Ernest. Odile crossed the porch and looked into the yard. He was coming from the barn's flung-wide door carrying a ladder. His face was set in a frown.

"Ernest Palfrey, what are you doing?"

"I'm taking a look at your roof," he yelled back, setting the ladder against the side of the house. "I saw something as I was driving up."

"There's nothing to see up there," she said, but with too much force.

He leveled his gaze on her. "Odie, I think we've both had enough of your fibbing."

She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. Hot tears spilled down her cheeks, as she went as quickly as she could to her closet. She took the box up in her arms. Ernest's words flamed in her ears, and she couldn't ignore them: She was a liar. She would never have believed it of herself until a rock fell into her house. Now she felt every lie, big to small, she had ever told that day and any day before, swirling around her, passing through her like ghosts. There was the time she said she hadn't drawn a flower inside the cover of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. Then when she told her mother she was studying with Molly Dietz, but she met some kids from school at the drug store for a phosphate. Three years ago, she told Ernest that she was convinced that the best thing for her was to take care of her mother. Then last year on the evening of her mother's funeral when Ernest told her that he would be waiting for her, she told him that she never wanted to be a wife and that he should never come to her again. Now she was lying about the whole town about a rock that came crashing through her roof from God knows where. She had lied and lied, never brave enough to be truthful.

First she undressed the space rock, peeling back the handkerchiefs and they fell into a soft pile of cotton and lace on her bed; in her hands it was like any old rock, but she heard it whisper of life beyond what she had known. Then she undressed herself, abandoning her blouse and skirt in a heap on the floor next to her bed. She heard Ernest's footsteps on the roof, followed by a long whistle of disbelief.

Her hands should have been shaking. A well-brought up Christian woman's hands would have trembled. But this had nothing to do with anything she was

supposed to be anymore. She put on the many-colored frock and took the rock into her hands before returning to the parlor where the shades were still drawn low.

“Ernest,” she said and was answered with locusts and frogs.

Then there were footsteps back across the roof, then down the ladder. His shadow passed outside as he strode to the front of the house. She wished she could match her breaths to his deliberate steps. Her hands grew sweaty clasping the space rock. He creaked on the floor boards of the porch, and there was no hesitation in his gait as he opened the door and came into the house.

He entered the parlor, stood at the center of the room, and tilted his head back. The sunlight streaming through the whole illuminated the motes swirling around him. He finally noticed her, and he shook his head. “Girl, what am I going to do with you?”

Odile opened her mouth to speak, but nothing would come. Instead, she offered her hands with everything they held. While the breeze pushed the frock against the back of her legs, she waited for him to cross the room.

## Hiding in a Dark Room

Kelly was sure of two things: Without monochromatic color blindness she wouldn't be a photographer, and without photography she wouldn't be standing in a midtown art gallery on a Thursday night sipping free cabernet. Granted, the latter point was more indirect since it wasn't her photography hanging on the white walls; but there she was in a room filled with black-clad people and sprawling heaps of industrial trash sculpted by the man she slept with.

Maybe it was because Kelly saw the world in greys and the girl's black and white dress, dark hair, and pale skin made for reassuring contrasts. Or maybe it was because Kelly herself was standing off to the side of the action and was surprised to see someone else eschewing the small talk. Whatever the reasons, she was compelled to abandon her solitude to approach the girl. "These things are never as much fun as they sound, are they?" she said.

The girl turned and her face darkened with embarrassment. "Worse. I'm supposed to be taking notes for a class."

"That is worse."

The girl shrugged, but her face blossomed in a smile. “You’re a fan of Sean Creiter’s work?”

At the mention of his name, Kelly’s eyes drifted to his dark, curly head across the room. He was surrounded by well-wishers whose heads were tilted to gaze up at him through eyelashes. “I am.”

“It’s so different from yours,” she said. “You’re Kelly Burns, right?”

“Have we met?”

“Amica Lorentz.” Her hand clasped Kelly’s. “I really admire your work. The values are so rich, and the textures are amazing.”

Kelly thanked her, but was taken aback. Most people who liked her hyper-real nature photographs had silvered hair and lived on safe and quiet streets. They were people who bought her prints for their offices and foyers. “How do you know my work?”

“I interned at the Madosky Gallery. I was there for your show last August.”

“So you’re a student?”

“Art history. Your exhibit was my favorite. But it makes me curious about what you think of Sean’s work since you don’t work with color. What do you think about how he uses it?”

A thrill of panic coursed through Kelly; she lived in fear of these questions. Her color-blindness was her secret, as much as it could be, and she worried that it would be looked at as cheating. She avoided openings and receptions, but Sean had been insistent that she come to his showing.

“Everyone will be too dazzled by your observations to figure out what you can and can’t see,” he said. “And if it comes down to it, tell them that Sean Creiter’s colors are extensions of his commentary on the manmade wasteland of the chemical age.” His smile drew deep creases over his face.

With Amica expecting an answer to her question, Kelly smiled now. She peered down at the tangle of rusted metal that was stuffed with paper trash, mostly concrete bags, and she wondered if it was supposed to look like his bed before it was tucked back into order. Regardless, she admired his ability to arrange things in meaningful ways. Kelly wondered if she was getting away with something in her work, only capturing what already existed. “With Sean’s work, the colors don’t impact me as much as the mere fact of the piece,” she said. “I like that he challenges us to look at this junk. He didn’t make the trash. He made the trash a statement. It makes the observer uncomfortable.”

“You like being uncomfortable?”

“Not really.” Kelly surprised herself by smiling. “But I think it’s my natural state.” Amica opened her mouth to ask another question, but Sean motioned to Kelly from across the room. Kelly excused herself, and threaded herself through a gaggle of his students, who were every one, gorgeous in their ballerina chignons, vintage dresses, and slouchy boots. His eyebrows arched and fell as he charmed his followers. Kelly smiled, knowing she should be jealous. His ability to work an audience was one of the reasons she found herself with him; he could make her forget everything but what he was talking about.

Kelly put her arm around his waist, but didn't linger. She hated the role of the possessive and jealous girlfriend. It was painful how hard the girls worked at ignoring her presence, so she chose to disregard them by studying a run of ductwork that had holes and gashes spilling corroded nails and the *Financial Times*. After a moment, Sean draped an arm over her shoulders. "Are you doing all right?" he asked.

She nodded. "You?"

"You're smiling."

"It could be the wine," she said, "but I'm having a good time."

"I'm glad." He kissed her cheek. "Do you mind grabbing my notebook from the back office?"

"Sure."

Kelly slipped down the hallway that led to a unisex restroom and two unmarked doors. She tried the first door, and from the glow of a water cooler in the corner she could see that she had stepped into the break room, she closed the door behind her and stood in the dark. After a few easy breaths in the relative quiet, her mood tumbled.

She had a good thing going with Sean after being together for the better part of a year—right after her show last summer. She loved that he was always cataloging her angles or the way the light caught the fine hairs on her belly, and she wondered what parts of her could be found underneath his sculptural rust piles. At the same time she was making her own study. This is what mouths are for. Hands should squeeze backs, shoulders, asses. Legs tangle. Backs arch.

Eyes close. She noted the dark puddles where their skin met, and the way his hair absorbed the shadows of his bedroom. And after the cataloging was complete, she would dress and leave Sean in his apartment of concrete, brick, and steel planes and return to her own place—black and white, but soft, clean, uncomplicated.

Last night the pair of them lay in his dark sheets, the study was only beginning. Her fingers were mapping the contours of his shoulder and the length of his arm. “I hope you’re still coming to the opening tomorrow,” he said with his breath falling against her throat.

“I was planning on it,” she said.

“It’s just that you spend too much time alone.” His hand ran over the angle of her jaw. “In fact I propose you move in with me, thereby spending less time alone.”

“Move in?” She stiffened. “I’ve never even stayed the entire night.”

He let go of her. “That’s kind of my point.”

“Where would I fit?” Kelly slid out of the bed and paced along side the bed. “Every inch of this place is your studio.”

“I want to be with you more.”

“Is it so bad that I like my own space?” When she was answered with silence, she slapped the brick wall for punctuation. “I guess it is. Look, it’s not that I don’t like being with you.”

“I know you’re scared. It’s scary letting someone in. I just thought you might be ready.”

“Sean,” she said, as she knelt next to the bed and stretched her arms towards him, “I’m closer to you than anyone I’ve ever met.”

He stared at the exposed joists in the ceiling. “I’d hate to think that’s true.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said. She retracted her hands, clasping them together. “All right?”

He reached for her, tugging her hands, then her body back across the bed.

“Think about it, but don’t say no.”

His dark eyes blinked at her, and she repeated herself. “I’ll think about it.”

But this moment was exactly what she meant. He was out there in his element, surrounded by all the pretty young things, and she was hiding in a dark room soaking in the quiet. And yet, he wanted to share something with her beyond a few hours a night. No one before had asked for more from her, and never before had she considered it.

There were footsteps in the hall, the door opened, and the lights were flipped on. In the dark, Kelly hadn’t known that she had been only inches from a sofa, over which now fell with a shriek and then bounced on the woolen cushions.

“Are you okay?” The footsteps had belonged to Sean, who was helping her up.

“I just needed a minute of quiet.” Up on her own two feet again, she glanced at the sofa to make sure the cushions were not too much askew, and that’s when her stomach dipped.

“Sorry, I knocked you over. There’s a journalist out there who wants to set-up an interview, and he’s trying to leave, so I came to check if you found my appointment book.” He held it up.

“That’s great,” she said with eyes narrowed at the sofa.

“Are you all right?” he asked, and then he noticed where her attention was.

“Pretty cool couch.”

She swallowed. “What color would you say that was?”

“Yellow-green.”

“I thought so.”

“If you want to head over to the bar in a few and grab a table, I’ll be along in a half-hour or so.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said, forcing a smile.

