

AMERICAN DAYDREAMS: A COLLECTION

by

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## ABSTRACT

RUSSELL ANDREW WINFREY. *American Daydreams: A Collection*. (Under the direction of BRYN CHANCELLOR, M.F.A)

These four stories are very much a reaction to our current political moment, where mounting complexities in the world are met with untenable simplicity and hostile tribalism. The protagonists in “Miss Future Expat” and “Beans in Peru” are able to understand and accept that complexity, sometimes to the point of paralytic ambivalence, but feel estranged from almost everyone as a result. They recognize and are bothered by myriad social failures, but are left to tend to their own versions of success. The protagonists in “Premeditation” and “Dying over the Water” are confident in their worldview at the cost of personal growth or interpersonal wellbeing, but overall view their lives as successes. Except for “Premeditation,” all of the characters think of their success in relative terms, qualifying it for them. Given the relative prosperity (and potential prosperity) of the world each of them inhabits, there is a good deal of economic anxiety coloring their thoughts. Each of the characters is a loner, and their sense of faltering democracy and growing social and familial alienation makes them dubious of any civic future, so they focus on securing a private one.

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*American Daydreams: A Critical Introduction*

Up to now, most of the stories I have written have been coherent but quite spare. I recall my work being described as restrained, which though often couched as a strength but I later realized was a euphemism for thinly drawn. And while I've always been attracted mostly to complex and closely observed yet minimalistic stories like those of Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Joyce, I realized that unless you are a master of the style, the world you hoped you were alluding to might be vaporous to most readers. I still believe there is too much to like in Ernest Hemingway's, Raymond Carver's (or rather Gordon Lish's) and others' examples of the iceberg theory—the idea that a text is only good to the extent that it suggests a rich subtext—but was glad to recognize that it was a stumbling block for me, and often led to inhibited writing.

One of the challenges I gave myself for the first stories—"Dying over the Water," "Premeditation," "Beans in Peru," and "Miss Future Expat"—of my collection *American Daydreams* was to break out of that inhibition and do a better job imitating more contemporary literary fiction, which balances the interiority of characters and the exteriority of place and circumstance. I'm clinging hard to old habits, but do feel that these are the most "story stories" that I have written to date. They are far less stingy about what they are willing to expose or explore, and I try not to let every action and utterance sag under the weight of symbolic importance. While I think there is an effective intercourse between symbols, I hope that what is said and what happens feels basically like life and achieves a sort of naturalism. I wanted them to be sad, funny, serious, and a little haunting. Two stories I tried to keep in mind as being those things and also fully written and realized are Lorrie

Moore's "Thank You for Having Me" and Michael Chabon's "A Model World." I think my characters and plots are as interesting and plausible as the ones in these stories. I do feel that at times I am a bit too explicitly philosophical where these stories are a bit more graceful about the subjects with which they deal. On that critical note, I think my most developed strength is still in the arrangement and kneading of symbols than narrative structure and urgency. Going forward I will keep this in mind and better attend to those skills, but this is certainly the best I've done on both fronts.

A part of my writing which I felt had been previously neglected was dialogue, so I challenged myself by writing a fair bit of it in this collection. "Miss Future Expat" contains dialogue between a number of characters, and "Beans in Peru" is entirely monologue. Because "Miss Future Expat" has dialogue between a number of characters, they needed to be distinctive. In doing this, I had in mind Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The story has two couples who are chatting over drinks about their lives and marriages, and though Carver has speaking tags almost all the time, the voices are particular enough and the flow of discussion coherent enough that it would probably work without them. This was my goal as well. In the conversation Grey, the protagonist of "Miss Future Expat," has with Mr. Tone and that which Grey has with her mother, there is little chance of mistaking one for the other. The shifting dynamics of the conversation are reflected in the tones of these conversations as I strove to make the complex dialogue serve the story.

Thematically, for "Miss Future Expat," I had in mind Moore's "Foes," in which a liberal historical biographer meets a conservative Washington lobbyist at a benefit dinner and their disagreements come to an uncomfortable head. They are not intending to argue, but it becomes clear in the course of trying to have a conversation that their disagreements are too

fundamental to relate to each other or enjoy each other's company. During the conversation, the protagonist Baker initially sees the woman with whom he is talking as beautiful, but as he learns her views on the Democratic candidate Barama Brocko (har har) regarding his birth certificate and the relative ease with which she believes he won the election by virtue of his race as well as other notions about global terrorism, he begins to see her as more and more physically grotesque.

I wanted to capture this story's hostile political mood. Grey, though not succumbing to a political moral equivalency, is frustrated with both liberals and conservatives. She has a foot in both worlds (rural/conservative—liberal/urban) and has a dim view of the possibility of productive discourse or empathy between them. She finds anathema the simple righteousness and glaring hypocrisy on both sides. In Moore's monologue of Baker, we can see him struggle between a tribal impulse and a less orthodox one, thinking, "I don't think that's true." Or was it? He was trying to give her a chance. What if she was right? "Perhaps we have an unfulfilled streak of myth-making. Or perhaps we just don't live as fearfully as people do elsewhere," he said. Now he was just guessing" (Moore 25). Grey is better at resisting this reactionary tribalism, though she clearly has an emotional stake in the election, herself an analog to the undervalued, highly qualified losing candidate. Regarding her own party, she is frustrated most with the unfocused and frivolous reaction that's mounted, and to the extent it matters, what she sees as its lack of critical self-reflection.

"Foes" ends with a desperate hope for the success of the Democratic incumbent. Baker's wife Suzy consoles him saying, "Brocko is going to win. All will be well. Rest assured," she said, as the cab sped along toward Georgetown" (Moore 26). "Miss Future Expat" begins where all is not well. And while her party is working through earlier stages of

loss, she goes quickly to acceptance and further to solution. As the story progresses, she determines that the gulf between these groups and views is too wide, something she no longer has an interest in conciliating, even for herself. Grey, a synecdoche of American politics, is going through a period tumultuous arrest, and while it is tempered by the boredom and malaise that her no-longer-inspiring job and the current media environment supply, it is one that is ultimately intolerable to her. Her lived poverty and secret fortune make it difficult to place her on a spectrum where privilege is so operative. Nevertheless, her plans involve living out the most paradoxical version of the American dreams: the one in which she leaves it.

For “Beans in Peru,” which is purely monologue by a gay white male character named Chase, I had in mind a few works. The first is *Angels in America* Part I, particularly Act 3, Scene 2, where Louis pontificates about politics and democracy at length to Belize revealing, if not his latent racism, then his solipsism. Louis suggests, because of American diversity, there’s no “insurmountable fact of a kind of racial, ethnic, monopoly, or monolith” and that “racists just try to use race here as a tool in a political struggle. It’s not really about race” (Kushner 90-92). Belize’s scoffs at Louis attempt to bang...[Belize] over the head with [his] theory that America doesn’t have a race problem” and continues that “we black drag queens have a rather intimate knowledge of the complexity of the lines of [political power?]” (Kushner 93-94). This part of the scene is quite philosophical, and though topically my character’s rant is a bit more roving, I wanted to capture Louis’ semi-self-conscious racism and overall ambivalence. My character’s ambivalence, slightly distinct from Louis, surrounds identity politics and capitalism. With Chase I explore the compartmentalization that seems necessary for people that face certain kinds of discrimination but not others, and

how well-to-do people rationalize their success in a deeply unfair world. Part of what makes Kushner's scene so effective is the way in which his worldview is checked by Belize, but I wanted to see what would come of a scene where there isn't such a resounding challenge. He checks himself at times, as does the elided psychologist, but I think it's interesting to see someone reach their marginal, tenuous, and probably provisional conclusions basically on their own.

The decision to make the psychologist's questions implicit was made in revision when Professor Chancellor showed me the "Skates" chapter in her recent novel, Sycamore. Prior to this, the doctor occasionally chimed in, essentially to prompt further monologue. These comments were flat and pointlessly disruptive, but in taking after this chapter I made the reactions to implied dialogue clear from the monologue. The change was small, but it improved the story a great deal.

"Dying over the Water" also has a discontented woman at its center whose frustrations are diversely derived. Her expectations about the good life is that it is the result of normative behavior—normative to a conservative, suburban American. On paper, hers is a relatively comfortable life, but every good thing about it feels compromised, from her sex life to her relationship to her children. They have everything they thought wanted, what their assumed identities dictated, but are stretched thin financially and physically in trying to maintain '50s era lifestyle in a contemporary context. In her insecurity, she resents the seeming happiness of others and critiques their lives on the basis of how they seem to deviate from what's normal—to her, a heterosexual, single income nuclear family.

She is basically a reliable character and sympathetic to the degree she is getting a disappointing version of the life she imagines. We find, however, that her own imagination

is wanting and has much to do with her discontentment. She is self-aware, but not to the extent that she understands this about herself, nor how she might overcome it. Her choice of diversions, while they may alleviate her exhaustion, aren't all that fulfilling. And though it takes a vision of romantic nihilism to kindle passion on this trip, that passion is quickly extinguished by the actions of her husband. I had no particular story in mind for this, at least not consciously. I simply wanted to portray a type. I portrayed this middle-class suburban woman as deeply bored and ineffably dissatisfied by the life she's chosen, but it is the sort of life that should would defend endlessly. This dis-ease causes her and her husband to lead separate physical and emotional lives, where it is connection and authenticity that becomes alien to them. Though she is wise to the false promises of excess that the ship promises, it is still a ready and intelligible form of pleasure.

There are shades of misanthropy throughout this collection, but none so much as in "Premeditation." I wanted to write something in the crime genre or about someone who was socio- or psychopathic. I didn't really have a story in mind when I wrote this; the most direct inspiration I had for it was our current president. In a rally in Milwaukee during the campaign, Melania Trump said in reference to her husband, "when you attack him he will punch back 10 times harder. No matter who you are, a man or a woman, he treats everyone equal" (Vitali).

Two stories I read after producing the bulk of this story, which I thought of in relation to this work and in revision, were Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and George Saunders's "Adams." The protagonists in these stories are obsessive, petty and vindictive, and my character shares those qualities. Like them, my character has both a low threshold for what offends or disgusts him and no obligation to a sense of proportionality. Ellis's

Bateman justifies his murders on so flimsy a basis that they are almost random, killing people for who they are than any specific wrong done to him. Saunders's Roger has a legitimate gripe, as indicated by the first few lines: "I never could stomach Adams and then one day he's standing in my kitchen in his underwear. Facing in the direction of my kids' room! So I wonk him in the back of the head and down he goes" (New Yorker), but his reaction is in no way proportional. The story ends with Roger kicking Adam's daughter across a room, knocking Adams and his wife unconscious, and burning down their home with them inside it. My protagonist, Cailen takes exception to the inconsideration and unfairness of others and to being personally humiliated. And though this prudence less severe in his violence, he does inflict pain, mostly by humiliating or frustrating people in kind. That said, for him, there is potentially no grievance too small.

Like we learn of Bateman, Cailen is also something of a fantasist. He has only "killed" once, and whether or not he had an active role in Mason's death is left ambiguous. Despite this, he has a God complex, and thinks of his actions through terms like judgement, patience, and caprice. Cailen is motivated by little more than the satisfaction of revenge. Unlike Roger and Bateman, his mode of violence is much more passive and meticulous, which strikes me as more sinister somehow—he doesn't even have to witness the violence to enjoy it.