He disappeared through the door, but Kelly couldn’t bring herself to walk away just yet. Her eyes closed, and she was back in her childhood living room, where her mother’s perfume and father’s aftershave were still in the air. There were chickadees and nuthatches warbling outside in a last minute scramble to gather food before the rainstorm set in. No clothes were ever as comfortable as the cotton skirt and velour turquoise sweater she wore that morning. For a moment she was back in that life.

“It was nice to meet you, Kelly,” Amica said, coming from the direction of the bathroom. “I think I’m done for the night.”

Kelly took another long look at the sofa, and then at Amica. “Do you want to join me and Sean for drinks? I’m supposed to head out now and get a table.”

Amica's face scrunched up. "I don't think I should. I don't want to intrude on the rest of your night."

"You wouldn't be." Kelly meant that; she hoped Amica might be a buffer to further discussions about moving in. After a little more prodding Amica agreed to have a drink with Kelly while she waited for Sean.

A short while later they were settled in the dark and smoky bar, sipping on pints in a booth that had needed new upholstery since 1975.

"I take it you had enough of the beautiful people back there?" Amica said. "You looked like you were in another world when I ran into you before we left."

"Yeah, it's silly, but it was that sofa."

"Yeah, that is one retro couch."

"The color certainly is."

"Chartreuse," Amica said, exaggerating a French accent.

Kelly groaned. "I drank a bottle of that stuff once."

"What stuff?"

"Chartreuse. It's a liqueur that the color is named for, a top secret formula made by monks in France."

"Why did you drink a bottle of it?"

"It's a long story. It was an experiment, but it failed and I ended up in the hospital on suicide watch."

"Really?" Amica said, leaning forward.

Kelly took a deep breath. "My parents had that same sofa when I was a kid, but then they died."

The other girl's smile evaporated. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. They've been gone a long time." She wanted to say that she didn't feel anymore pain about this, but she couldn't bring herself to lie. What it felt like was a record playing the same song over and over underneath the rest of her consciousness—*they're gone, you're alone, they're gone, you're alone*. She had gotten used to that rhythm; it was always there. Seeing that sofa made the record skip, but the needle had found its place again, and she heard the whispering chant, her sad balance restored. "I loved that sofa. Its cushions made a good fort."

Amica smiled and nodded. "But where does the Chartreuse come into play?"

Kelly's secret story was this: On a rainy day in April, as she sat in her family room among the rich red shag carpet, gold velvet curtains, and the pea-soup green of the slope-shouldered sofa, the colors faded leaving behind black, white, and every shade of grey.

She had been playing with her dolls on the floor while her grandmother worked crosswords and watched Phil Donahue when the phone rang. Her grandmother set down the crossword and went to the kitchen. Minutes later, she came back into the room. Kelly didn't even look up; she was busy dressing Barbie in a ball gown.

"Kelly, honey," her grandmother said, her voice strained and watery.

Kelly's head snapped up. As she was told her parents had been in an accident and wouldn't be coming home anymore, she stared at the yellow-green sofa. It was the last color she saw.

Later she learned in art classes that the yellow-green had a name—chartreuse. She was in high school and got a hold of a bottle of the green 110 proof liqueur. Her thinking was that maybe by drinking the last color she ever saw, maybe it would unlock something, shake it loose. The park ranger saw her feet sticking out from behind some bushes, and called the ambulance. She didn't drink again until she was twenty-three, and she was pretty sure that if she had her stunt worked, if she could see the color chartreuse, it would only make her lose the contents of her stomach.

“No one knows that,” Kelly said.

“Not even Sean? Does he know you're colorblind?”

“He knows what my vision's like, but he doesn't know the rest.”

“Why not?”

Kelly shrugged. “I never thought it would last so long.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“I guess I needed to tell someone.”

“Feels good, I'll bet, to have that out of your head,” Amica smiled, but there was a cloud over her face.

Kelly laughed. “You have a secret that you need to tell someone you've only know a few hours, too?”

Amica laughed, too, and shook her head.

“Will you keep an eye open for Sean? I'll be right back.”

In the restroom, Kelly splashed water on her face and let out several deep breaths. Amica was right; she should tell Sean the truth, especially if she was

even going to consider his offer. Tomorrow, she'd tell him tomorrow. With a last look in the mirror, she stepped back into the smoky bar to see Sean had finally joined them. He and Amica were leaning over the table talking their heads only inches apart. They were talking about her.

"There's no need to tell her," Amica said. "I like her. I don't want her to get hurt."

"I have to tell her," Sean said. "I asked her to move in with me."

Angry streaks had appeared on Amica's throat, unfurling and irritated like ink staining fabric.

Kelly knew that Sean slept around, and she hadn't minded because in the early days it kept him from getting too attached. But that was before. "When?" Kelly said, as she approached the booth.

Sean looked up at her, his eyes wide. "Last year." His palms pressed against the table top. "Your show."

"We were together that night," she said after a moment.

"It was during the show."

"During?" Her gaze swept from him to her. Amica's eyes were lowered and studying the tabletop. Kelly's mind raced back to that night.

"We met at the student show last winter and went out for drinks. And I ran into her again that night at the Madosky. It was just something that happened once, Kelly." He searched her face with his dark eyes, but she saw Amica's head snap up.

“Was it just once?” she asked Amica, but the girl pursed her lips together, and lowered her head again.

“You’re the one who never wanted to put limits on this,” he said.

“You’re right,” she said. “It’s a good thing, too.”

As she walked out, Sean called after her, but Amica was yelling at him. Kelly stepped into the cool spring air, and rubbed her face. She clutched at the first practical thought that popped up, “Get a cab.” She walked down the block to the intersection to hail get-away car. Once she gave the driver her south city address, she sank into the back seat and underneath the easy-listening music on the radio she whispered over and over, “You’re alone.” The words disintegrated into syllables and sounds until it was the reassuring gibberish of wind through grass.

## Separation

When Leslie heard him coming up the stoop, she sat up from the bed, and padded over to the bedroom door. The deadbolt unlocked, the door swung open and shut, his keys landed in the bowl on the little table, then Alan came up the creaking stairs, each step echoing into the corners of the entryway. The sticky door at the top was forced open, and once it was closed again, he stopped to lean against the cool plaster wall.

That morning, Leslie had crept to the living room window to watch him leave. As a police officer he had been deemed essential personnel and was authorized to leave the house only to perform his duties, but she suspected that he abused the freedom of his badge to get out of the apartment into the open air. Where he went dressed in her favorite blue shirt, she didn't want to consider. Now as he leaned three walls away, she could hear him breathing, each exhalation slower than the last. After a moment, he walked through the living room, dining room and hallway to stand outside their room.

“Leslie?” he said through the door. Traveling through the century-old wood his voice softened, so that she could pretend everything he said was said tenderly. “Are you okay?”

Scenarios tumbled through her head—what would happen if she answered no? What could he do? Risk infection by coming into their room only to discover that she was perfectly fine, not even a sniffle. His eyes would narrow to glinting slivers, a glare that she didn’t miss. “Yes,” she said. “I’m fine.”

His weight shifted on the creaking floor back towards the other room—he was turning to go. “How are you?” she blurted.

She peered at the knotty panel of the door, convinced that one of those afternoons through the power of x-ray she would be able to see Alan’s expressions and body language. For now she told herself that she heard his shoulders relax. That was one power she had developed; the ability to discern the nuances of cloth on skin or breath pushing through air.

This had come about since the electricity had gone out a week ago, when twelve days into the general quarantine too few workers could make it to the plants. Although occasionally generators filled in the blank spaces where there had been the hum of refrigerators, the buzz of TVs and stereos, and the whizzing of any number of electronics plugged into walls, the air was free from those agitated noises.

At first it was worse than after September 11<sup>th</sup> when the absence of jet engines in the skies made stranger those unnerving days. That absence was there again,

but coupled with no power the silence was deafening until everyone's ears readjusted to bird calls, dog barks, and the sound of people in their homes.

The neighbors' lives had become soap operas that occupied Leslie's time as the days wore on. The Morrisons lived in the house across the alley from the two-family flat she shared with Alan. Amazingly, none of the five perpetually sniffy and phlegmy children had been infected, but that meant Antonia Morrison was nearly hoarse from yelling at them to stop antagonizing one another. But just when things reached fever-pitch at the Morrisons everything went quiet. Worried that one or more of them had finally been pushed over the edge, Leslie peeked through her window to see them in their kitchen hugging each other.

Relieved, Leslie lay back on her bed and folded her arms over her stomach and waited for a breeze to blow in. While she waited, her neighbors downstairs, Jim and Emily, decided to use the time to propagate the species. They joked that there would be a need to bolster the population once the quarantine was over and the bodies were counted. If enough people thought like Jim and Emily, the world was in for a baby boom on the other side of the panic. Thankfully Leslie was spared a play-by-play of their repopulation plan after the Espinozas got into a screaming match about cleaning the house. It wasn't the name-calling and the door-slamming that had put a damper on the mood around the block, but rather the enthusiastic make-up sex. Everyone got a little self-conscious knowing how much could really be heard by the neighbors, but then when Leslie heard muffled noises, she was left to guess what was being muffled.

The only silent apartment was Leslie and Alan's. If one of their neighbors strained to hear what they were doing, the only clues would be quiet voices in brief conversation and the occasional door closing, as Alan came and went from the second bedroom or Leslie took a breather from hers. But this had been the arrangement for two and half months before the quarantine began. Long gone were the days when they would pull their mattress into the living room to watch movies or take turns reading to each other from the paper. The night he told her about Marissa and that it was over, and she said that he couldn't sleep in their bed anymore, the things they used to do together were suddenly things they might never do again.

"Are you okay?" she asked once more, hearing him caught in the space between their rooms.

His weight shifted away again. "Yeah."

"Is it terrible out there?" She was forgetting what his hands looked like. This made her throat clench, even after all the time she considered what a relief it would be never to see him again.

"No." The window sill groaned as he sat on its edge. "It's weird with everything so deserted, but not too bad."

"Are you safe?"

"Most of the looting is up north, so I am safe enough."

"You wouldn't lie to me?"

He stood up and stepped quietly to her door. "If only I could."

She had nothing to say to that, but hoped he had not learned how to hear drooping shoulders.

Something brushed against the door. She put her ear up to it, hoping not only to hear but feel his fingers on the wood. Her breath collected in brief puffs on the dull polished surface until he moved away. While she waited for him to retreat to the space that was now his alone, the doorknob was cool under her grip, but not cool enough.

## Little Fish

Galya Sokoloff remembered one summer more than any other. It was the summer before her family sold their cottage, their *dacha*, on Lake Champlain. It was the summer of raised voices. The summer spent with her Aunt Vera. Galya was five years old.

She had learned to swim off the rocky beach behind the dacha. In the cold water her lips blueed in a matter of minutes, but that didn't stop her from imagining she was just another fish in that expanse as mysterious as green amber. She wore her Barbie swimming suit every day from first light until bedtime. As often as her family could stand to keep an eye on her, she was in and out of the water.

A short flight of wooden steps led down to the beach that after a few feet fell off into the lake. She had been warned many times by her parents not to climb down there without one of the adults. But the temptation of the water proved to be more than she could stand. After lunch one day, when the cottage filled with sleep, Galya slipped out to the beach. Galya's Aunt Vera, her *tyotyenka*, had come to America for the summer and spent her days looking after Galya. That

day, Vera had sung lullabies from her bed across the small room they shared. While her auntie sang, Galya admired the mother-of-pearl combs that swept the hair from her auntie's face. The longer tresses dangled in light brown braids that Galya loved best at night, when the braids were unplaited and lay like shimmering waves down her auntie's back.

The lullabies trailed off, and her auntie's breaths elongated and stuttered into great snores, and that was Galya's signal to swing her legs over the side of her twin bed, careful that the old springs squeaked only a little, and certainly not enough to disturb her auntie. She tiptoed through the cottage, eased open the screen door, and pulled her towel from the deck railing.

She intended to swim for only a little while and then to lie in the sun to dry out before her parents came back from town with groceries. Since her father had to go back home to Burlington the next morning, the neighbors were coming over. The adults would want to talk, play cards, and not do anything fun the rest of the night. This was Galya's chance.

As fast as her feet would carry her, she ran across the lawn to the steep weathered steps. Holding on to the rail, she moved first one foot then the other onto each tread of the steps. Her progress was as quick as she could make it—her tongue stuck out in concentration. At the bottom she jumped off, nearly landing in the lapping water with the shale crunching under her. On the balls of her feet, she stepped back

“That was a close one!” she said forgetting that she was supposed to be quiet. After folding her towel in a floppy, uneven rectangle, she placed it on the bottom

plank. The water splish-splished against the rocks throwing droplets on the tops of her feet and ankles. The sunshine warmed her skin until she could no longer stand not to be in the lake. She eased into it, sucking in a breath with each step until the bottom dropped out and she tread water. When she submerged her head her scalp tingled from the cold and joy bubbled in her stomach floating her to the surface where she bobbed on her back like a leaf or a stick.

The boat was moving so fast that Galya only just heard it as it flew by, smacking its way through the soft waves. The impact of the boat against the surface of the water threw up white-capped swells that charged towards Galya. Her eyes grew wide, and she flipped to her stomach and slashed the water with her inexperienced stroke. The first wave tugged her ankles back and pushed her down, and then again, and the water swirled over her head. Her chest burned and the urge to cough scratched at her throat while she tried to pull herself up through the water. Her arms tired, and she only kicked half as much as before. With her eyes open in the translucent jade green, she sank lower and lower until something caught and lifted her. When her head came up through the surface, her Aunt Vera took her by the arm and pulled her into the shallow water.

“Galochka!” she said, as she carried her onto the shore. “Are you trying to scare me to death?”

She coughed and wiped her eyes. “Tyotyenka, did you see it?”

“They have no business going that fast!”

“No, not the boat.” Her auntie lowered her to the beach. “In the water something saved me. I think it was a lady.”

“What do you mean a lady?” Her auntie’s white shift was soaked through and smudged with green algae. “You’re a strong swimmer and one lucky little fish. What would have happened if I hadn’t woken up and seen you swimming out here?”

Galya looked down at her feet. Bits of grey pebbles stuck to her wet skin. In her mind’s eye, a pale blur was becoming more and more clear.

“That might have been the end of my *rybochka*,” her auntie said as she put her arms around Galya. She couldn’t be in too much trouble, if her auntie still called her by her nickname, calling her a little fish. “You absolutely cannot do that again. Understand me?”

“Yes, tyotyenka.” Galya’s lower lip stuck out in a pout. “But there was a lady who helped me.”

“There’s no lady.” She turned Galya’s shoulders towards the steps and pointed up to the house. “If you promise that you’ll never come down here by yourself again, I’ll let this be our little secret.”

“I promise.”

Galya kept her word with no difficulty. She didn’t even go for a morning swim with her father before he headed back to work. Her parents thought she was coming down with something. “What’s wrong, little fish?” they asked, putting hands on her stomach and her forehead. Her mother shook her head at her father and uttered angry Russian susurrations.

“Enough,” her father said, and he made his way down the steps so that her mother had to yell.

“Can’t you see you’re upsetting her?” her mother said, grabbing Galya’s arm and pulling her close.

Galya ignored their quarrelling and peered at the lake for shapes moving beneath the water, but only saw the sunlight dancing over the surface around her father’s long strokes. Within a few days her awe of what the lake might hold eased, and once again she swam in the cool water all day long.

A green cloisonné urn sat upon the piano in the Sokoloffs’ living room, but it was out of place with the backdrop of Galya’s swimming trophies and medals in the built-in wall display of shiny golds and bold-colored ribbons. Galya sat on the sofa opposite holding a tumbler half-full of vodka. In a black skirt, black blouse, and kitten heels, Galya could easily have been on the wait staff at one of the Burlington’s fine-dining restaurants except for the scarf tied over her dark braids. Her Aunt Vera’s scarf looked like the aftermath of an exploded garish tapestry, but since the funeral that morning Galya didn’t feel like uncovering her hair, even when mourners voices kept trailing off when they told her she looked like Vera. *Before*. That’s what they wanted to say. Galya looked like her aunt before the cancer.

Galya’s mother had mandated that the urn should remain on the piano. She said that Vera ashes should resonate with the hammer strikes since her playing had brought so much joy to all who heard her. Galya had no recollection of her auntie playing the piano, but her mother insisted. Galya suspected that all the

years her mother had colored her Lady-Di hair an implausible shade of mahogany had finally taken its toll. The funeral had been held at the Orthodox Church almost an hour away, although her auntie had been a non-believer. The only concession to her auntie's wishes was her cremation. Galya's father had insisted on that. Galya had been surprised; her father's attitude was typically one that suggested it was easier to let her mother have her way.

"Say hello to the people who have come to pay their respects," her mother said, as she perched on the edge of the sofa next to Galya. Her face was smooth and white like a china doll. "Your auntie's at peace now. You mustn't be so sad."

Galya's mother was relieved that her sister had passed. For the past two years, her auntie had battled cervical cancer, growing every week a little less bright, less cheerful, less enthusiastic—a poor copy of herself. But her hair had grown back quickly. Every morning when Galya got home from swimming practice, she would plait her auntie's hair and slide her combs into place. Her hair always looked like the sunlight on water, brown and silver. Then in the past year, no matter how badly she was feeling, Vera would disappear from the house and show up along the shores of Lake Champlain. Galya or her parents would find her auntie soaked to the bone walking along Lake Street, saying she just need to feel the water around her.

Galya untied the scarf and touched the combs now in her hair. She surveyed the room, but didn't see anyone she could bear to speak with. From the kitchen, she heard her father's watery voice speaking in hushed tones to his friends, all

fellow engineers from the factory, between raised glasses of vodka. Galya couldn't bear to see her father so unlike himself. In his grief everything seemed to droop: his ears, his jowly cheeks, his shoulders, even his hair seemed to hang in sadness. Her father had known Vera longer than he knew his wife, and they had often had lively conversations about who was a greater novelist Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, or what the greatest Russian poem of all time was. Surely it was one of Pushkin's, her father would insist, while her aunt was a fan of Akhmatova. Even now she could hear him muttering Lermontov's poem about Pushkin's death. One of the men stepped away from the group, and met Galya's eyes. She sighed heavily; she was in no mood for Ilya Borchin.

He was an arctic fox, thinned by the hard-scrabble life of summer—mean, sinewy, and desperate for snow. That wasn't to say that he wasn't attractive, but he had a Russian's broad bone structure that looked best pale and full with the rosiness brought on by frosty temperatures. It helped to see him like this, all tanned and hollow-cheeked; she couldn't remember what it was that drew her to him in the first place. That and every time she saw him she thought about him with other women. That image wasn't going away anytime soon.

"Everyone," Ilya said, still staring at Galya, "I would like to say something."

Galya raised a hand to her forehead. "This will not be good," she said, but no one noticed.

"Vera and I didn't know each other very well." Galya rolled her eyes; her auntie had never liked Ilya. "But her niece, Galya, is the most beautiful and kind girl I have ever known, not to mention a great swimmer. I know how much Vera

meant to Galya. She must have been truly extraordinary. So let us raise our glasses.”

There was a moment of relative quiet as everyone drank in memory of Galya’s auntie, then a murmur swelled in approval of Ilya’s speech. Galya rolled her eyes, and sipped at her vodka.

Her mother appeared at her side. “Ilya is trying to make up with you. He’s sorry.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry.” Galya gulped down the contents of her tumbler.

Her mother put her arms around Galya’s shoulders, and squeezed. “You’ll make it up with him, then?”