I did have in mind, with my allusion to Trump, the connection between business and sociopathy, though my reference is somewhat oblique, particular compared to American Psycho in which Trump is frequently referenced. The principles of leverage and overcompensation are touted in Trump's Art of the Deal and to me correlate directly to his penchant for an often emotional and disproportionate response. I also thought of Trump in

having Cailen view himself as both a regular guy and hyper-competent. And while he strikes me as more careful and Machiavellian than Trump himself, it is difficult to say that Trump is not a success in many ways. I can imagine Trump's view of capitalism is not so different than the final words Cailen offers, "You can believe that shit happens, and it does, but every time you lose, think hard about whether or not that fate was rehearsed, whether your misfortune was carefully managed by better minds than yours." Even as a child, Cailen has an acute sense of, if not the law, then what people will believe about his involvement with Mason's death—a sort of social genius. Trump, given his ability as an alleged billionaire to appeal to the working class, speak in populist overtones, and claim to be a principled actor, surely shares this genius.

I find it difficult to easily categorize these stories. I like Kurt Vonnegut's conception of stories as having a shape which reflects the narrative arc in terms of the changing fortunes of the characters (Swanson). I tend to like the *Which Way Is Up?* stories, and think of that as my preferred aesthetic and the aesthetic of most contemporary literary fiction. Most of these stories fit that model to a degree, but I also feel that it's a cop out to leave it at that. Honestly though, the fortunes of these characters don't change that much in the course of the story. Their dramas, successes, and tragedies are smaller by design; this choice becomes a way for the story to represent the character of their lives and get at a larger social truth.



FIGURE 1: Illustration depicting Vonnegut's concept of a Which Way Is Up? story.

That said, without torturing them too much, I do see these stories as having shapes besides the Which Way Is Up one. “Miss Future Expat” strikes me as a Bad to Worse story, where the election result is the instigating incident, and her growing cynicism about the future of American politics, based on her family and the marchers, motivates her to (probably) cut ties with her family and (probably) leave the country sooner than planned. I also think of this as a sort of picaresque story. It is quite close the character, in third-person, episodic, and often in a free indirect mode. I view Grey as a sympathetic outsider, whose ambivalence makes her the picaroon in that polarized milieu.



FIGURE 2: Illustration depicting Vonnegut's concept of a From Bad to Worse Story.

“Dying Over the Water” strikes me as part *Bildungsroman*, and part Old Testament story.

The protagonist does *find herself* in a meaningful way during her experience in the water, but her fortunes do ultimately sour. Her period of transcendence leads to a period of sexual passion, then to a recovered marital closeness that her husband soon squanders. Her experience on the ship has a low starting place, which gradually improves until the climax, where her relationship with her husband quickly plummet to a place worse than where she started.



FIGURE 3: Illustration depicting Vonnegut’s concept of a Man in Hole story.

The criteria for fortunes seem inverted for someone like the character in “Premeditation,” such that simply continuing to hurt or humiliate others and avoid jail seems like success. I also think of “Premeditation” as partly an origin story and slow-burn thriller. But the model that it seems to fit best is the Man in Hole shape. For both the Mason and elevator girl sections, he faces an adversary that has humiliated him, exacts revenge, and comes out on top. He’s successful but not conventionally sympathetic, therefore a classic antihero.



FIGURE 4: Illustration depicting Vonnegut's concept of an Old Testament story.

“Beans in Peru” strikes me as a stillborn or recursive *Bildungsroman*. Without a fuller context of his life or therapy, we don’t know what epiphanies are new and not, which parts of his personality are static or dynamic. Of the four of these, the Which Way is Up shape is the only one that seems to apply.

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## DYING OVER THE WATER

When we neared the boardwalk, the ship was all you could see. The ships always had terrible names: Ecstasy, Valor, Miracle—always promising too much. A pleasure, a strength, a circumstance too overwhelming or fantastic for you, oh faithful cruiser, to even fathom. You'll be *too* leg-shakingly satisfied, *too* secure in your 1.5 room cabin, *too* inundated with chocolate fountains, mountains of cocktail shrimp and ambrosial mixed drinks (not included in the ticket price) to ever think of renouncing excess. And most of the time we didn't. If we weren't treated like kings and queens, free to drink ourselves stupid or eat ourselves sick or vice versa, we were ready to deliver a drunken, spittle-rich harangue to the captain, pleasure services manager—really anyone who had to take our abuse. That wasn't really us, but it was the feeling going in. The ship towered over the fresh, wide-as-two-city-streets concrete dock some 200 feet above the water line. It really was a floating city, complete with a water-park, botanical gardens, a solarium and a carousel. The brochure boasts a 5400 passenger capacity with a boardwalk full of shops, sixteen bars, three music lounges, and four upscale restaurants.

Thankfully, Norfolk had well-kept sidewalks so in heading toward the ship, I wasn't heaving my rolling suitcase over curbs or stuck humping it on the asphalt. It was all the same to Ryan who fit his entire week into an Adidas duffle he's had since high school. The spring air was thick and exhilarating. We caught the town in the couple of weeks when the cherry blossoms were in bloom; a steady drizzle of fallen blossoms covered the thoroughfare and swept in coils behind passing cars. The low canopy of trees was draped lazily over us like line bedsheets in the wind. The ornamental pear trees were only beginning to bud. Their smell, made extra salty by the sea air, was not unlike semen and was bewitching in its way.

Ryan was humming “Superfreak” to himself in a white tee, board shorts (Was that what they called them? I always thought *trunks* was unduly flattering), and sandals that were a size too big.

The previous week Ryan scoured the street view maps to find the closest place we could park legally for a week straight. He assiduously tracked the streets for and zoomed in on the parking restriction signage. The last time we went, we were charged thirty bucks a day, and Ryan didn’t intend to lose a chunk of the savings that he made back from the slashed cruise price. He told me before we left to pack some tennis shoes. He didn’t say why; he didn’t have to. He found no shame in taking what was on offer. It was the only way we could afford trips like this. We always claimed to be students when it would help us— at museums, on buses, or for college performances. If they asked for our I.D., we’d sigh, drop and rifle through our bags until they decided it wasn’t worth holding up the line. When Ryan was still in school he used school loans to pay the mortgage on the house we now rent out. We use our church’s daycare whenever we can, and when he got caught with appendicitis and no insurance, we tapped the church’s medical emergency coffers. We weren’t suckers; if someone has it to give, we’re happy to have it be it a used car or a case of Similac. But I’m on an allowance; it isn’t as if we’re living it up. We have four kids and I don’t work. I clip coupons. We make the sacrifices, and are given our modest bounty.

When Ryan surprised me with the tickets, I was picking up bits of tinsel in the yard that the kids had scattered after our late-February tree dismantling. He had just made it home, walking up with his shoulder bag and his wrinkled shirt pulled out of his slacks. I mustered more surprise than I had, looking agape, giving a delighted squawk. About every other or third year we go, and he finds me in a bad moment hoping (I imagine) I’ll leap on him with

joy and scream like a sorority girl, hands waving and all. Again, that didn't happen, but I was appreciative. I hugged him warmly with my "thank yous" and he kissed my hair. He walked inside to excited screams of "daddy!" while I picked up the remaining pieces that had blown under the van and against the tires. Ryan treats the kids with the emotional complexity you'd show a dog, and right now that's exactly how they preferred it. They greeted him with unconditional excitement, and though they *had* to impress me, it's him they wanted to impress. When we watched a movie, they looked to him to confirm or disconfirm what they thought was amusing. My satisfaction in what they did or thought was not easily won but somehow too pedestrian. Finishing their plates or breathing in my face to show me they'd brushed their teeth was not a rite of passage, it was a routine. I'm the test audience for all the material they worked out during the day, and they save the A-material (almost-right factoids, knock-knock jokes, things they'd seen that day) on their dad. His exhausted indifference made them work all the harder. I grabbed the pieces I could reach and upon seeing my reflection in the tinted passenger window, flattened an unruly bit of hair.

My mom always took the kids for a week when we left. She had always lied and told me she had plenty of vacation, and I let her. She was tired too, but always happy to have the kids. Since we moved the previous September she hadn't gotten to see them as often as she liked. It was a relief in a lot of ways to be far enough away that mom and dad couldn't drop in any old weekend, but I miss being able to see a double-matinee by myself in the afternoon. Mom's mom died young from cervical cancer—talcum powder she always blamed it on. Each time her mother comes up, she mentions how her suspicion had been justified by the recent rash of daytime ads from law firms seeking claimants against Johnson and Johnson. As a consequence, my mother didn't really know how not to be a mother. My sister still

didn't have kids and might never. I didn't take it as my duty exactly to shore up the grandkid quotient, but that's certainly how she took it. My sister and I got sick pretty quickly of how our mother so thoroughly *mothered* us. By the time we had gotten our ears pierced and discovered tie-dye in our post-Hanson, Bush, Nirvana, and Goo Goo Dolls phase, she had to find something else to baby, so she began to direct her cooing, inane questions to anybody that would have them—at the supermarket, doctor's office, or (God forbid) at our school. And it was never enough. The children she met were always a little terrified at how strongly she came on. She was *too* sweet, *too* affectionate—more a mother to them than their own mothers. I had to tell her that it was weird to kiss someone else's child. She didn't believe me until she was rebuffed in one way or another by half a dozen children, then finally scolded by one of the mothers.

We walked through the boardwalk to the mid-ship elevators. We passed the busy hands of people carving fruit, mixing guacamole, clinking ice into glasses, and working their cocktail shakers. There were clumps of families every five feet, desperately trying to agree on some collective action. There were others pinching and un-pinching their phones trying to navigate a map of the ship decks. The deck maps displays on the ship were surrounded by an impenetrable, half-moon huddle, five-people thick so it was quicker for most to whip out their phones. Despite the bustle of cruisers, one of my favorite things about being on the ocean was how the sound dissipated—how impenetrable the white noise was. Voices didn't travel far, dying quickly over the water. And the sounds of shore were replaced by the ship cleaving the whipped surf ahead of it and churning the undertow behind. We were four levels up on the starboard side. Last time we cruised, Ryan spent the trip quizzing me on nautical terms. We had a small privacy window a few feet above eye level. I began to

unpack my bag into the drawers and Ryan threw his in a corner and collapsed on the bed. He laid out sprawled, let out a long groan and said, “Holy crap, we made it.” After a moment’s paralysis, he looked at the nightstand and picked up the activities schedule.

“You know what you want to do this time?” he asked. I hadn’t looked at the schedule beforehand, which I normally did.

“Not yet” I told him, “you see anything good?”

He verbally scanned the list, his relative interest changing with his inflection.

“Calligraphy, mud baths, art gallery/lectures, photography lessons, putt-putt, wine tasting, IMAX, dancing lessons, silent auctions, a chocolatier academy, marine-life exhibits, *ooh* ship tours. And at port: scuba diving and horseback riding on the beach.”

“I just want to lay out for awhile until dinner—maybe get in a hot tub” I said.

Ryan looked anxiously at me, and I rolled my eyes and told him he could take the ship tour if he wanted. He pumped his arms in a little celebratory dance toward me and grabbed and kissed my face.

“Thank you, baby” he got out between kisses.

“Message me around 6,” I told him.

These cruises had become our only release valve, beyond the occasional grandma pick up. Sex had become rare and perfunctory. Lately, it’s felt like going to the gym; we’d undress with our backs to each other, and leave to our separate showers, knowing to keep them short with our water heater. I was beginning to suspect that for Ryan, it *was* going to the gym. This year he’d taken up distance running for the first time since high school, and his breathing seems more controlled than I remember it being. He hates being reminded to pick up condoms, but has spent entire evenings shopping for the best anti-chafing tape or

talking to custom shoe salesmen. Since our youngest, Lance, turned 3, we decided that each week we'd both take one of our children on a date—on different days so we didn't have to get a sitter.

I wrapped myself in one of the gargantuan bath sheets that on our first trip almost went twice around me, but this time only went as far as my spine. I sat on the bed several minutes to study where our room was relative to the tub sections. Once I felt I had the route down, I closed two different strengths of sunblock, my phone, and a copy of *The PrayFit Diet* into the puckered lips of my drawstring bag and went down. In the elevator heading to the main deck, I heard the bellow of the final boarding horn. I decided on the clump of tubs toward the rear (was it the *stern*?) that seemed the least full of boarding traffic and mouthed and gestured to the two ladies inside if I could get in. This was an etiquette that only women observed, to other women. They smiled and waved me in. They chattered to each other, chuckling and watching those that passed behind me. They were pleasant looking old women, in their fifties, probably. One had a cherubic face, with hair like Katie Couric's, except that it was two inches too thick all the way around. The other had loose curls, half condensed glasses, and a lot of definition in her neck—too much, like the stretched tendons on a whole chicken. I imagined first that they were old pals, maybe old widows, who worked reception at the opposite ends of a large factory. Maybe they worked at rival insurance companies in a small town. They got lunch together a few times a week to rap about office drama and budgeted for a cruise together every year. But, no. Their rapport, their glances were more familiar than that. They laughed too readily, too heartily. They didn't look at anyone else with jealousy or scorn, but with a kind of nonchalance, piqued only by curiosity or amusement. These were *lesbians*, old lesbians. Maybe they didn't sleep together, or

maybe I didn't want to imagine it, but they were *companions*, simpatico. They had given up on men or men had given up on them, not out of bra-burning radicalism—these don't seem like *those* women (I could make out southern accents in both of them over the burbling tub)—but an ease, like that of fresh retirement. They've *retired* from men. Retired from Saturdays where the only sound in the house is ballgame announcers, and the awkward way they all seemed to eat. They retired from a generation of men who saw their reproductive organs in mostly practical terms, like trimming a lawn or changing the oil. They don't think we'd all like it that easy? That we don't owe something to anyone else? That we couldn't all be so loose with our affections? Anyway, who wants trim lawns, fresh oil?

I looked past them to do my own people watching. Cruises attract all sorts. You can usually spot the perennials, the veterans, the ones who know to sneak in their own liquor, swapping out the mini Patrons in the fridge with rinsed bottles of Coppertone, to wait the last day for the ship shop sales, and to buy iceless liquor and bring their own water on the shore. Short, pale, and muscular latin men strutted, leading with the pouty tufts of their speedos. Hirsute men—business looking men, frat boys aged into adulthood—tanned either mahogany or peach skin red in half open cabana shirts, the clean edges of their facial hair contrasting with the overflowing bales of chest hair poking out of their shirts. Their wives always seem to have unnaturally black hair, and swimwear designed either to smush or spread their breasts. Even the old women couldn't resist sporting *some* décolletage, mottled after years in the sun. Even if we could afford to, I wouldn't bring my kids here. It's just gotten so indecent. The back of the brochure advertises decorousness—a hunky husband carrying a woven-grass bag full of beach toys and his tall (taller than him compensating for the perspective) wife in a pink one-piece and sarong— but there's sure as heck nobody here

enforcing it. People here weren't walking and smiling; they were sizing each other up before it was time to eat again. It was flesh feast, real feast, repeat. *It was college all over again.* They all wore shades and pretended to read books so their spouses couldn't see their wandering eyes. There were real sights too, but the grandeur gets old; most of the deck chairs face in, not out. Even when couples found a pair of loungers, they didn't look at each other. They settled in separately, applying their own oils and lotions. The horizon was there, but didn't inspire fantasy—not in the same way. Not the way that a hint of a crease or protrusion under cloth could.

The first day and a half was always exhausting. Each ship is different, so you always have to relearn the lay of it, where the bathrooms were, the dining decks, and so forth. There were some givens. You didn't want to hit the hot tubs after ten because they all were filled (really filled) with drunk singles who slept until dinner and mistook cruises for spring break. I watched the following day when the poor, early morning crew had to use skimmers to fish out Natural Light cans, dump the watered down margaritas overboard, and empty the filters of cigarette butts. Ryan was exhausting, and at some point in these cruises, I gave up being his sheepish cheerleader. He wanted to hit every activity that remotely interested him. And anything that had freebies or prizes, he would be at, despite his interest in the actual activity. He took a warped pleasure and pride in beating out kids and old men at limbo and hula contests and shuffleboard tournaments for cruise dining credit or Amazon gift cards. On our last trip, he won a surfboard that he immediately sold to an old man who was buying it for his grandson for six hundred dollars. I wasn't there. I'm positive that I'd once said early on to him I'd love to learn to surf, but it did help fund the following trip.

The third day we got up pretty late, having swum together until about 11:30 the night

before. We wandered up bleary to the lunch buffet. Ryan came from a big family, and he *still* ate too quickly at meals and gorged on all the best snacks in the house before anyone else could. This drove me nuts, but it was hard to be mad at him knowing this. It was an unconscious and learned selfishness, that he'd passed to me rather than me beating it out of him. I have to hide my favorite snacks if I want to eat them: cocoa dusted almonds, kale chisp, and sweet corn salsa. I can feel him loosen up at a buffet, knowing that platters get replenished and he won't have to nag anyone for more rolls. We both will tend more toward the expensive foods, feeling that we are earning back our ticket price. It was a relief not to think about how to budget our food. Normally, we shop as if on a mission, with steno pads and calculators. We always double check the unit price and factor in our own metric, CCP or calories per penny. I had learned to leave on the stems when making broccoli casserole and stretch a pack of six chicken breasts into five dinners. I insisted on water at all meals. We hardly went out for fast food, but when we did Ryan would get two drink holders, refill everyone's drink (no ice) and put them in the fridge for later.

“Does roughy cost more than swordfish?” he asked me in the buffet line. I had to talk him out of putting a saffron cream sauce on his fish because it wouldn't go with citrus. When he began to tell me again that, ounce for ounce, saffron was more expensive than gold, I told him I knew, and that he can do what he wanted but that it wouldn't be good. He looked at me directly and said, “Did you also know...it's more valuable than pure, Columbian cocaine?” in his best Tony Montana. He held his seriousness until I smirked, and let out a made-you-laugh guffaw as he bumped into me, passing me in the buffet line.

We sat on the deck until our stomachs settled watching a group of boys hold up half a sandwich for gulls to dive toward and pick at. When the gulls got close, some of the boys

tried to grab at it, but were either too slow or nervous to hold it. We held hands and walked back to our room. I always hated and still hate walking through crowds, but it's much easier with someone. I didn't like the time I spent in college—three semesters. It was a real-time Hot or Not as everyone looked quickly at or past one another, playing out their futures with one then another passerby. The speed at which people looked for what they wanted was astounding. Looking was also overlooking the rest of us. The girls were sexy and young but broke, so they didn't dress up but down, into sexy slobs in spandex and lycra. They got a second look and knew they were being looked at. Girls know when they're titillating, know when people are thinking or saying *Good Lord* under their breath about them, when every part of them is being obsessed over, and when people start playing their favorite songs over their movement. They feel the looks on them like the heat of a dozen spot lamps. I presume it's something like the opposite of embarrassment, like that dream where you wake up and everyone's looking at you in your underwear, except they're transfixed by what they see. It took a lot, I'm sure, to act like it was no big deal. To resist the impulse to cover yourself and flaunt instead. That's what it was to be cool wasn't it? Unacknowledged respect?

Unreciprocated jealousy? The real world was upon us and the difference in our value could not have been more obvious. People were better than other people; it was no longer a secret. What was on the minds of those sinewy girls who ran in their shorts and sports bras with a total indifference to the scenes they passed? Or is that wrong? Were they desperate to be seen, dreaming up the sort of man they might have an impression on, imagining the house they might live in, the decorating scheme, the stores they could afford to be in? Was the point to be glanced and gawked at? Did they like it? Sure they did. Sometimes I like my body. It's smooth and soft and real. Tight enough, I suppose, but not skinny or muscular.

My family's women are petite but not dainty. *They* never thought about their family's women. They were singular creatures, but I could never run in a sports bra.

On the fourth day, we ported in St. Maarten. I changed into a tankini in our room while Ryan sat shirtless in his shorts tuning in to local Caribbean news. I brushed my hair and pulled it in a ponytail. Ryan was repeating certain words back to the screen in a thick Carribean French, *Tropic of Canceur, low presseure system, dieu point*. He never picked a cruise on the basis of the port city; it was always price. From the deck, you could see past the hotels to the blue and pink houses with corrugated steel roofs, some rustier than others. There was little activity beyond the strip, not many cars or much foot traffic. Though they meant to, few of the cruise destinations felt like beaches at home. The islanders were never on their own beaches, but upstairs folding our towels. Beyond the hospitality industry, there was not much of a tourist economy. There were children selling baubles and brown wizened men hacking at the heads of coconuts, feeding straws in the exposed hole, unsure whether or not to smile at you.

The island was beautiful and would've been more peaceful were it not for the airliners that invaded the horizon on the tourist's side every thirty or forty minutes. They came in dangerously low and didn't have much runway before it would crumple in a blaze at the foot of a lush beachy mountain. Rather than resent it, the air traffic had become an offbeat island attraction. Random beachers cheered as the rumble shook the air around us, and getting off the boat we heard a group of guys in ball caps say that they were going to the foot of the strip to feel the jet exhaust. Ryan pulled me away from my towel, complaining how long it took me to settle in, and we walked into the water. We held hands at a distance and sucked in our bellies as the waves hit them. It was difficult to reach the point of uncoiling, of trusting the

idleness—I didn't think I'd ever know it as well as most. Even now, I'm scanning the water for conchs or crabs, but this became much easier on land. On board, I couldn't fully give myself over to the experience—couldn't suspend my disbelief that the ship's anything other than a conveyance. I'm in transit, wayward and, whatever mood it puts me in, it's not usually one in which I want a cocktail. But here I finally could.

We played together in the water watching the waves slip over our oily, sunlotioned skin, but then broke to experience it separately. The water was a dozen degrees cooler than our bodies and as we waded deeper, it became a more fantastic shade of blue. I stared out at to the way we came by ship, my feet barely touching, bobbing on the swells. My body went limp at the near weightlessness. The muscles in my back unclenched like the loosening of fabric, an unweaving, an undoing. I didn't say anything. It was intoxicating. I felt like...nothing. Time didn't slow, but it felt like it did. Seagulls moved normally, the waves moved at the same, steady clip, but I was not concerned with its passing. No one was asking for something or pulling at my arms. Ryan mercifully didn't remind me of the scuba excursion we were surely missing. He stayed quiet some meters away, watching me. I heard the ocean slapping the cavity of his armpits, but didn't return his look. I lay back, letting the water fill and unfill my ears, a desultory adjusting of the volume of the world. I chased the surf once it pushed me too close to shore, when I could hear the murmur of bathers again. Over and over I did this until the sun was low enough to stare at directly.

When it slipped out of view, I walked back to lay on my towel. Ryan laid next to me, looking at me. I looked at him, his body barely lit in early twilight. He looked scared to speak, practically holding his breath. Finally, in a gasping whisper, he told me that departure was soon. "Second warning, already." He turned his head toward the ship, whose deck lights

had turned on. "Hmm," I said. I looked at him for several minutes. He wasn't seeing me the way I was seeing him. He was unsure of me. I didn't want anything. I wanted to lay here and be swept away by the coming tide. To never set foot again on linoleum or toss fitfully in my bed. I wanted to understand silence and the preserving pressure of an overhead ocean. I wanted to be stilled in hypothermic beauty and drift past alien fish in unknowable darkness. I wanted to surrender my thoughts forever and be dismantled into far flung alluvia. That must've been frightening from the outside. What *would* those eyes look like?

I walked with him in complete silence back to our room. He was still watching me, walking around me like a postman around an unfamiliar dog. He laid down on the bed in the dark and reclined, and when I went into the bathroom I heard the musical chime of the TV. I returned in the doorway as a nude silhouette and the response OFF chime sang. He said nothing, and neither did I. I mounted him and we sweat and our mouths met desperately. We cringed and our extremities curled in orgasmic focus, alternatively holding and shifting position. We saw only parts of each other at a time, and trusted our hands to satisfy ourselves and each other. We neither gave nor took verbal instruction. We finished in a pant, hot and slaked. We drifted to sleep as we clung to soggy cotton, and the air was beginning to wick the ejaculate on both of us.