Galya shook herself away from her. “Like you made up with Dad?”

Her mother looked stunned, as Galya escaped outside. The sunlight was bright and sticky, but she wanted to walk anyway. Her heels clicked along the cement, and the black of her clothing was heating up like tar, clinging to her skin. Everything felt wrong. Anger filled her chest and throat, barely allowing air to get past. It was typical of her mother to gloss over the past, forget that which was unpleasant or unseemly, while Galya’s grew sharper and more unforgiving.

It wasn’t long before Galya found herself walking along the lake, thinking of that last summer on Isle La Motte. Her parents had been arguing again, Vera had been singing—she was always singing or humming—to Galya to distract her. But Galya still heard them—her mother accusing, her father denying, then her mother threatening, and her father calling her bluff.

“You still love her,” her mother had said.

"I married you."

"That is not an answer."

"It should be."

These fights always came right before her father returned to Burlington. The day after he left, her mother would stay in her bedroom all day, making Galya come into the dark and still room to keep her company. "You're the only one I can trust, Galochka. You'll never break my heart."

"You have tyotyenka."

"I have you."

"Yes, mama. Can't I go swimming now?"

"You want to leave me?"

"I just want to swim."

"Fine, leave me be, then."

Galya would always leave the house filled with the effervescent glee of escape. She and Vera would swim, have lunch, and swim some more. And so went the summer until Vera had to return to Yaroslavl, where she taught school.

Galya cried to leave the dacha and to have her auntie leave her. "When will you come back?"

"I don't know, rybochka," her auntie said. She stared at the water that was gold and green. "Be good. Your mama and papa will be better after I am gone. No more yelling, I promise."

Galya was doubtful about this, but didn't want to hurt Vera's feelings so she nodded and hugged her auntie.

“One last thing.” Vera held her face a few inches from Galya’s. “Every time you swim, I’ll be with you.”

This Galya believed, but she was startled to find out her auntie was right about both things. Back in Burlington, relations between her parents settled down. At first the silences were stony, but then they grew comfortable. Her mother no longer languished in bed, but bustled and fussed over making everything just right. She shuttled Galya to and from swim practices and meets, arranged the display of awards, cut out the mentions in the paper. All the while her father worked at the business machines plant, coming home to homemade meals and a clean house. Galya was never sure if her parents were happy, but they were quiet and polite.

Galya’s swimming career provided her with an education, but when her auntie came back fourteen years after that summer with a body worn thin by disease Galya quit the swim team. It no longer felt necessary to get into the pool everyday. It was not a comfortable situation, being a “quitter,” as Ilya saw it. That’s when the trouble with Ilya began, or at least that’s when Galya caught on to his infidelity. She found she had little to speak to her parents about when there were no new challenges to face in the water. And she felt like she had broken her mother’s heart by discarding the things her mother’s hopes for her were pinned on. But now as Galya looked at the water splashing against the bouldered shore, an itch sprung up in her throat and limbs. She shivered, but the itch was still there. The water was calling to her with its every lap at the rocks. Spinning around, she knew what she must do.

By the time she reached her house, her clothes clung to her and pulled and tugged at her skin with every moment, and her braids were damp at the roots and hung heavily down her back. She went to the piano. The enameled surface was cool to the touch as she ran her fingers over the leafy motif.

“I hate to see you so upset,” Ilya said, appearing behind Galya.

“Then maybe you should go away.”

“I can make you happy again.” He touched her shoulder, and she jerked away from it as if it had burned her.

“I doubt it,” she said, her voice cracking.

“You’ll go back to school. Start winning championships again. It will be like old times.” He smiled with one corner of his mouth, “C’mon, it’s me. Your Ilyushenka.”

She slapped him, and the flat satisfaction of it rang out. “You think that if I’m your trained seal swimming up and down a pool all day long, I’ll just stand by while you make a fool out of me? Not every Sokoloff woman is that naïve.”

A hush had fallen over the room, and her mother’s porcelain complexion peaked. Galya took the urn into her hands. Surprised by how little it weighed, she nearly dropped it. At the front door, she took her mother’s keys from their hook. She passed through the door with the urn leaving the house full of mourners in stunned silence. She got in her mother’s Lexus and pulled out of the driveway, as her parents, Ilya, and a half dozen others spilled out onto the lawn. Galya glanced at them, as she accelerated down the street making sure the urn remained upright in the passenger seat.

She drove north on the Theodore Roosevelt Highway towards the islands of Lake Champlain, and refused to think about the blast radius of the fit her mother was throwing by now.

With each mile she tallied, the itch in her extremities pulsed and she scratched at her arms. After a half-hour of driving, she crossed the bridge to Isle La Motte. Galya straightened up in her seat, rubbed her face with one hand, and looked around trying to get her bearings. "I know we want to take the first right," she said, hardly registering that she was talking to an urn.

As she drove down the west side of the island on the coastal road, Galya's gaze was fixed on the wooded shoreline, trying to see the cottages and houses hidden in the trees. "From the road they all look the same," she said, biting her lip.

She remembered a red house, but it was so long ago it could have been repainted purple. Just as she was feeling hopeless, a stand of trees struck her as familiar. She decelerated the car, and there was a glimmer of red through the foliage.

She turned into the dirt driveway. There were no other vehicles in the driveway. An old volleyball net was set up in the patch of grass between the house and the road. Only tree-filtered light reached that part of the yard this late in the day, and it felt like a blanket dampening the air even more. Nervousness squeezed her chest.

She got out of the car with her auntie's urn and walked around to the back of the house. Galya took in the bright, cartoon character-emblazoned towels

hanging over the deck railing where hers used to drape. She didn't need to touch the terry cloth to know it was cool with the dampness of an afternoon swim. Her mind flooded with the memories of days that seemed to have no end and the intertwined smells of marine plant life and lake air.

She made her way to the wooden steps. At the top the lake sprawled out before her, gilded by the late day sun. Her heels clonked as they struck the silvered wood of the top tread. She took a step, and her heel found a knothole. She fell back, sitting with a thud, but the urn popped out of her hands. It bounced end-over-end down the steps, then rolled over the short swath of beach into the water. It floated out like a buoy, but then one of the little waves overtook it and sucked it under.

"No!" Galya cried, kicking off her shoes and flying down after it. In the water her feet slid over algaed rocks, and she stumbled and banged her shins while her eyes searched the water for a glimmer of gold or a shimmer of enamel. But every step she took only stirred up more and more flotsam.

She dove underwater and opened her eyes to nothing but a green blur. For a moment, she was at peace. The itching insistence in her arms and legs was gone, washed away. There was a glimmer of gold a few feet in front of her, and she pushed her way to it, stretched her fingers and her lungs to their limit. The tips of her fingers brushed the urn, but then it disappeared as though it had been yanked. She pushed a little farther down, but she was running out of breath. She popped through the surface, spluttering for air. Then her lower lip quivered, and she

turned back, moving slowly against the weight of the water and her sodden clothes.

On the beach, she made a guess of where she was when she touched the urn; that's where she would start looking when the water settled a little. A shank of hair fell into her face that she pushed behind her ear. Her hand registered the absence before she did—one of her auntie's combs was gone. She cried out, and stood at the edge of the water looking for any sign of the comb, but the water was too cloudy. Tears stung her eyes, as she settled onto the bottom step, and waited for the debris to settle.

Somewhere above her a car door shut. Scrambling over the rocks, she crouched by the steps, wanting to take a peek, but at the same time she was terrified of being caught. She had no idea of what she would say to explain her presence.

"Galya Petrovna Sokoloff!" Her mother stood over her in the yard.

"How'd you find me?" Galya asked.

"I do know a few things about you. For one, you're impulsive." Her mother came down the steps. "For another, you're sentimental." She didn't look angry although her make-up was smudged; a trail of tears had been carved through the veneer of powder.

Standing on the beach, facing her mother, Galya shivered in her wet clothes. She hoped to be left alone, so she said nothing.

"Where is the urn?" When Galya pointed at the lake, her mother clucked.

"I dropped it. I was waiting for the water to clear up to see if I can find it."

Galya's voice quieted. "And I lost a comb."

"Oy, Galochka," she said, before she sat down on the bottom step with a heavy sigh. "Well, we'll wait then."

They sat in silence. Galya scooped up handfuls of the beach's rocky sediment and let it fall. "This is different," she said. The sound of the fragments sounding slighter than it did in her childhood. "It used to be just shale, but now it's covered in zebra mussel shells."

"Everything changes," her mother said, gazing out across the water to New York and the muddy blue Adirondacks. "You said some things this afternoon that made me wonder. What do you think your father and I have been through?"

"Mom, I am not an idiot. I remember our last summer here and the fighting. Dad was having an affair and you found out, but you stayed with him. After that you never let him out of your sight. You've smothered us both."

"You were so young."

"Not too young to understand." Galya's anger returned. "How could you let him humiliate you?"

"I was humiliated, yes, but by my own doing. Your father didn't have an affair. We have both been faithful, no matter what. But I have been jealous, and I thought he still loved your Aunt Vera."

"What are you talking about?"

“In Yaroslavl, Vera and your father were together when I was in Moscow studying; I had yet to meet him. He was in love, but she was not. He wanted to marry her, but she knew he wanted to leave Russia, and she did not love him enough to give up her life there. A year later, I came back and met your father, and I fell for him instantly. Vera could see this and encouraged him to take me out. He eventually loved me back, and here we are.

“But that summer when Vera came, I was having a difficult time. I imagined that your father wasn’t happy. And maybe he wasn’t, but I thought it was because he regretted marrying me. If I hadn’t been so selfish, I would have known he was working so hard, and the burden of coming up here at the weekends was so much a strain that he couldn’t enjoy himself. That’s why we sold the dacha.

“I try so hard to make everything perfect for you, my loves, but I am afraid that I have made it difficult for you, too.”

Galya swallowed back tears. Something caught her eye twenty feet out from the shore; Galya got up and walked into the water.