I woke up to slightly warm crepes and fruit. Ryan had uncharacteristically ordered two breakfast trays and moved the chair to the foot of the bed with the TV on silent. He was a morning person, so even though his tray had been slightly picked at, I saw that he was working hard to wait for me. I don't usually want breakfast, but tore into the crepes, cutting them noisily with my fork. He laughed at my messy hair, which I looked at in the stainless steel serving lid and shared a muffled chuckle at. He asked me what I wanted to do today.

He said this with so much earnestness, you'd think he'd asked it all the time. I stalled for time, umm-ing and asking for the activities schedule. Most of what the ship had become was acknowledging our differences, and admit that we enjoyed things more, separately. Never expressly to one another, and only barely to ourselves, but this...distance had evolved slowly throughout our relationship. Activities of our own devising seldom seemed planned. We planned things for the kids, planned for dinner, but our personal schedules were to be maintained, *personally*. Haircuts and baths were somehow fit into the day, and when a movie was begun by either one of us for ourselves, it was not interrupted. It might've been ignored while the other person zoned out on their phone, but what was deference turned into indifference. One another's traditions became a chore, and the feelings that incited them died in both of us. This was different. I chose the marine exhibit, and he held me closely in the cool darkness of the aquarium. It felt like we were dating. We were silly together, stifling laughs and making dumb, idle observations about the animals. We made fun of each other and there was no fear that it was something real that we had just let slip.

We went to one of the bars on the main deck, *Boca Roja*, and I had a couple of mojitos. I was a sort of lightweight and after the mojitos, ordered the following drinks by color—several tropical numbers sweetened up with pineapple juice or grenadine. I watched Ryan's face with each new drink and was impressed with him when he didn't balk or even look at the prices. He nursed a couple of negronis that were served with a floating sphere of ice that he kept tapping back into his drink. We talked about the rooms in the house we'd like to redo, what sort of hobbies seem worth nurturing in the kids, joked about how last time we visited his dad, he was bragging about shorts he'd found at a yard sale that were clearly for a woman. The back pockets had diamond tapers to them.

He helped me to the room around nine and I napped on the bed while he rewatched *Die Hard*, which had just started. In a parody of himself, he reiterated to me that it was basically a perfect movie, and I smiled weakly and put two thumbs up. I woke up during the credits and was completely famished.

“Mmmmmm, I’m hungry. What’s still open?”

He bent over his nightstand. “Uhhh, bars and Cinnabon.”

I gasped, “Ohhhh my gooosh” throwing my head back. “Would you split one with me?”

“I just want a bite. Are you okay alone?” I gave him a self-assured nod that was undercut by my leaping up too quickly (still processing the alcohol), and nearly losing my balance. Ryan vainly held his arms out, but I caught myself and smiled childishly at him. I slipped out of the door and made my way down to the dining area of the main deck again.

It was easy to find, its bright blue sign the last lit in that area of the food court. There was no line, and I ordered one. A short black man in a neat blue smock was the only one there. He took my order then began to prepare it.

He was in the middle of mixing and kneading; there were ropes of sticky dough on the prep boards to the right of him. He worked with slow precision and with his head down said in a lilting Caribbean accent, “Felt like a late night snack?”

“Oh, yeah. Right. I guess I did—do,” I said. “What about you? Do you like working on the ship?”

He looked up at me contentedly, and said, “Yes.” He took a few moments and continued “It’s worth the small moments” and boxed my bun.

I moseyed back, picking the nuts out of the frosting in the elevator and noticed on the exterior wall that there was only one lit cabin window, and counting back—one, two three, four rooms— it appeared to be ours. On a lark, I set the Cinnabon on the fixed table nearby and scooted one of the lounge chairs up to the wall to peek in to our room. It was one of those rubber band loungers, and it was difficult to steady myself. I was ready to tap on the window until I saw that Ryan was masturbating in my direction. He stood there, with his shorts band just above his knees in front of our bed with his phone laid in front of him, just *doing it*. I almost fell over; I ducked my head and caught the wall with my free hand. He didn't see me, clearly. As tears began to well, I slipped my head back up and watched him. He was working very hard, grimacing, mouth all tense, but there was a complete deadness in his eyes. What was he watching? Or whom? I could barely make out any moaning or screams. He had himself wrapped tight in his hand, his head purple and frothy from exertion. His arm held an odd position and he couldn't seem to maintain a facial expression. It was focused one moment, intent, and in the next completely lost in, what seemed like, an imitation of passion. He threw his head back and adjusted his grip looking frustrated at his pumping hand. Moments later, his eyebrows raised in an odd mixture of anticipation and surprise (as if he didn't know where this was going) and his other hand frantically reached for the sock on the left side of his phone. Finally, he looked down and wrapped the tip of it with the sock like he was corking a bottle, finishing into it. He balled it up and pushed it to the bottom of his bag. He looked relieved to be finished and worked quickly to clean up the rest of his mess. I watched him another moment as he slipped his erection under his waistband and hopped back in the bed, and flicked through his social media feeds. I was nauseous and tried to quickly but carefully climb down. I grabbed the Cinnabon and held it to my chest.

My breath was uncomfortably short, my chest tight. I whipped the clamshell pastry box over the railing, unconcerned with where it landed and ran.

I ran down the flights in a teary panic. There were few people on deck, but I avoided everyone. I ran across the deck and along it, losing all orientation, my palms slamming into railings, looking for some place to hide. Several minutes later, panting hard, I found a gap in the corridor that was beyond the main light arrays. I sat with my back against the steel in that shadowy spot, bleary and shaking. That *shit!* Why would he do that? Why here? Why now, in the 20 minutes I was gone? It was so...pathetic, so blasé and routine, like he'd taken out the garbage. Was I so terrible? Was I the garbage? My feelings and our children as good as a soiled sock at the bottom of his bag? It was so easy for him to spend a private moment that way, to not want to wait for me, to prefer to think of something else, to not put the time in, to stain the tenderness we'd just gotten.

I got up and walked to the railing, looking through it at the ship's reflection in the water, each little light rippling and unfixed like it had bad reception. They bled into the distance like watercolor. There was no moon. There were no stars. I was in the bosom of darkness. I clutched the railing uncertainly and heard the rapid slapping of flip-flops against soles and his steady aspirations a deck above which left me and were lost to the beckoning murmurs of the water.

## PREMEDITATION

I'm always amazed at the people who get caught committing crimes. There they are on the evening news, face in low res, looking angry and scared beside a Funyuns stand or huddled poorly behind someone at an ATM. And their families can't wait to turn them in, get them out of their own hair. We've been told that a criminal is one of two people: the baddie—a desperate, loudmouth loser who can't get his hands on a balanced bank account but *can* a snubnose .38. He's the person you watch in the mall, the person who seems to be loitering everywhere he goes. And then there's the other type—the quiet next-door neighbor with a collection of teenage heads in his backyard. Those to whom the great challenge of avoiding detection and prison is appearing normal. And people will give you a wide berth even for that, but why tempt them? Life is little more than self-control, anyway.

I don't think it works like that anymore. At least, it never did for me. I don't seem like you, I am like you. Nobody touched my dick or held my hand to a stove. I don't dance naked in my room to opera or decorate my house with taxidermied fauna. I'm just some guy. I go to your movies, eat your fast food, and like the same cat videos as you. I'm a Steelers fan, and never miss buy-one-get-one-half-off sushi night. I'm a prolific Yelp reviewer. And it's not the depth of my game that leads me to lead pretty much the life that everyone else leads. I'm just not a weirdo. I don't have the luxury to be misunderstood, but I don't have the inclination either. I don't have some great cause or a half-finished manifesto. Serial killers and serial rapists (not so rare, by the way) it's assumed, follow the senseless logic of victim-by-dart-throwing. I couldn't say. I can only speak for myself. The people I choose;

it's not random. They may not know it, but it doesn't mean they didn't have something coming. When people are asked, "is there anyone you can think of who would want to do this to you," they assume no. But this is only because most people aren't very good accountants. The hairy gambit that everyone makes is that you won't take it personal, that nearly everything is let go—there's a universe of strangers and almost-acquaintances that count on it. They trust that it is just too much trouble for someone to get back at them for eyeballing you at the bank or cutting them off in traffic or in line. But it's really no trouble at all. I remember everyone in my life who's ever wronged me. I remember Trey Willis who, in Kindergarten, made fun of me for eating the sandwich crusts, and who, after I tore them off and tossed them out of the bus window, made fun of me for being browbeaten. Trey is a thirty four year old courier outside of Akron. Sometimes life is better at revenge. I paid some kids 20 dollars a week to steal James McVee, of 13215 Kagel Canyon St., Pacoima's mail for the better part of a year. I worked under James at my first job out of college, and what he did was pour the remaining coffee in his mug back into the office pot to reheat. Everyone just learned not to use it when his shift began, making it *his* coffeemaker. It wasn't a cheap one either. It was one of those big, restaurant quality Bunn's with a top and bottom burner, and if you didn't see him...recycling, you had to assume both pots were spoiled. I guess you could say Mason was my first.

Judgment alone is a violent act. But there's a truth in *violence* that's unignorable, unidentifiable. It's transgressive in a way that nothing else can ever be. You've probably heard somewhere that no wild animals kill for fun. That may be, and in captivity you can get almost any animals to get along, but they *want* to kill. They just also need some food. You ever seen a cat catch a bird or a vole? It's fun to them. They shake them with unreserved

wildness until their nervous systems give out then bat around their little bodies like Pelé. And they don't understand it. Don't understand that once upon a time, they actually needed that animal, that hunting was actually easier on empty stomach. People let go almost entirely of rage. And we badmouth it; it's always blind or senseless or insane. But it isn't. It's personal.

We all judge, all day long; one could say we do little else. But actually doing something with all those little judgments, making something of the grievances you build up in your head, carefully externalizing your outrage—there's nothing quite like it. And the icing on top is if you can do it with a complete lack of a trace, where it's all crime and no criminal. The machinery of design, the predictability of plans—it's an art form; it really is. The world is so often quiet, and not paying attention. The more you do this, the more you see what they ignore. They suffer in ignorance...of cause, of vindicator. So, if my violence seems random, it's only because I've let it.

Like most hobbies, this mostly takes your time and attention. You get extra marks for being cheap, for creativity. I imagine that a pipe to the head is pretty satisfying, but not nearly so as pretending to be the standby super and refitting someone's kitchen sink pipes with lead solder. Lead you melted down into a thick wire from fishing weights. You get breakfast near their apartment to see them break morning routines with visits to their doctor, where they'll both puzzle over their fatigue and uncharacteristic irritability. Eventually they will repaint the walls, change their diet, shampoo and detergent, get allergy and blood tests, which will be ambiguous because their intake is negligible. And long before they move and credit everything to the fresh start of a new job in a new place, you were in their apartment, talking to them about the weather and how bummed you both were that the Vietnamese

restaurant two blocks down closed, accepting a Coke from them after ensuring that every ice cube and pasta pot made there is faintly spiked with poison. And what do they know? They will forget your face. There's no cause that comes to mind, no pattern. When you go, they'll remember how *nice* that guy was, how *normal*.

Too like you, we've got our own little community, our own cozy corner of the internet. I haven't needed it for some time, but I like to check in. I mean, we're all students, right? Through proxy sites and blind FTP servers, people shared their inspiration. Most of it isn't that. You get pictures of tires that were slashed, advice on when and where to slip a fish into an air duct, stories of retail workers saving their crab-infested pubes for the pockets of expensive slacks. Most of these were bad kids, as in dumb kids—little sociopathic aspirants who can't get good grades so turn to this for inspiration to wreak a little mayhem for their teachers and social workers, testing the edge for others and themselves. They like what *feels* dangerous, and just find somewhere to go with it; others tell them what that is more than they tell themselves. They want to shock you in secret with a Nazi symbol on a bathroom stall—that's where it starts. Somebody's older brother shows them stick figure comics that make jokes and shoot each other in the head. And move on to grainy footage of the smashed head of a pizza delivery boy whose moped got slammed from behind on an otherwise quiet city street. They enjoy the physics of his body as it moved, oddly elegantly, through the air. They are unutterably intrigued by the simplicity of ballistics and the clean symmetry of action and reaction. They understand *their* truth as rocks are thrust through glass, as bodies make way for cars, and bullets slip through bone and flesh. The world opens up to each of them, glass tipping away like the surprised and crooked limbs of pedestrians, leaving the clean, see-through passage of a bullet hole before blood and body engulfs it. I get it. There's

an aesthetic there, but it's too crude. There's no art in it. Erect bodies struck limp, see how they fall. *Big whoop*. Where's the personal touch? And you're never going to get away from it. Years ago, that guy shot people through the trunk of his car; that guy was thinking, at least. They kill themselves because they are too lazy to learn how to punish in plain sight. Their dim fantasies fill tacky, flashing, red webpage banners and rest innocently on subreddits. Some of them aren't bad, so it helps to check in on the conversation.

For elevator girl, I waited about a month when it was just the two of us in the elevator again. We both tended to come in slightly early. Getting off on my floor, Browning Accountants Ltd., I stayed to watch where the floor indicator stopped; she was on six. The week after that, I mussed my hair, left my jacket downstairs went upstairs and pretended to be delivering mail. I packed some shredded paper into three bubble mailers and emptied them randomly into cubicle trashes as I circled the room. In the far corner, I passed behind her desk, noticing the neat line of her shoulder length hair. The week after that, I stayed late and took the back stairs up to the offices. They were keycard locked, unlike our office, so I pretended to text in the stairwell outside the door and taped the latch at a quarter to six the next day. I parked a block away so my car wasn't the only one remaining in the lot when the last person left. I stayed a good ninety minutes before I made my way to her floor and found her desk again, which was two in from the far corner. The office was a peculiar cobalt color in the few remaining minutes of natural light. Her cubicle smelled good like guavas, and was very neat. She was young and had no pictures up—no boyfriend or nieces or nephews or even a dog. She bought her own expensive, German-made pens. Her computer screen must've been habitually wiped. The black screen was mirror-like; there wasn't a spot of dust or spittle, even in the fading light.

I pulled on the drawer handles slowly, like a curator at the Guggenheim might've, and began to look through her desk. Whatever made this space smell so good, she took with her every day. I found no lotions or perfumes. Nothing personal, not even tampons or headphones. I did find a handheld spray bottle and a neatly folded microfiber towlette in the top left-hand drawer. This was not water or Windex, but a specially bought compound for LCD screens, alcohol, not ammonia based. Her deep drawers held only files whose tabs had script so perfect, I first assumed they were printed. She kept other supplies in the drawers, leaving an immaculate desktop. I appreciated her cleanliness, and that she wasn't self-satisfied about it with a cute, fucking miniature zen garden to let others know she had a half a bookshelf at home devoted to feng shui. I couldn't be sure what she was getting out of it, or what she's making up for. If you're going to be clean, be clean where it counts. If your desk and handbag are *that* clean, something else about you is ready to snap. I can't park in my own garage because there's so much junk in there: bikes, a kayak, inflatable couch, power tools. Nobody worries about a slob.

Then, I found something. Next to her row of (possibly alphabetized) paperclips, pencils, and post-it notes was a contact lens case. I hadn't brought anything. Almost anything would hurt an eye: crushed silica gel, paint thinner, even lemon juice. I still had a vial of methotrexate from when I helped clean up my aunt's house before the estate sale and a boiled strychnine reduction I made from rat poison, but that would've been extreme. She did just look at me, after all. I still can't figure out why. What from my backside did she find so disagreeable. I didn't step in dogshit or pass gas, I don't have dandruff, and my clothes were freshly pressed. My mother used to play out arguments in her head and sneer or shake her head out loud, but this didn't seem to be that. It was hard to say. She didn't see me see

her, but she made a face. At me. The why niggled at me, but it ultimately didn't matter.

I found a different cubicle nearby and got some scissors out of the desk. I stepped up onto the desk and pushed up the drop-ceiling tile. Pushing against the tile was the gentle weight of an unfurled blanket strip of white fiberglass insulation. I snipped off a swatch of insulation and climbed down. I went back to her desk and borrowed the solution, stole two tissues from the neighboring desk, wiping off the clean rubber impression my shoes left. Going back again to her desk, I used the tissue to unscrew the left lens cap and snipped the very edge of the glass filaments into the solution. I wiped and returned the bottle of solution, wiped the drawer handles, and made my way back out, removing the tape from the door latch.

Making my way out to the car, I noticed I had a ticket. I studied the sign. Not looking at the advisement closely enough previously, I saw now that between the three signs that were there, there was a period between 3:30 and 5:00 that required money in the meter. "My mistake," I said out loud. But in pulling the ticket out from under the wiper, I saw an emphatic, double loop circle around 150 dollars. Immediately, my jaw clenched. I was wrong, clearly, and was ready to go home, take my medicine, and put a check in the mail, but this was fucking outrageous. *Literally* highway robbery. The entire block was empty but for my car, nobody clamoring for space. This was ticketing for ticketing's sake. The last big get of some meter maid's or meter man's day. My mind went directly to arson. What fucking place could I torch to the goddamn ground? What courthouse, what public services center deserved to make the news that week? I felt the dangerous urgency of vindictiveness that gets idiots caught, and thought better. Do they have routes? Do they always have the same routes? If they rotate their routes, how long would I need to watch them to figure out who

made this inscrutable mark under Officer Signature? How much was anthrax? How should you handle it? Could it be seen on a windshield wiper? How many times would I need to be ticketed again for him or her to go home and choke on blood in their Barcalounger?

The following Tuesday I saw elevator girl again. I smiled at her, and she weakly did the same, but this time she was wearing an eye patch—a scratched cornea, most likely. I turned back to face the front and watched her face appear again in the meeting of the polished pewter doors. Her face was downcast and she didn't smell of guavas. I looked down to flatten and re-straighten my tie in order to hide my growing smirk.

\* \* \*

I don't really go looking for trouble, mind you. But I can't rightly say that I'm meting out justice. A clueless person can't be contrite. Nor is it proportional. A wise person said if you get attacked, punch back ten times harder. I don't owe them fairness. I'm not trying to impart a lesson, balance the scales, or even settle a score. My karma isn't instant or even merited. It's more about me than you; I'd have to be crazy not to admit this, and I'm *not* crazy. I don't want you out of the game, I want you to hurt. I get uneasy looking at the soft temples of a restaurant cashier and the ticket spike nearby in the knowledge that the two are separate. If I see a carpenter working in a new subdivision, I'll park in view of him and fantasize about taking a mini-sledge to his crown, burying it in a bloody hole in his head. Everything about him yielding to three inches of steel. Everywhere I go I see the fragile bodies of librarians, gas station attendants, and dog-walkers that, if I wanted, would be at the mercy of my careful and inventive caprice. They just needed to give me a reason. Short me change, litter on the street; I don't need much.

I have my petty vengeance, but truly I've only killed once, a boy. And I was boy,

and I can't even know how much I meant to happen, whether it was an accident or not. I remember being shocked, but remember the shock quickly morphing into self-protection. I don't think I enjoyed it, at least not in the moment, in his falling or in the blood so quickly escaping his head. I don't remember. Later, I enjoyed the privacy of it, the secrecy, being glad he was gone, that he was finally quiet.

Fourth period in Zoology, we were finishing with our dissections. We were on cats and after the identification test, we got a chance for extra credit for getting the brain out intact. I sawed a crack into its skull with a serrated scalpel and peeled it open like a difficult hard-boiled egg. When it was fully clear, I turned the cat upside down and a smooth, muscular-looking lump of what resembled molded silly putty fell onto my glove. After Mr. Brown inspected it for scalpel nicks, I took it back to my station and tested its plasticity, wanting to know how it would react. Would it unravel? Did it have a sheath and distinct innards with some give, like the tendinous sections of a tangerine. It didn't. It didn't break and couldn't be neatly disassembled. Under my finger, it disintegrated into a grainy mush, looking like pâté or a undercooked spongecake.

Fifth period was P.E. and we lined up for chin-ups. Boys and girls, each in their own lines, self-segregated into discernible types: jocks, preps, tubs, nerds. None of us fit very well on that continuum, but we all ended up somehow yielding to it, especially in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. We all felt ridiculous in our loose, unflattering grey shirts and our flared, stretched-out hot pants with a thick, white space where we scrawled our names. The preppy girls rolled their pants at the band and the jocks rolled their sleeves above their shoulders. I never thought of myself as a jock. Jocks were supposed to be cool. Jocks were *involved*. I played football and ran track into my sophomore year, but never broke 5'10" or 170 pounds. I was athletic,

but not big enough or coordinated enough to be of much value to any varsity teams.

I got fourteen chin-ups, third best among the boys and we lined up on the basketball courts for indoor soccer. The year before we got an indoor gym with two courts and a half-sized track with the dividers cinched in the ceiling. I liked it. I always overheated quickly and often threw up from lightheadedness, but I actually enjoyed sweating indoors. It seemed to work as it was meant to, the sweat, where you glazed yourself with your own cooling membrane. You didn't drip. The beads would streak across my scalp, periodically give me little shivers. The teams were evenly matched and the boys' game ended 5-5. None of the girls went back discussing the score or the game.

I took my time back and slipped into the main school hallway because the drinking fountains in the gym were never cold. After several long draws, the fountain compressor kicked back on and I made my way down into the locker room. Most were already almost dressed, their clothes clinging to them oddly, mopping up what their poor dry jobs missed. The air was acrid because the layer of steam kept the motley aerosol deodorants at head-level. I went to my locker at the far interior of the room, and grabbed my soap-on-a-rope and a thin-knit dollar-store beach towel. The pressure was too high on the shower heads but there was always warm water, so I never bothered to hurry down. I opened my towel and added to the unflushed pee in one of the urinals in the urinal bank across from the showers. I hung my towel on one of the hooks, stepped over the divider and turned the faucet dial, which gave me about three minutes of water before I had to re-engage it. The clattering of lockers had almost completely died down. I heard a light shuffling at the other half of the locker room and a stream of forced belches. I lathered my chest and neck and face and the violent stream rinsed it quickly. My head was under the shower head when I heard the slapping of flat feet

approaching, and before I could open my eyes someone said, “nice dick, Cailen.”

Mason Klegg. He moved to my elementary school in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when his dad took over the muffler shop in town. He sold his dad’s copies of Swank on the bus (my bus) and called me Kayla for a good year and a half before the titters subsided. I don’t think anybody liked him, but he did have an uncanny ability to humiliate anyone and everyone around him despite being the biggest loser among us. That was the leveler; it was why we all let him have at us individually. *Mellany’s eyes really were too far apart, and Jimmy’s mom did dress like a pear-shaped prostitute.* He spoke to truth in a way none of us felt we could. He let us onto the fact that everyone could and should be taken down to size. Where someone's character flaws were once just an unacknowledged fact of the world, they were now something to be constantly addressed and exploited, if not out loud then to one's self as a measure of...what? Superiority? For the first couple of years, he made us sharper and harder until we realized that his best outcome was going to work at his dad's shop. What were these pointed assaults getting him?

I didn't speak. Looking at him was all the acknowledgement he needed.