“Did you see something?” her mother asked.

She nodded, as she eased towards the glimmer she had seen, her head dipping under the surface so that she could feel along the bottom until her hands found what she had been looking for. Galya turned towards her mother and waved the comb in the air.

“See anything else?” she asked after she gave a shout of congratulations.

She was already casting her eyes like nets around her, but they were coming up empty. Not far beyond her the water grew darker and shadowy.

Her mother stripped down to her undergarments and swam out to Galya. They both searched under waves for as long as they could, careful not to touch the bottom and muddy the water. As the sun fell lower and lower into the horizon the more shadowed the water became. They swam back to the beach and sat cross-legged next to each other.

“Well, you were going to scatter her ashes anyway,” her mother said, wiping the water from her skin.

“Are you mad at me?” Galya ran her thumb back and forth over the curve of the comb.

“No. She would have wanted this. No one loved the water as much as your tyotyenka.”

They were quiet for a moment, as the evening wind gathered strength and the water’s splishing turned to splashing.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you swim again,” her mother said, as she dressed again in her blouse and slacks.

“I didn’t know if I would see me swim again either,” she said, as she took the other comb from her hair and unplaited her braids.

Her mother opened and closed her mouth again. Galya began to re-braid her hair, but her mother said, “Let me.” Galya knelt in front of her mother to let her tightly weave together the sections of her hair. “Your father and I will support you in whatever you decide to do. That goes for Ilya, too. I just want you to be happy.”

When the combs were back in place, Galya shaded her eyes against the setting sun. The water now looked like black glass. "We should go."

"Do you hear me, Galochka? I just want you to be happy," her mother said.

"I heard you, mama." Standing shoulder to shoulder, they took in the lake once more. "I'm sorry we couldn't find the urn."

"Don't apologize, rybochka. Everything is as it should be."

Galya peered into the water as she did all those years ago attempting to glimpse what was underneath the surface. At length, she turned to her mother whose hair hung in her eyes over her bare, freckled skin. Her mother and Vera were so different, and Galya couldn't see how they could be sisters. But now it was there around the eyes. She couldn't find the words to tell her mother how beautiful she was, and how much she loved her, so she hugged her, leaving dark splotches on the black satin shirt to dry in the summer sun's last light.

As they returned to their cars across the shade-bald lawn, the sliver of the sun glinted over the shoulder of the mountains, echoing the urn's glimmer in the water. The wind blew inland from the lake, and at last Galya's auntie was at rest.

## Preservation

Andrea had never been in the same room as a dead person before, and she was struck by how not-dead the girl looked. She had been prepared for this expedition by photos and videos of other bodies recovered from burial sites, but they all more closely resembled Edvard Munch's screaming figure than any person she had ever seen.

As Andrea wrapped the girl in fresh linen, while the others prepared the freezer where the girl would be kept, her mind drifted to stories about Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. The girl had been frozen on a mountain top in the Andes more than five hundred years ago, and she may as well have just fallen asleep. Her head hung down over her chest, her legs crossed in a seated position and her arms resting in her lap. When they pulled the cloth back on the summit, they were struck by her perfection, the way her fine braids cascaded over her shoulders, and her intact skin gave her wide cheekbones a youthful fullness. Doctor Reeves lost no time in noting the details of their find.

Over Andrea's shoulder, Reeves said, "Look at her hands."

There was a murmur behind her as everyone strained to see; the girl's hands rested in her lap wholly unblemished. Andrea would not have been surprised if

they were warm to the touch. Mateo, Reeves's assistant crossed himself, as the other team members crowded around chattering and saying words like *milagro*, but it was not a happy miracle judging from their expressions.

"And there on her lip," R.H. continued, "a coca leaf."

Andrea tilted her head to see the bit of green stuck to the lower lip and squeezed his arm. "This is amazing."

But no matter how much Andrea's mind turned to European fairytales, the girl would have had a very different story. She was most likely from some other part of the empire, chosen most certainly for her physical perfection. They would have taken her from her village to see the emperor in Cuzco before coming five hundred miles to the mountain. There she would have been taken through rituals, and then the ascent to the summit of the impressive mountain that stood guard over the surrounding arid land. Those responsible for the ritual, the *capacocha*, would have given her coca leaves and plenty of *chicha*, corn liquor, so that she might drift into a fog until the cold took her. Her people believed that she would awake in heaven with the gods; she was a salvation for her people and their next harvest. Yet here she was five hundred years later waiting to be carried away from where she slept.

With some sadness, Andrea considered who Prince Charming might be among a group of scientists who would be poking, prodding, scanning, and analyzing the girl for years to come. All of the guides and climbers had gone home, leaving Andrea, Mateo, and Reeves in the lab to finish securing the girl's preservation.

Mateo would be a good protector; he was in archaeology to preserve the cultures of the indigenous peoples of his country, but his wife Teresa might have something to say about his availability to play at fairytales with a dead girl from the Incan empire.

That left Reeves. Andrea scowled, but then she looked up to see if he had noticed. Then he hadn't noticed much of what was going on with her in the past month. Now, was no different. The expedition would always come first for the doctor, but the reality of that was hard to take. She recalled the intensity of his gaze when he first laid eyes on the girl. It had been months since he had looked at Andrea with anything resembling that level of interest. He had promised to be less distracted when they returned, starting with dinner that night. In her tiny apartment, the table was set and a bottle of Malbec awaited them. The only thing left to do was to pick up the meal she had prearranged with the café around the corner from her place. She was pinning her hopes on that dinner to catch a glimpse of the connection that had brought them together in the first place.

That settled it—no Prince Charmings here. Her scientist's mind was saddened by the wasted opportunity to see if there was anything to such stories. It's not every day that one finds a perfectly preserved person from half-a-millennium ago. The linen wound around the girl's shoulders, and Andrea lifted the chin ever-so-slightly to wrap the cloth around her neck, and the sleepy parting of the girl's lips seemed to suggest *why not?* Andrea stopped.

Why not?

She leaned forward and the chill coming off the girl was that of the slightest spring breeze. Her lips pressed against the stony cold of the girl's. A heat crept into Andrea's cheeks; it had been a childish gesture. She hastily pulled the cloth over the girl's face, and turned back to the men who were inspecting the thermometer and hydrometer in the freezer chest.

"I think we're about ready to move her, if you're ready," Humboldt said.

Andrea opened her mouth to tell him she was finished, but there was a scream from behind her and both men's faces drained of color. The shape under the cloth was flailing. Andrea covered her mouth and stumbled back towards the men.

"Is this a joke?" Reeves moved around in front of her and grabbed her arms. "What'd you do with the girl?"

"What?" Andrea struggled to get away from the anger in his expression. "How could I have done this?"

"I don't think this is a joke, Doctor," Mateo said, pointing to the girl. The cloth had pulled away from her face to reveal the same high cheek bones.

Andrea was nauseated. Reeves let go of her and went to the girl. He made shushing noises and helped her free her from the rest of the wrappings. The girl's wide eyes darted around the room, as she said something hoarsely over and over. Reeves raised his hands in a calming gesture.

"I am not sure of the dialect, but it is Quechua," Mateo said, confirming Andrea's suspicions. The language had been the lingua franca in the Andes before the Incas and still existed in various forms. "I think she's asking if this heaven."

Andrea pressed her palms against her eyelids to fend off the prick of tears. Reeves was speaking in hushed tones as if the girl were a frightened animal they had trapped.

As she calmed, he asked her what her name was in a common dialect of Quechua. When her brow puckered, he repeated it twice more, each time more slowly and enunciated.

“Illariy,” she finally answered.

“What’s that mean?” Andrea asked Mateo.

“Something to do with light?” Mateo said. “Dawn, maybe.”

“Richard.” Reeves patted his chest, and then he glanced at Mateo. “Will you see if you can calm her?”

Mateo moved toward the girl, and Reeves patted his shoulder. “Mateo.”

The men switched places, and Mateo’s voice purred as he spoke to the girl.

Reeves turned to Andrea and pushed her to the other side of the room. “What happened?”

“I don’t know.” She couldn’t meet his glare. “This is impossible.”

“What’s that on your chin?”

She wiped at her face and between her fingers held a coca leaf. “It’s nothing.”

“Andrea?”

“I don’t know what happened.” She brushed her hands against her pants.

“Shouldn’t we figure out what to do now?”

He stared at her for a moment, and turned his head to the girl.

Mateo came over to them. "I've told her that she has to wait a little longer for heaven. She's upset, but I think she's all right for now." His eyebrows dipped low.

"But?"

"This is a big problem. When the others come back, and she is gone there will be an upheaval."

"For now, let's lock the freezer. If anyone wants to see her, we'll tell them that we're limiting her exposure to the air until we construct more permanent storage." His gaze shifted only slightly towards Andrea. "In the meantime, take Illariy to your apartment. Keep her out of sight."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

He put his hands on his hips and studied the tiled floor. "What else should we do with her?"

She ran her hand through her hair and glanced at the girl who was crying silently, disappointed to wake up once again in the world. "What are we going to do?"

"I'll think of something," Reeves said. "We need to get her out of here before someone sees her."

Andrea raised her hand to touch his arm. She needed him to look at her, but he moved away to his desk to go through his research, leaving Mateo to help Andrea get the girl to her place.

And all Andrea could think about was a conversation she'd had with Reeves that afternoon after having driven from the mountain through the desert dusted gold by low scrub.

"You know, we have quite a battle ahead of us," he said and signaled a turn.

"How do you mean?" Andrea asked.

"With the girl. The indigenous people won't want us to examine her, particularly in her condition."

"So we should have left her for the looters?"

"It's not so clear-cut."

Andrea nodded. She had wanted to say more, but she knew that there was no need—Reeves felt the same way she did. They were in the business of preserving the past, cataloging each observation and object so that they would not be forgotten. But some were better satisfied with tales passed through generations and ruins of sacred places.

With her impulsive action, she had made things infinitely more difficult for not only Reeves and this expedition, but the archaeological profession. She may have single-handedly destroyed an entire field of study.

Andrea and the girl stood blinking at each other in the inadequate incandescent light of the studio apartment for a few minutes after Mateo left. Andrea had been careful not to see Mateo's expression when they entered her

apartment, where she had set the table for two before she left. The bottle of wine stood on the table next to the stubby candles at the center of the table.

She had dropped her bags and swung open the windows, grateful for the cooling breeze against her face. “You can leave the bags by the door.”

“If you want help, I will send Teresa to you,” he had said. “She’ll bring you food.”

“No, I won’t keep her from you. Go home, see your wife, and rest. I can handle this.”

“Call me, and we will come. In a few hours I will return to the lab to check on the doctor, anyway. So call if you need anything.”

Andrea thanked him and sent him on his way. She locked the door behind him, and turned to face the girl. The air moved through the room and tugged at the girl’s braids. She had the appearance of any other teenager in a t-shirt and jeans, but these were on the rank side of dirty; Andrea had no clean things left in her pack, but Illariy didn’t seem to mind. The girl opened and shut her eyes several times as though she expected to see something different each time she opened them. They heard Mateo start up his Ford Galaxy, and the exhaust wafted up through the window as he drove away. The girl wrinkled her nose and coughed a little.

“Pollution, another wonderful feature of the modern era,” Andrea said.

“Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.”

She led the girl to the small bathroom and turned on the tap. The water was hot today, maybe the girl's first lucky break. "This really is something worthwhile." She turned on the shower, and Illariy backed up against the wall.

"It's all right," Andrea ran her hand under the stream, and with a pang realized how badly she wanted a shower. Everything had gone wrong. She sighed, and turned back to the girl.

She pantomimed undressing, but Illariy's forehead only creased further. "Fine." Andrea reached down to lift the hem of the girl's shirt, but she pressed her back even closer against the wall, and pulled the cotton fabric from Andrea's fingers.

Andrea stood back and ran a hand through her hair. "Listen, Illariy. *E-yar-ee*, right? This is all some kind of mistake." The tears she had quashed earlier had returned. "This is not supposed to be happening, and it's entirely my fault."

She covered her mouth with her hand and her cheeks slicked with crying. The sobs came harder and harder until she was seeing stars. Then there was a hand on her shoulder, and she opened her eyes to have the girl's face only inches from her own. She eased to a snuffle. "This is backwards," she laughed bitterly. "I'm the one that's supposed to comfort you."

The girl was murmuring something that Andrea could only hope was something along the lines of "Get a grip." That thought helped pull her back together.

She wiped her face, and grabbed the hem of her shirt. "Like this." She lifted her shirt over her head. "Okay?"

Illariy peeled her t-shirt over her head, and then removed her jeans. Andrea breathed a sigh of relief, and pulled the shower curtain aside. "All right, be careful." She offered the girl a hand into the stall. The girl relaxed after a moment under the spray, and closed her eyes. A slow smile appeared followed by a sigh. Andrea handed her a washcloth but no soap or shampoo. She was afraid of exposing the girl to too much of the modern world when they did not yet know what the long term plan was. Again, she mimed what she should do, and then dropped the curtain. Andrea leaned against the tiled wall and shivered.

After a few minutes, the girl poked her head out from behind the curtain and said something and Andrea wished her Quechua was better. The hoarseness in the girl's voice had almost worked its way out, and she had a soft, lilting tone. Andrea pulled the curtain back, and helped Illariy step out of the shower. She handed her a towel, and left her alone in the bathroom.

When the girl was once again dressed, this time in a clean t-shirt and shorts, Andrea tucked the girl into her single bed, pulling the bedspread up to the girl's chin. "Sleep tight," she said and wondered how it felt to lay down after sitting for half a millennium.

After putting out the light, she sat in one of the armchairs across the room. Her eyesight adjusted to the dark and the streetlight flooded in the windows. The gauzy drapes floated in the warm wind, and somewhere on another street, a car horn beeped a muffled staccato beat. Illariy tossed and turned until finally her shallow, drawn-out breaths filled the room until they became tangible, pressing against Andrea with sticky heat.

She picked up her phone and carried it into the bathroom. Without turning the light on, she fumbled to dial the lab. The other end of the line buzzed and buzzed without an answer. He might have been asleep, but she didn't think either of them would be getting any shut-eye. Maybe he was out for a walk, clearing his head. She shuffled out of the bathroom and set the phone down on the dining room table before sitting in her chair once more.

With each of Illariy's breaths the air felt more and more like a damp woolen blanket. Andrea couldn't just sit there all night, and the girl would be all right if she was gone for a few minutes. Andrea locked up the apartment and headed down the tiled steps to the lobby and out of the building. On the street it was marginally cooler, but heat emanated from the stone streets and plaster-covered buildings. There were few people out, but every singular figure made her pulse sing with the hope that it might be Reeves. Shame flared into her face each time. She stopped and leaned against the warm façade of one of the buildings. She ran a hand over her hair and peered up at the sky. How did she end up here? Not just wandering the street in the middle of the night, but in Argentina digging up the past and sleeping with her boss.

This thing with Reeves was trouble; it was the kind of attachment that one never quite recovers from because it shouldn't have happened in the first place. But it was all over that late night when they were in the lab listening to Argentinean jazz on the radio. Reeves had twirled Andrea in between the tables, spinning her far from him only to pull her back, so that she was tucked close against him. "And we end up here," he'd said quietly. Andrea had gone dumb

with surprise and before she could react, Mateo entered the lab and they separated. After that it was only a matter of a few lingering looks before he was in her apartment drinking wine, then sweating and clinging to her in the single bed. Those nights she had slept with her arm across his back just to keep herself from falling out of the narrow bed. Now she could no longer count on her fingers the days since he had come to her apartment. She knew that she was losing him. He loved only one thing, and it wasn't her.

She made her way back to her building, where Mateo's Galaxy was again parked on the street. She climbed the stairwell to discover the door to her apartment was open, the lock splintered. Mateo stood in the shaft of light from the hall with a shopping bag at his feet.

"What's going on?" She pushed into the apartment. A bottle of chicha stood on the table, and one of the glasses was smudged with fingerprints. A movement on the bed drew her attention across the room. Reeves was straddling the girl with his arms rigid, rooted to her throat. Her feet kicked up the sheet in white punctuations.

Andrea shoved Reeves with all her weight. He almost fell off the bed, but his hands never let go. She raised her fists, but Mateo grabbed her and yanked her back across the room. In her struggle against him, they ran into the table, rattling the glasses and rocking bottles. She stomped on his foot, and he let her go with a yowl, but it was too late. Reeves released his hands, hissing a steam of breath.

"What did you do?"

"Andrea—"

She shoved him again, and this time he flew against the wall between the windows, where her flailing arms held him in place until he grabbed her wrists. In the light from the street Illariy's scratches on his arms were visible.

Andrea turned to the bed. She took hold of Illariy's shoulders, and her head lolled from one side to the other. She laid her on the pillow and kissed lips that were now warm, but there was no reaction, no life.

"Mateo?" Andrea face shone with tears.

"She did not belong here," he said. "We should never have taken her from the holy site."

"But this?" she said to Reeves, who leaned against the wall.

"No one should wake her again."

Mateo stepped over to the bed, and put a hand on Andrea's shoulder, but she shrugged him off. "This is horrible, but it was the right thing," he said.

"How was this right?" she said. "She was just a child!"

"Who didn't belong here, Andrea," Mateo said. "This kind of death will not damage what is understood about the culture. It was typical for someone like her."

"You're proud of yourselves then?"

"That was the worst thing I hope I ever do," Reeves said as he moved across the room to sit at the table. "You know what people say about our work—that we're little more than grave robbers. But you and I both know that we're trying to preserve the cultures before the real grave robbers desecrate the sites. If they found out about this, about her, we would never be able to do another dig."

“Not only that, but there are indigenous peoples that still believe in the sanctity of these sacrifices,” Mateo said. “If anyone found out about Illariy, there could be all kinds of unforeseen ramifications—vigils, protests, riots, anything. Were you prepared to protect her from that? Would she belong to the people or to science? That was not meant for her, Andrea.”

“But this?” she said again.

“She must not be disturbed again,” Mateo said.

They listened to each other breathing. They were right. There was no place for Illariy here. Her existence meant a discourse about life, death, and religion that would be volatile in the fragile societies of Latin America and beyond. She stood up. “We should go,” Andrea said, wrapping Illariy for the second time that day, this time in a cotton sheet. The men looked at her. “We’re taking her back to the lab, aren’t we?”

The lab was quiet. Crates from the expedition sat next to the door waiting to be cataloged. Mateo carried in Illariy and laid on one of the stainless steel tables. Andrea retrieved Illariy’s clothes and redressed her. When she was in her long tunic, Mateo and Reeves lifted her from the table and place her into the freezer chest. Andrea had to climb in to arrange her legs they way she was sitting when they found her. The girl’s hands were resting once again in her lap and her head was tilted down. Reeves helped Andrea out of the box. They, all three, stood

over Illariy, and Mateo's lips moved in a prayer. They closed the lid, and Mateo padlocked it and said, "The maiden sleeps again."

It was now morning, and Andrea's eyes burned like acid fire in their sockets. From the shopping bag, Reeves produced the bottle of pale-gold chicha. He uncapped it, took a deep swig, and passed it to Mateo, who winced after taking a drink. Andrea, too, accepted a swallow of the liquor when it was offered.

"I'm sorry," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"What's done is done," Reeves said. "I don't understand how this happened, but it's not your fault."

"I don't know whose, if not mine."

"I'm trying to tell you, it doesn't matter."

"He's right. You do good work, Andrea. You are a good person. Nothing has changed." Mateo hugged her, and she swallowed tears. "I'm going home. Get some rest, both of you."