"You sure are real good at soccer, Cailen," he said. I kept washing. I grunted back so he wouldn't repeat himself, which he often did if you didn't take his bait.

“Are you a *Polo man as well*” he asked in an effete voice. “Or is it all commie-fuck sports that tickle your little homo nutsack? The Romans were *big-time* fudgepackers, you know.” He smacked his lips loudly and burbled into shower water. "I'll bet you didn't know that." He turned around laughing to himself, sticking his own bar of soap into his thin, blonde thatch of armpit hair.

Here I can't remember exactly how it went. I remember walking up to him, feeling

nervous, but fed up. Either he fell back in surprise at finding me face to neck with him, or I helped him lose his balance. I didn't push him, but maybe I caught him by the heel—I dunno, kids are such fantasists—kicked his feet out from under him. I remember his body turned more than ninety degrees. His neck recoiled and head whipped back, accelerating faster than his body was turning, toward the tile. I remember thinking, *I did know that*. We'd watched Spartacus in class about a month ago; I had to get a permission slip signed. Nothing so cool came out of my mouth. Likely they were the unsure guttural noises of my open mouth. I do remember his equivocal expression—contorted, somewhere between concern and a smile. I assumed it was one of those involuntary things that happened when you died. I knelt down and looked over his naked body. It looked so small, though it was easily thirty pounds heavier than mine. I'd never seen him this close before. His breath smelled like Beef-a-roni. He had a fat face but a thin nose and a smattering of freckles above his cheekbones. This was the first time I noticed them. After looking him over, I got dressed and made sure I was seen before being dismissed. This was last period, so it wasn't until the janitors found him and the etiolated blood trail leading into the drain early the next morning that there was any hubbub. And there *was* that. Cops and new crews quickly filled the parking lot, and the police questioned everyone in fifth period P.E. I didn't know what their suspicions were, but I knew enough to know that it would be difficult for me to be implicated. I didn't deny that I was the second to last out—better to be caught in an inconvenient truth than a compromising lie. I told them I saw him going in the showers as I was leaving. Time of death isn't so precise that they could put us that close together in time, not that anybody in the gym upstairs was paying close attention to when I came up. And I didn't bruise him, just unbalanced him. By all appearances, Mason fell on his fat head, and I

had no more motive than anyone else who had a class with him.

It was ruled no foul play. That was the story they wanted, and that's what I gave them. And it worked because it is the likely story. Occam's razor cuts clean, but I intend not to be on the severed side, but on the bleeding edge of what remains. It was impulsive. He was nothing to me, really, the day before, and I could just as well have tolerated him another three years, but I saw a sort of opening and took it. Who knows what elevator lady thinks hit her eye. An eyelash, her LCD spray, dust in the fucking wind. Who cares? You can believe shit happens, and it does, but every time you lose, think hard about whether or not that fate was rehearsed, whether your misfortune was carefully managed by better minds than yours.

## BEANS IN PERU

I don't know, doc. You know that old Freud, thing? Penis envy? Well, today what we've got is subaltern envy. Everybody's a part of the underclass, backlash or alt- something or other. You remember those psuedospiritual, or maybe actually spiritual, books on tape on addiction and grief that floated around in the 80's, with titles like Winning through Loss and The Bound, Unbound. I guess it shouldn't surprise me that a Christian nation found some use in the power of being a victim—slave morality to the *n*th degree. I saw, a couple years ago, this billionaire fuck said America was facing a 'progressive *Kristallnacht*.' You know what that means? I had to look it up myself. That's when Nazis smashed the windows of Jewish proprietors. Guess who *he* is in that scenario? This person, who went to Harvard and MIT and wherever the shit else, who once read the history of the Holocaust, presumably understood it, read about the *Kristallnacht*, 40 years later wrote an op-ed to the Washington Post saying how Occupy Wall Street was *hurting his feelings*. Steve Jobs still thought he was a hippie. He had the John Lennon glasses and George Carlin uniform, but was perfectly sanguine about setting up netting around Foxconn for the *jumpers*, or getting miners in the fucking DRC to pull coltan, an effective conductor, out of the ground with their bare hands. I guess in his couple of years at Reed, he never read Conrad. And don't get me wrong. We're all complicit. If I spend five dollars on a coffee that I also enjoy, I'm a goddamned monster. Any spare change that I don't send off immediately to Calcutta or Bangladesh is a sacrilege. When money isn't money, but life—clean water or a week's worth of education for some poor kids in a dusty hole—I can't justify my own. Life, that is. I could've bought a Fiesta instead of a Lexus and *literally* saved dozens of lives. Like Schindler and his little Nazi lapel

pin. Things are always that urgent, it's just easy to forget they're not. We make it easy. Did you know the best thing you can do to fight malaria is still mosquito nets? Search adoption on Google, and see how far down the list human adoption is. The average person spends more on their dogs than they do on charity. I love dogs, but there's too many dogs. We could have a better world, but we'd rather have a living antidepressants.

Oh, I think I have a right to happiness. I mean, do you? Is that the issue? There are enough babies starving right now, in this moment, to fill this room—at least up to the middle of your window there. I told my old Republican boyfriend this, and—. Yeah, exactly, Anton. Anyway, I told him something to this effect then, and he told me to go pick beans in Peru. He said, “Chase, if you want to defend a loser ideology, go live the loser scenario.” I was done with him right then, whatever happened after. I mean, he's right in one sense. People should know when they have it good. Even if you're just lucky, you should know it. That's not so easy to do. If your life sucks, you fucking know it. There's no mistaking it. He always told me if you're poor you don't know why you're poor, but if you're rich, you know exactly why you're rich. *He* knew why, and he had every intention of holding onto it. And, yeah, it pissed me off. This WASPy fag from Long Island was always telling me how fucking good I had had it. But everybody wants it both ways, don't they? The underdog-overdog. Some billionaire piece of shit can't just be happy with his yacht. We have to *appreciate him*. Anton really didn't. He knew how complicated the world was. He could talk for hours about almost anything if you let him, and was fucking coherent. He said people couldn't manage their misery. That's how he put it. He didn't get miserable. He said that they looked for excuses instead of opportunities. And in no way did he feel the need to become *cool*. He was an investment banker with a summer house in Santa Barbara. He *was*

cool. He told me if the meek were going to inherit the earth, they would've done it already.

Then again, do you know I've never been cut in line by a white person? It happened again last week, in a Wendy's. I mean, not exactly. I groused, internally. I mean, what can you say? It was a power move. A dick move, really. You don't have to be rich to be entitled. And by some accounts, good for him. How *do* you get back at a system screwing you over? It made sense to *him* or he wouldn't have done it, right? His calculus was, if he's not getting reparations, and his credit score is shit before it's even established, and statistically someone will pass on his resume because his name is Jamal and not James, how else do you exact your revenge but steal two minutes of your day from someone else. But also, I mean, where are we as a society if we're just—what's the opposite of dick measuring? If we're just enumerating our disadvantages, like a register, where does that get us? Intersection upon intersection upon intersection. It exhausts me and I'm a queen from Dallas. And there's no *redress*, no justice. Society isn't interested in measuring pain; it's trying to get the fuck on. This is just a business at bottom. And, at some level they're right, too. I wouldn't have pissed on Scalia's head if it was on fire, but he was right, not in that or most cases, but generally, in saying you can't get rid of racial entitlements once adopted. *Why?* Because you'll never own that shit down even if you're trying to. Nobody is ever going to feel like it's even-fucking-Steven now, and call it off. And you can't. It's never going to be fair again. There's no righting those wrongs. This is a judge, mind you. Pain and loss are lost to the fucking dirt because the penniless don't have accountants. And we *still* go to the pyramids, don't we?

I didn't mean that either, I'm just saying even if you could enact reparations, even though it'd be right to do it, people wouldn't have it. I know these people; white resentment

knows no bounds. It'd be worse, not better, to be black in this country. That's how fucked up it is. People can barely stand the fact that it might ever be unfair *to them*. Sorry, but that's what it's supposed to feel like. You can't even slip policy in. Talk about monetary policy and you'll be yawned out of the room, but if people even *suspect* some brown people are getting an advantage *they're* not getting, a roomful of rednecks go William F. Buckley on you. Forget the fact that whites get the same advantage when tested against Asians.

I don't know. In the grand scheme, I'm certainly closer to the billionaire than the Wendy's man. It doesn't get me far, but I know that all our accomplishments are *tainted*. Dismantle the patriarchy—fine, whatever, but there's always an —archy. Heh. You know that song? *God said to Noah... gonna build an arc-y, arc-y*. Rich fucks are entitled; we know that. I've never been ripped off by anyone who wasn't white. But so are broke fucks. What have they got to lose? It's easy to blame people that have some shit, but having nothing doesn't make people innocent or right. They're just fixated on the fact that you got shit and they don't. But you know, I think about being cut in line ten times more than the time than my HMO ripped me off for a full year, or when my vendors charge me for rush delivery that wasn't rushed. I didn't even try to get my money back. I'm glad Jay-Z got rich, but I can't listen to his music anymore. What story is he going to tell that I should care about? His arc is over. He's the fucking man now, isn't he? Popping Cristal isn't an event for him anymore; it's a Thursday evening.

I franchise three Baskin Robbins, right? What does that mean? What *does* it mean, right doc? I know this: around there, *I'm* the fucking man. I've been there, trying to cozy up to the staff, but they aren't having any of that. They don't know how to act with me and vice versa. I pay them pretty well for the job, about 20% more than other franchisees—but, I

mean, come on, it's scooping iced cream. I can't go nuts. But I'm not the one doing it. Why not? Because it sucks. I *did* do it, for years. And you know what it is? It's fucking picking beans in Peru. There's no pleasure in it, not really. There's no zen master ice cream scoop. It's not redemptive; it's a not-very-good paycheck. Getting out of it, I didn't even care about living well. I mean I'm not, am I? I'm in here with you. I just didn't want to scoop any more iced cream and fake any more smiles. In my little hierarchy, I'm sitting on top. When I was in high-school, I straightened my hair and wore Warhol print t-shirts. Boys slid straight porn and AIDS pamphlets they got from the nurse's office through my locker vents. If my name was left on the board, it was always amended to *Chasing dick*, or *Chasing disgusting, hairy, man ass*. And when they got bored of that, in the locker room, they held me by my arms and legs and smacked my body red. They'd leave me a swollen, bawling heap on the floor while they got dressed. I didn't know what the hierarchy was, but it was clear I was nowhere near the top. I mean, I'm really more of a *bottom*, right? Get it, doc?

On paper, I'm doing alright. Nobody in my family has ever had as much money as I do now. This is the time for model minorities, isn't it? But I'm in here just *dying* to be a loser, aren't I? Trying to trick myself into thinking I have nothing, so I don't feel so guilty. Or I just feel bad because having something usually means you *are* guilty.

Can we just talk about my mother or something?

## MISS FUTURE EXPAT

Inauguration day was yesterday; their firm is one of the few she knew of that opened for a half day on Saturdays—a convenience for the working-man, as it was sold to her. Grey sat on the couch waiting on her skirt in the dryer, hunched over her crossed, panty-hosed legs. She stared vacantly at the weather girl, hypnotized by her slow and smooth gesticulations and the small pleasant curves of her belly, which disappeared beneath the taut fabric between her pelvis. On the TV stand was the insomniac litter of leaning stacks of DVD cases and the interspersed sleeves, which sagged under the weight of them. She flicked a long length of cigarette ash into the tray and stabbed out the butt.