When they were alone, Reeves said, "You shouldn't stay at your apartment. Not at least for right now."

"It's where I live." She rubbed her forehead.

"Don't stay there." He seized her hand. "Stay with me."

"I need to grab a few things." His palm was hot against hers, and under the fluorescent lights the sticky, bloody mess of the scratches looked awful. "I'll meet you?"

"Don't forget that bottle of wine." He held up the chicha. "I think it will take more than this for us to be able to sleep."

Andrea pulled her hand from his, though it took everything in her to do so. She strode through the university grounds half hoping he would run after her having figured out that she wasn't coming back. The early morning sun, already hot, dried her tears before they fell. And she was tired, more tired than she knew possible. A gust of wind blew past and somewhere behind her a door squeaked open, but she did not turn her head. She no longer had the strength to look back.

## **The Line Between Men**

John Wayne was the last person Carrie had expected to discover on her sofa in Saturday's wee hours. She had woken up to find herself sprawled across her bed with the light of a June morning filtering into the room. The air-conditioning kicked off, and she knew she was not alone, the way you can tell if a TV is on in another room even with the sound turned down. For a moment she allowed herself to hope that Ryan had changed his mind and come home, but then she grabbed her outdated cell phone with its protruding hard plastic antenna. She could jab at eye sockets and then call 911 if it came to that.

Her bare legs swung over the side of the bed, and she dressed herself in an oversized green velour robe. She moved across the wooden floor, eased open the bedroom door, and edged down the hallway into the living room. With a deep breath, she jumped into the room and found John Wayne sitting there on her cream-colored sofa. John Wayne in brown leather slippers and a navy flannel robe wrapped over light blue pajamas.

They blinked at each other for half a second, and then she screamed. His face puckered and when her breath ran out he said, "What'd you do that for?"

He looked like the John Wayne in “The Quiet Man” and “Rio Grand,” his hair thinner, but the voice spot-on. “How’d you get in here?” she said, pushing up the sleeves of the robe.

“There’s a door, isn’t there?”

She glanced at the front door and struggled through a red-wine fog to remember if she’d locked it before she had gone to bed. “Who put you up to this?”

“No one put me up to anything,” he said. Then he waved a hand at her, and grinned. “What, didn’t they have anything in your size?”

It took her a moment to get that he was making fun of her robe; she reddened. Carrie had been on a self-pity jag that had included not doing laundry and wearing Ryan’s bathrobe, which was two sizes too big for her. This had been going on for the week since he’d left. He had yet to come back and box up his things, and she was offended that he trusted her not to set fire to his DVD’s or put the coat rack through his beloved plasma TV.

“I like it,” she said with a tug at the wide floppy lapels.

“It’s not doing you any favors.”

“No one asked you,” she said.

He rubbed his forehead. “Where can a man get some coffee around here?”

“Are you kidding?”

“I can’t think without coffee and a cigarette.” He reached into one of his robe pockets and took out a pack of Camels. “So do you have any coffee?”

She wanted to tell him there was no smoking in the house, but instead she sighed and went to the kitchen. Stacks of plates and glasses spilled out of the sink and onto the countertops in evidence of her wallowing.

When faced with the white cabinet doors, she remembered that she ran out of coffee the day before. Panicked, she rummaged through the pantry hoping for a stashed brick from one of the holiday gift baskets they got last year. Instead she came up with a jar of instant stuff bought for a mocha brownie recipe and then forgotten. She shuddered at the prospect of serving John Wayne instant coffee of dubious freshness, Flavor-Loc crystals or no, but filled the electric kettle anyway.

“So what is this?” His voice behind her gave her a start. When she turned, he was filling the kitchen doorway just like in a movie.

“You tell me. You’re in my house.”

“All I know is that I woke up this morning, and I walked out of my bedroom into this house,” he said. “I went back through the door and ended up on your front porch. I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

“And just who are you?” she asked, still unsure if her eyes were playing tricks on her.

He raised his eyebrows; he may even have been a little hurt.

She folded her arms over her chest. “You don’t have a name?”

“Duke.”

“Really?”

“That’s right.” He took a seat at the table and laid the cigarette pack on the Formica top. “Who’re you?”

“Carrie Delaney.”

“Delaney... Delaney...” he said, staring up at the ceiling. “Were you a script girl on the ‘Kentuckian’?”

“I think I’m hallucinating.” For the first time since college, she had the urge to smoke. She finally set down her phone and reached for his pack. “Do you mind?”

He struck a match and lit her cigarette.

“These are strong,” she said after an overzealous drag.

“If you can’t handle straights, maybe you shouldn’t smoke.”

“You’re probably right.” She doused the cigarette under the faucet, retrieved an ashtray from the back of a cabinet, and placed it in front of him. “Last night I watched a marathon of your movies, drank a bottle of cabernet, and cried a lot. This has to be the product of the weirdest hang-over ever.”

“Well, do you mind letting me get back to my life? I’m supposed to go out to Palm Springs this afternoon with the missus.”

“I never really considered whether or not you were married.”

“Probably won’t be much longer. Esperanza is more than a little suspicious of how I spend my time.”

She put a hand to her forehead. “This is getting complicated.”

“Or maybe this isn’t a hallucination?”

While the kettle heated, they ran down possible scenarios; she hadn’t kidnapped him, he wasn’t an impersonator, she wasn’t dreaming from a coma bed, and neither was he.

“What year do you think it is?” she said.

“1952. What year do you think it is?”

“Not 1952. Let’s leave it at that.”

He frowned, scratched his cheek, and stared into the speckles of the floor tiles. He seemed young enough to be someone she could date and not raise eyebrows, but she tried not to think about that.

The kettle’s cheery little ding cut the silence, and Carrie pulled the last of her clean mugs from the cabinet and measured out the coffee crystals. Since there were no more spoons in the drawer, so she used the tablespoon to stir in the water, too.

She chewed at her lip. This was all Ryan’s fault. He had left her, and now she was going a little bit crazy. She should have known the rug would be pulled out from under her considering it hurt how good-looking Ryan was with his straight white teeth and close-cropped hair. Not only that, he was a children’s book illustrator with a great sense of humor. The kind of guy that remembered birthdays with weekend getaways to the lake or Chicago. She had imagined that their kids would have his twinkling green eyes and his hiccupping laugh. But it was Katie, his not so ex-girlfriend, who was going to have a baby with Ryan’s eyes and smile.

Carrie should have known he was still in love with Katie when a few months ago she found a photo collage of those hallowed college days tucked away on his side of the closet. At the time, she didn’t think much of it—everyone has a past—

but now the thought of him gazing longingly at the collection of smiles sent a ripple of nausea through Carrie.

“That’s about as stirred as it’s going to get,” Duke said.

Coffee had sloshed all over the countertop running in a stream around the towers of glasses and plates covered in pizza crumbs. She moistened a dish rag and wiped the bottom of the mug. “Here you go.”

“Nice place you got,” he said as he surveyed the ruins of meals over the rim of his mug. “Say, do you have any cream or sugar?”

The corner of her mouth jerked. “The Duke doesn’t drink it black?”

“It’s just Duke, and not always.”

Carrie pulled the skim milk from the fridge and dug out a packet of sugar substitute from the drawer.

“What’s this stuff?”

“Fat-free milk. Sweetner.”

“Why would anyone want that?”

“It’s better for you,” she said with a shrug. “Everyone’s supposed to be eating healthier these days. No one wants to be too fat.”

“You look all right.”

She ignored him, particularly since he was squelching a chuckle. “So what are we going to do?” she said.

“How about breakfast?”

*Why not*, Carrie thought; she opened the fridge and saw nothing appetizing. “I’ll need to get a few groceries.”

He agreed to stay put while she ran down the block to the store as long as she brought him back some smokes. The air outside was hot and thick like a damp woolen blanket; it was only a matter of time until the air gave way to the weight of rain. Spurred on by this threat, she hurried through shopping and came back a half hour later with eggs, milk, juice, bread, coffee, and two packs of Camel straights.

“Hello?”

“In here,” Duke said from the kitchen. She found him sitting at the table surrounded by clean counters and drying dishes in the drainer. He was wearing one of Ryan’s oxford shirts and a pair of his twill pants, reading her *Rolling Stone* with Britney Spears on the cover. “What in the hell has happened to this country? Say—” He looked her over with a grin. “I knew there was a girl under that robe.”

“Never mind that.” She set the groceries down, but tugged on the hem of her blouse before pointing at him. “Where’d you get those clothes?”

“Not a bad fit.” He smoothed his hands over his chest.

“I don’t remember you asking to go into my closet.”

“I couldn’t hang around in pajamas all day.” He tossed the magazine onto the table. “What happened to your husband?”

“He’s not my husband. He was my boyfriend until recently.”

“You lived together?”

“Things are a little more progressive these days,” she said, stocking the refrigerator.

“Is that what you call it?”

“It doesn’t matter. We don’t live together anymore.”

Her cell phone buzzed on the kitchen table.

“What the hell is that thing?” he asked.

She started to answer him, but stopped when the display told her that she’d missed a call from Ryan while she was out, but he’d left a voicemail. She took a deep breath and listened to the message.

“I need to come by and pick up some things.” Her stomach knotted at the sound of Ryan’s voice. “I’ll be there in a half hour.”

She glanced at the microwave clock and hung up. “Duke, you need to hide or do something, go somewhere.”

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I mean Ryan’s coming over to pick up his stuff.”

There was a knock on the front door.

“We can all talk this over like adults,” he said, as she pushed him towards the sliding door that led to the back yard. “It’s not like anything’s going on here.”

“How am I going to possibly explain this?” She was just flipping up the latch when she heard the key in the front door. “Just get outside.”

“Carrie?” Ryan said from the front hall.

“Please?” Her jaw was clenched and her eyes bulged with panic, and for the first time Duke stared at her like she was crazy. He gave in and stepped out onto the patio into the muggy morning.