There was a mindless reassurance to the morning news that she suspected only she and post-menopausal women appreciated to the same degree, women who had to get up early, too early, for work. These women didn't greet the day smiling with their shades in the morning glare, reaching twice a minute for their six dollar cappuccinos, but preferred waking up to the familiar rhythms and mindless patter of news, traffic, sports, and weather. Today, for a woman her age, it had almost a boutique charm. The cold efficiency of the Weather or Dark Sky app seemed needless and, lately, downright offensive. The news had become a slow, sweet morning drag that gave her a spun out frisson like a steady shot of morphine into the spine. She got the same feeling when someone slowly and expertly gift-wrapped something in front of her. She was not given to handling things in her life so delicately, least of all herself.

After blowing a mediation across town a couple months ago, she sent her iPhone skipping across the third level of a parking deck. Her mother had given her an Apple Watch for her birthday, but it sat in its packaging in her glovebox, depreciating faster than the

Corolla it sat in. Not only had she never worn a watch more than an afternoon, finding them uncomfortable, now she had nothing to pair it to. Her mother told her on her newly activated dumb-phone, “I thought you could keep track of your appointments this way.”

Grey was chronically late, but only to family functions. Her mother could scarcely be blamed, though she was, for having such a false impression of her. She had made a point to deliberately forsake her advice since twelve when she realized that, despite persistent protest, she continued to put peas on her plate. Breaded chicken breast, polenta, and PEAS. Mushroom risotto, au gratin potatoes, and PEAS. These were not failures of observation, but failures of observance. She had *told* her this. Her mother calls her once a week, presumably to stay abreast of her life, but somehow didn’t notice that she went vegan for almost a year. “*Pot-roast is good for Sunday, right?*” And she was always a boyfriend behind. “*Oh, is this the Chad I’ve heard so much about?*” Yet she never fails to call her when daylight savings was about to into or out of effect, something that regrettably her new phone no longer automatically changed.

Lately she mostly seemed to call to pester her about being behind the curve for a woman of thirty-three. “I’m *doing* things,” was Grey’s normal rebuttal. “*Canceling your gym membership is not a life goal.*” Maybe not, but she did have to sit down and spook a G.D. regional manager with legalese and highlighted portions of the contract before being taken seriously. By Grey’s age, her mother had had two kids, one marriage, one divorce, and a fat monthly alimony check. Her dad was high up at Honeywell at the time of the divorce, and her mother was happy to put in her notice as a copy editor for a now defunct home journal when the papers were finalized. Grey was going tomorrow, with little news to share, anticipating a reprise of conversations they’d had dozens of times.

Despite a week's reluctance, she was happy to downgrade. She spent an hour in the phone store fending off a salesman, whose face sank upon hearing that she was considering a flip phone. The first afternoon, she kept picking it up, dumbly, out of muscle memory, quickly realizing that the pathways her fingers had learned were stopped dead. She liked how awkward texting became on the phone, and that the last message sent to all respondents was: dnt txt, plz call, and then they didn't. It became obvious that modern phones imposed boredom rather than alleviated it. This wasn't new, surely: making you itch and selling the scratch, but this was different. This wasn't a movie, or a band, or wrestle-friggin'-mania—an finite event in time that you anticipate, enjoy, and maybe remember. This was your id in your pocket, constantly available, needful of your attention—a timesink masquerading as productivity, as relevance, as self-importance. A world designed to make you feel behind, making an hour ago old news. News that you can only respond to with angry impotence. Making *you* old news unless you briefed us quarter-hourly.

Grey didn't like what it was doing to her. She reached for her phone before her glasses in the morning and fell asleep with it in her hands. Who needed that kind of convenience? Relieved of the time it would've taken to develop film or go to a bookstore, she didn't take flying lessons or learn to paint. She read Amazon reviews for bath racks so she could watch porn in the tub. She read (on Facebook? Twitter? Who remembers?) that there was more computing power in an iPhone than the astronauts had on Apollo 11, and she was fantasizing about jerking off with it. It was ironic that her mom was pushing new tech on her as she felt to urge to regress. Her hope was that they'd meet in the middle somewhere. That they'd find new antique shops and look for Jo Stafford and Otis Redding records, that she'd teach her how to play canasta, that they'd take a train to Pittsburgh for no reason.

The dryer beeped and she shut off the segment on the local women's march, slipped into her toasty polyester skirt, put on her pea-coat and scarf and grabbed the gallon of de-icer by the inside doormat. The apartment was just outside of the expensive, close to downtown belt. She hadn't invested in decent furniture and was at least the third person to have this carpet. The only decent-*looking* thing in there was a large false bureau that they were throwing out of the show apartment. It had an impressive facade with a cherry stain that she paid a couple kids ten bucks apiece to drag up to her place. She looked out of the wide angle of the peephole; it was barely light out. It was unholy cold. The nerves of taffy running the length of her that she had kneaded with news and nicotine for the better part of an hour shortened and stiffened inside her. She clopped down her apartment stairs and doused the windshield haphazardly as if it were gas and she were about to toss a match onto it. The jug glugged halfway empty, catching its breath every few seconds, and she saved the rest for another day. She tugged several times at her frozen door. Once open, she tossed the jug in the passenger floorboard and turned the car over.

She drove in silence for the first ten minutes, enjoying how empty the downtown streets were this early. As the intersections shortened, she saw the earliest marchers with bobbing signs and pink hats extending so far they ran over the duration of the cross-walk lights. Grey never felt like the protesting type. It was strange to be in complete ideological solidarity with a group of people without any inclination whatsoever to join in. It struck her as an odd act. She had spent so long trying to find the right arguments for exactly the people that it mattered to persuade that protesting seemed so ill-directed, without much overriding purpose or message. They sporadically shouted invective and congressional phone numbers, promising themselves and one another to call every day. She could see why these women

were the angriest, but they should be the least surprised at what happened. As if being right had ever been enough. Some of the signs were funny enough. One of them read, “I’d call you a cunt, but you don’t have any depth or warmth.” Grey looked at their faces. She got several you-go-the-girl-in-business-attire smiles and encouraged waves from the passing pink-headed mob. The character of the march was wholly different than ones she’d seen. They were...in good spirits. Maybe it was too early, but most of them didn’t seem all that solemn or angry. They’d clump up and chat between chants extending their Styrofoam cups out to the communal thermoses. Some had their kids holding signs, some wore Go-Pro mounted helmets. Whatever catharsis came with ordering a pink Etsy hat and saying they were here, for reproductive rights, for women, for whatever, this somehow provided it.

This was a chance to extend their social media political hobbyism. Nothing will have changed afterward, but they will go home feeling better than before. All of these women voted, that couldn’t be doubted. But this is belated motivation—a wielding of soft power, outside the “legitimate” machinery, thus easily ignored. The best they could do now is pester the elected, and try to claim a mandate where there isn’t one. They wanted a change, but got a half protest, half festival instead. They could’ve used their Fourtws and minivans to bus people to voting booths, but they surely didn’t. They could’ve moved outside of the city limits where their vote might’ve mattered, but they surely won’t. And neither will Grey. These are the good ones, she tried not to forget. Pushing back isn’t fun; it’s a fucking grind. And thankless. It’s busting your ass twice as hard for the same pat on the back, if you’re lucky. The best you can do is embed yourself and be damn near unassailable. Disappoint everyone who underestimates you, and hopefully someone will care. Hillary won every debate and the popular, but you don’t win what can’t help you. The march was following

form. And you can't help yourself either. If being doubly bound wasn't enough, the left doesn't even want you to be successful. Obama made money talking to Wall Street and people found the energy to talk about it. They entertained conversation of Hillary as a flawed candidate.

The firm was empty. She unlocked the door, stamped her heels on the mat and flicked on the lights. It was a small firm, getting smaller. It had laid off two secretaries and the intern (filer) moved on within the past year and the efforts to replace them had just sort of fizzled. She wasn't sure if she wanted to stay here, or rather not sure how soon she should leave. She'd been putting the partners off because of it. She was also irrationally bothered by the fact that "Kenard" seemed to belong nowhere in the now familiar, Wentworth, Baum & Greer. She'd joke, "You gentlemen don't *really* want to invest in new letterhead do you?" Or "Jim, do you really think you can get your hair perfect again for that billboard on I-465?" Evan was closest to her in age. He was offered partner before the firm was a sinking ship, now hoping that the title was more powerful than his association with a firm whose reputation was waning. Grey wasn't ready to take that bet. Or any bet. She was dug the fuck in, and that was enough. The firm was moved from a downtown high rise before her time here, about six years ago, and was now in what used to be a full-service jewelry store. The conference room is in the old showroom, where you can see the entire space through layers of vertical plate glass. Their offices and filing rooms, however, are cheaply lit and cramped. Every time the air kicked on in her office, she could smell the frowsty gold dust and polish that gummed up the ducts.

Grey met Evan a few years ago when she was a green public defender. She came up to him after seeing him out of step with three six-and-a-half foot blonde clones who, in an

uncannily synchronous act, periodically interrupted their banter by checking their phones, then pocketing them and picking conversation back up precisely where they left it. Evan and Grey met eyes when he recognized that she was also registering disbelief at the situation. They went out for drinks, and he must've mentioned her name to Jim and Gene after they talked about a case he working at the time. Grey mentioned, casually and half-drunk that he look up a couple of case precedents he didn't think of. "*Holsey v. McCollough will cover your butt in terms of the sunset provisions and Willis v. Celadon Trucking gets at employer negligence vis-à-vis DOT compliance.*" He was clean shaven then. Now he's got one of those ridiculous pencil-thin, salt-and-pepper goatees. He was trying hard to keep the look of a fun-loving kind of guy. Either that or he's too lazy to reinvent himself. He still had the soft-top Wrangler that he picked her up in. He put in a remote starter after they broke up but in the winter, but she still sees him pull up in his chunky Gortex jacket. He took her to an indoor rock-climbing joint on their second date, and she remembered in herself a personality she no longer recognizes or one that feels more and more put on, as she clutched the flat-stone of his inner calf. She remembered that they were strung in matching torso harnesses, as he chuckled and ascended in front of her and that halfway up the wall, she jokingly bent over and twisted her head upward, peeking into the shallow cavern of his gym shorts.

The other day, she teased him when they had lunch, poking the breast pocket of his jacket, asked if he was, "addin' paddin'?" He had the vestiges of a high-metabolism, but the constant tapping of his feet and restless torso (he could never be a trial lawyer), couldn't outpace his newfound love of Irish pub food. She immediately bristled at this lame flirt. He'd never say anything of the sort, not out loud at least, and that's something for a guy who does what they do. *She'd* never let a remark like that go, but she was trained better to exploit

a double standard than to be fair. She was going to apologize, but he was up in line and jumped ahead to order.

Grey was sure she could make more at a bigger firm, but she was fine subsisting right now. She'd gotten a lot of substantial wins for the firm. Her plan was to retire, as early as she could, far away from here. She did her year abroad in Italy, and when she wasn't in the archives at Bologna and Florence, spent her time in Ischia. Most of her spare time was devoted to planning a life there, calculating how much more she needed to save before she could set herself up indefinitely. It was a place where the future, or even the present, didn't seem all that critical. She spent her year learning to shape her vowels and appreciate the vistas that her flat and palazzos shared equally. She slept with a nineteen year boy who made enough money fishing with his uncle to afford the bad pot and rubbers they'd burned through those few months. Stoned and naked, they'd lay face down in each other's laps and read philosophy to each other. They'd dress lightly and fill the tiny flat with the smell of buttered orecchiette and mussels. There was class there, as everywhere, but people weren't ready with their distinctions. There were no strivers and stragglers or makers and takers. Living well was a priority for everyone, and most were only working as hard as they had to. There was no bad coffee. People who obsessed about Berlusconi were a bore, but *I don't give a shit about politics* wasn't a credo for rank philistinism.