“Didn’t you hear me knocking?” Ryan said, as he came into the kitchen.

The moist hot air blew a last gasp across her forehead, as she slid the door shut. "Hello to you, too."

"What were you doing?" he asked as he walked towards her. She stepped forward, and was struck with a mixture of sadness and relief when he kept the distance between them and retreated back to the doorway.

"Taking out the trash," she said. She was so flustered that she forgot she hadn't seen him in eight days and that she had been waiting for this moment. "What are you doing here, Ryan?"

"I left a message. When you didn't answer, I figured you were at the gym." He looked down at the floor, shoved his hands in his pockets.

Her jaw clenched. "You can't just show up without talking to me first."

"Fine." He shrugged, and she waited for him to make eye contact. When he did look up, his eyes locked on something outside. "Who's that?"

Carrie turned to see Duke with his back to them leaning over the fence, peering into the alley. A ribbon of smoke curled above his head. She glanced back at Ryan. "None of your business."

His eyes darted at the carton of eggs and the pan and finally at her as she got back to her cooking. "You're making breakfast for that guy?"

"Why? Are you hungry?"

"What in the hell is going on here?" He pinked. She leaned against the counter and pressed her lips together. "I still pay rent here, so if you're shacking up with somebody I have the right to know."

"Don't make a bigger ass of yourself. Grab your stuff and go."

He glared at her until he finally shook his head and stormed into the bedroom. Carrie returned to the stove and picked up where she left off with the eggs. She cracked them into a glass bowl and took a fork to them counting all the ways this wasn't going the way she had hoped. She hadn't showered in days, her hair wasn't pulled back in a loose ponytail, and her lashes weren't mascaraed. She imagined these would be key factors in making Ryan realize how much he missed the smell of her shampoo, her pancakes, her sympathetic ear. He would grow nostalgic for late night pasta and red wine from smoke-colored glasses.

"Are these his pajamas?" he yelled from the other room.

"They aren't yours," she said under her breath, as she poured the beaten eggs into the pan.

He came back to the kitchen, rattling the glassware with each furious step. "Is he wearing my clothes?"

He narrowed his green eyes at her. Every muscle was rigid as he leaned forward and flung his arms open, prompting her to answer to his implications.

"Stop jumping to conclusions before you hurt yourself." She pushed the eggs around with the spatula in short agitated strokes.

"What am I supposed to think, Carrie?"

"I don't really care. I just don't want you raging around here acting self-righteous."

"I didn't come here to fight." He leaned heavily against the doorway, and rubbed his eyes. "I just need my stuff."

She stared into the pan. "Right now, I think you should leave."

He straightened up and watched her for a moment. "When can I come back?"

"Call me, and we'll talk about it."

"I will."

"Fine," she said with a wave of her spatula. She didn't raise her head up from the stove until she heard the front door close. Even then she only snapped out of it when the smell of burning eggs overpowered her. She shoveled them into the trash and started over.

After breakfast Carrie turned the TV to one of the classic movie channels. Most of the films airing were made before 1945, nothing too shocking to Duke's sensibilities. As it was he was amazed by the picture clarity of the plasma TV. "Doesn't leave much to the imagination, does it?" he said.

"It's a little reassuring to see that the people on TV are just people with pores, pimples, and frizzy hair."

"It's supposed to be an escape, not reality."

"Sometimes the line gets blurred."

"That's what people want—blurred lines." He lit a cigarette and settled back into the foam cushions of the sofa. The ashtray was brimming with butts. "They don't want to see a line between a man and a movie star. Even my wife. She thinks that if I make love to a woman in a picture that I'm in love with her off-camera."

"That can't be easy."

“No, ma’am.”

“Maybe she figures she won’t be as disappointed if it turns out to be true.”

He took a drag from the latest cigarette. “She tried to shoot me once when she thought I was stepping out on her.”

“Really?”

“Sure did. Thank god she was three sheets to the wind otherwise she might have left her mark.”

“And you weren’t stepping out?”

“Lines get blurry.” A smile tugged at his cheek.

That little smirk stabbed at her. “What’s wrong with you? Can’t you keep it in your pants?”

“What’d I ever do to you?”

She fled to the bathroom where she sat on the end of the tub and cried until she couldn’t breathe. That morning Ryan had looked worried that she would make some sort of emotional scene; that wasn’t the sort of thing that promised a reconciliation. She turned on the shower, and stepped into the hot stream in hopes that the heat would ease the throbbing in her chest. Maybe fidelity was a biological impossibility. Maybe all men were assholes no matter who they were. Maybe she was tired of thinking about it. She only realized how long she had been under the shower when the water began to cool. When she turned it off she heard rain on the roof and a stillness in the house. The TV wasn’t on anymore.

She wrapped the velour robe around herself. "Duke?" she called. She was answered with silence. There was a note on the coffee table. *Needed cigarettes.*  
D.—

"How much does that man smoke?"

She peeked through the blinds onto the street, and saw his large figure swaggering through the rain towards the house. As he came up the front steps, she opened the door for him. He was soaking wet and even the color of his skin had been washed out.

"What is it?" she asked.

He sat heavily on the sofa and stared into the dark TV screen.

"What's wrong?"

Water dripped over his eyebrows and down the sides of his nose. "I knew that chances were—"

She put a hand on his shoulder. He was wearing a shirt that she had bought Ryan last month, and the pinkness of his arm showed through the saturated fabric.

"I've been dead nearly thirty years?" Those eyes that could take the measure of a man were now as wide as a kitten's.

"I don't know what to say," she said.

He had gone down to the market. And just as it started to rain he realized he didn't have any money. He was waiting inside for the rain to slow down when someone recognized him, but thought he was an impersonator. Because he was so "convincing" the guy teased him for being a method actor. He talked about movies that Duke had yet to make. "Said he could trace down to the day of my

passing this country's problems— June 11, 1979. I played dumb, and he made fun of me for not being too good at my job after all. Then he said they don't make men like Duke anymore."

"They don't make men like that anymore?"

"That's what he said."

The words had a déjà-vu taste in Carrie's mouth, and with clarity she saw Duke as Sean Thornton scattering his bride's dowry with deliberate swipe to show her she was all he cared about. They didn't make men like that, men of action who said what they meant and meant what they said. Men who were straightforward and took responsibility for their actions.

She slipped her arm around his back, and he folded his around her shoulders. They sank into the sofa. He felt solid, real; his skin feverish through damp clothes. She was lulled by his slowing breaths, until she began to talk in the flow of their wide rhythms. "When I was a little girl, I believed everything was possible. I could be anything I wanted—a chemist, a singer, even the president. I could be in love with whomever I wanted and they would love me back.

"I believed that I could wish on the first star I saw and wake up to find Robin Hood in the trees of my backyard or Superman flying around waiting for me to wake up. The fact that they never came didn't stop me from going to the window every morning with butterflies in my stomach. One day I just stopped wishing. I hadn't asked the universe for anything in a long time. But last night I wished for John Wayne."

He was breathing so softly she had expected to be answered with a snore, but he said, "No one's life is better than anyone else's—just different. I'm no angel. We all have problems and weaknesses. You don't need me. You're doing all right."

He pressed her closer, and she let herself be crushed against him; she was sure it was the only way they could keep from falling apart. After a few moments, the force of their grasp eased, and so did their respiration. It slowed and slowed until they both fell asleep.

When Carrie woke to the late-evening sun shining through the blinds, she was cold and Duke was gone. She sat up, pulling the robe tight across her body. "Duke?"

The doorbell rang. She looked through the peephole and clenched her teeth.

"I haven't heard from you in a week and now I can't rid of you?" she said to herself while ignoring Ryan's tapping at the door the best she could while she went to her room and changed back into a shirt and jeans. "Duke?" Nothing.

Ryan rang the bell again. She gritted her teeth and grabbed the velour bathrobe. She wadded it up and stepped out the back door. She thought maybe Duke had come outside for some fresh air, but no luck. She was two steps into the yard when Ryan appeared.

"I know I am supposed to call." He stood with his hands in his pockets again while his eyes studied the lawn. But then he glanced up and his forehead wrinkled. "Is that my robe?"

"Maybe," she said. She looked into his eyes, eyes that used to conjure thoughts of cool water of bottle-green clarity, and she found herself thinking as much of them as she would a bowl of green Jell-O. "Why are you here?"

"I've been feeling terrible." He stepped closer. "I imagined that you were destroyed by what I did, but then this morning you were so together, and that guy was here, it threw me for a loop."

"Try finding out that the man you live with has gotten his ex-girlfriend pregnant."

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't know how this would all turn out."

"When you slept with Katie, you should have known." She stepped past him and headed for the alley. "You should have known then instead of waiting until she was pregnant when the choice was made for you."

"Wait." He grabbed her arm, but she yanked it away.

"I'll let you know when you can pick up your things." She arrived at the dumpster, raised the lid, and threw the robe in. Only when the lid clanged down did she notice that the air had cooled off with the rain. She returned across the wet and spongy zoysia grass. "You should probably leave before I call the cops."

"Have you lost your mind?" He turned an alarming shade of red as he pointed at the dumpster.

"You know where it is if you want it," she said without stopping. "But I would strongly recommend you call before you drop by a third time."

She stepped inside, locked the door behind her, and lowered the blinds.

“Duke?” she called again. The house smelled like cigarette smoke and burnt eggs. In the living room, she raised the windows in effort to air out the place. She smiled with relief when Ryan fired up his car with the telltale screech of belts that he had been trying to fix himself since the winter.

A slant of sunlight fell across the sofa and onto Dukes’ folded pajamas. She sat down and trailed a finger down the navy piping of the nightshirt lapel. Her smile eased when she discovered a frayed edge, and she ran her fingertip over it until she no longer felt the splayed threads. Outside a breeze ruffled through the trees, and she knew she was alone.