*Here*, it was easy to forget there were other things. She couldn't stand a striver. She'd talked to these people. She'd sat across from these guys, a few times at dinner, but mostly at work. To them, there are no good things; there are only the best things. Despite their ingenuity, they only care to understand something to the extent it will help them get a bigger house or their dicks polished. If they once cared about the law or finance in idealistic

terms, they soon found their minds couldn't be wasted on poverty. This was their culture, make no mistake. They were setting the terms, the tone. *Grab life by the motherfucking pussy*, a bro's revision on Morning in America. They made everything here feel desperate, chronic, like an addiction. Where attention, food and wakefulness are never paid, taken, or given well. Where, using or not, they all took unhealthy, cocaine addled shits. Where they want nothing but need everything. And when they became family men, they didn't have the time to grow a social conscience. Their lives become little businesses, organisms of systematic pressures that needed maintaining. They had slips in Corpus Christi that needed to be kept, and landscaping and gas bills for their cabins in the Ozarks. They tended their biological futures with college funds and orthodonture. They just can't live without the stakes—a city full of tightropes strung building to building. Sometimes, it's worth being on the ground floor. This firm wasn't much, but everyone here knew she could hold her own. She was never second-guessed, undercut, or brushed off. They didn't ask her how she was doing, or if she needed a moment.

It was almost time for her 11 o'clock, so she got prepared in the main conference room to the left of the foyer. She grabbed a clean legal pad—a lucky occupational convention for a lefty—and set both it and her computer parallel to the table edge. Their reception secretary, Ms. Shaffer led in a man into the door. He had on black pants where the crease had been ironed at an odd angle and he had on a shirt and tie but no blazer. He had wavy dark-chestnut hair and a light tan line above his brow where he likely usually wore a hat.

“How you you doing Miss...Kenerd?”

“Kenard,” she corrected. “You can call me Grey.” They shook hands. His were

calloused but his nails were clean and well trimmed; he had what sounded like a fading Kentucky accent.

“How are you doing today, Mr. Tone?”

“Oh. Well, okay, you know, considering”

“Uh-huh, of course” she said in her practiced sincerity.

“Well as I understand it, you’re claiming that the hospital was negligent because during her outpatient stay, she had a minor stroke and has since lost feeling in and has intermittent, uncontrolled use of her right upper extremity, excuse me, her right arm.”

“Yes, that’s right. I don’t know what they did, but, you know, she’s a young woman. Had, what they told us was, routine surgery, and is in the theater stroking out. Now she’s wearing a sling, unable to do what she needs to do all day. Can’t drive her car ‘cause we both have stick shifts, can’t do her hair, or tie her damn shoes. Dinner takes twice as long.” He shakes his head looking at the edge of the table. “Luckily our boy’s walking on his own now.”

“Have you talked to a neurologist?”

“Well no, not yet. We thought we’d better ask y’all first.”

“No, that’s fine. We know a great one.”

“Now are we just going through the preliminaries here, or are you taking us on?”

“Nope, this is it; I’ll be your attorney. I’ll get what I can from you today and I—“

“Well I...hmm. Are you—?” “Kenard,” he said flatly, and correctly this time.

“You’re not one of the partners, then?” He turned a quarter in his seat, squeaking its springs.

“I handle the majority of Med Mal...medical malpractice cases for the firm.”

“Ok. Well, do y’all get a lot of those, because—meaning no offense—you do seem a bit young.”

“I’ve been practicing for almost five years.”

“Well, okay. See, I don’t know for sure.” He paused. “This seems like a complicated case, and if the money’s all the same, I just would, like, I think—we’d prefer to have somebody who’s been at this a bit longer.”

Grey sat up straighter and crossed her arms on the desk.

“It’s not exactly your business, Mr. Tone, but for your piece of mind, I’ll tell you that I’ve been offered a partnership here.”

“Well, if it’s all the same—”

“And as the attorney taking on all the new medical malpractice cases, you can trust that I speak for the firm, and if you want us representing you, it is I who will be directly representing you. If you want, I can leave you alone to think about it, but either I will be your attorney or we won’t be taking your case.” This wasn’t exactly the case, but some people need an ultimatum. He leaned back, looking down and brought his hand to his chin.

“Well, ma’am. I can see you’re a fighter.” He rapped his knuckles confidently on the desk. “And I can see you are that.”

Grey gave him a forced smile and they went on. *Fucking asshole.*

Since the firm was short staffed, they took turns doing the courthouse filings. Grey snagged them today, partly as an excuse to take a long lunch. They were about four and a half blocks from the courthouse, so she wrapped herself back up in coat and scarf and shawl and smiled at Ms. Shaffer’s half-hearted advisement to “keep warm out there.” Most of the

marchers had moved more centrally downtown. She could still hear them, but their collective shouts were indistinct at this distance.

If you were moving, from about now to 3:00p.m., you could stand to be outside. Unlike Chicago or New York, the snow comes regularly enough and is not so driven over that it turns into a gritty, exhaust-glazed mush. There was a clean plow drift serving as temporary barrier to the walk. The smallest and hardiest birds sang and shook the weight off the branches and shit on Mercedes. In even the smallest towns, courthouses are impressive buildings. When they need to be rebuilt, which won't be for awhile most of them, she doubted they'll spring for marble or the ten inch crown molding or the rococo recesses, basswood carvings, or bannister filigree. Brick and Styrofoam-backed stucco will have to charm us enough. People only plan as far as we can imagine their society. Rome is a nightmare for a cost-projection analyst, its profligacy yet to be justified. She flipped through the filings: one brief for the Mandel case, and two motions in divorce settlements. The offices were plainly furnished. The carpet on short path from the door to the desk was well worn. She gave the filings to Joan, who excused herself for finishing a bite of her salad, and checked the folder. Grey anticipated her, laying the firm's credit card down on the Formica.

Back outside, Grey decided to lunch closer to the commotion and slipped into a crowded Panera. It was busy, but most of those standing around seemed to mostly be stepping in from the cold. Grey ordered and sat down, fiddling with the number card and overheard a pair of college age girls talking.

"Oh my god, I did not dress for this."

"I know. It is ridic' cold out."

"What did work say when you called in?"

“Pfft. I don’t know, I just told them I was having sinus issues. Screw them, I’ve got sick days. I think. What about you?”

“Ah. They’ve been super cool about this. Our supervisor’s *here*. She’s all for it and gave us all the day off to come.”

“Oh my fucking god, I hate you.”

“Did you have a good time with Jimmy the other night?”

“I dunno. He’s weird. He brought me to this shitty friend’s house of his and I was like one of two girls there and it was a bunch of his dumb drunk friends playing ping pong in the garage. His phone was dead, so he couldn’t pay for the Uber.

*Convenient*. And then he left me on the couch while one of his buddies put a bunch of 80s music videos on TV and came back stinking of weed. Now I’m trying to text him, and he’s all, like, whatever.”

“Did you guys do anything?”

“I mean, no. I wanted to, but I wasn’t going to do *anything* in that dirty ass house. I went to the upstairs bathroom and there was a guy just sitting in front of a set of drums, face pressed against the wall, passed out drunk.”

“Isn’t he an insurance adjuster?”

“Yeah, but all his friends are fucking burnouts. He parties like a poor person.”

“Hmm. Are you still applying for your Ph.D.?”

“I guess. I don’t know what I’m good at.”

“You’re *amazing*, girl.”

“Thanks bae. Why can’t somebody just see that, and give me an *amazing* job? My rent went up a hundred bucks this month. I feel like I could teach online. There are plenty of dumbasses out there that need to get woke.”

“I’m sure you’d get in.”

“Yeah, my grades are alright. I just wish I had some more boxes to check. I need to figure out if I’m part Native American or convert to Judaism or something.”

Grey turned to the window to roll her eyes, as they traded baby noises over puppy videos. She reassembled herself, pulling her coat and shawl and scarf off the chair back and grabbed her side baguette to make her way out for a smoke. She found the far-most concrete window ledge which was lined with the brown char stains of neglected butts. She leaned against the brick to the window’s side, feeling the cold through all her layers, and pinched off pieces of the bread. She threw every third bite near the street for the birds to find and gnawed on the rest. She dragged deeply, and gave her breath back stingily where smoke caught in her hair—a lingering corona around her face.

\* \* \*

The following Sunday, Grey woke up late to the gentle crunching of salt under the wheels of broadcaster. When the sun had crested above the apartment roofs enough to heat the pavement, she went out to collect the day’s worth of mail that had piled up in her box. She flipped through it, walking lazily toward the open side door of the dumpster and pitched all but two pieces in. The parking spaces were mostly empty. These cheap apartments seemed to fill mostly with shut-ins or the stir crazy. No one seemed to plan their weekends at home. She often saw fishing tackle in the back of small pickups or poking out of the back windows of sedans. People didn’t bring birthday balloons inside; they had planned festivities

elsewhere, leaving them in their cars to graze the headliner. Most of the year, you didn't see children outside.

Last summer, she came to the aid of a little blonde girl who fell off her scooter on the little hill leading to another section of apartments. She had just pulled her car into a space and saw her head too abruptly dip out of sight beyond the hill. Grey jumped out of her car without closing the door and ran as quickly as her heels allowed. The girl had scraped her right knee and elbow, tears collecting on her chin. Panicked, Grey whispered, "*Lemme see, sweetie. Lemme see.*" The girl struggled, but held her sobs as Grey inspected each abrasion, holding her little limbs gingerly.

"What's your name, honey?"

"Lacey."

"Okay, Lacey. I'm going to get something to fix you up. I'll be right back okay?"

She nodded quietly. Grey helped her up onto the grass beyond the curb, and set her scooter next to her. She kicked off her heels and ran back to her car for her keys, again not bothering to shut the door. She raced up the stairs, fumbling for the right key. She ran to her bathroom and grabbed the peroxide and her first aid pack at the back of her deep cabinet, spilling much into the sink which was just beneath it. She rushed back, feeling holes open on the feet of her nylons. The girl was holding her arm, strewn, leaning on her left side. Grey bent down and unbuckled the plastic clasps of the kit. She smiled at the girl who seemed to be cried out. "This shouldn't hurt, okay?" The girl nodded.

"You don't have to look, you know."

"I—I want to watch," she said.

Grey filled the cap and poured it over the scrapes and dabbed them with a square swab. She used the liquid bandage instead of the adhesive since they were both on the joint. She watched Lacey wince softly as she painted on the film—a shield from the air.

“Are you a doctor,” she asked. Grey laughed looking in the direction of her car and apartment.

“No. I am a lawyer, though.”

“Whoa,” she said, eyes widening. “Like on Law and Order?”

“Sort of.”

“You get the bad guys though, right?”

“Sometimes I do.” She looked at Lacey with a faint smile.

Grey had glazed twice over her scrapes asking, “How’s that?”

“Much better. What’s your name?”

“Grey”

“Grey,” she repeated. “Thanks, Grey.”

Lacey got up and walked her scooter down the hill with a slight limp.

Today, Grey was driving to her mother’s. She played a Courtney Barnett album through the TV and cleaned her house for the length of it. When the place looked reasonable, she grabbed the keys off the hook, having placed them there only a few minutes before. She made her way toward the circle, gassing up at the Exxon a few blocks from her place. A couple blocks down, along the thin strip of median, stood a panhandler. His face was obscured by the hood of a sweatshirt pulled through another sweatshirt with faux lambskin lining and the arms cut off. He tossed it onto a lumpy grocery bag leaning against the no U-turn sign. He had a many-creased scrap of cardboard that read, VETERAN. GOD

BLESS. When the short line of cars in front of her stopped, he awkwardly slipped out of his first sweatshirt, pulling it through the wide armhole of the second. She pretended to flip through her stations, keeping a peripheral fix on the line in front of her. When he was at the car two ahead of her, she registered his face. Forgetting her feigned distraction, she was now looking at him intently, leaning forward in her seat. She didn't believe it. It was *Mr. Tone*. What was he doing here? He was markedly disheveled, his wavy hair matted in spots and wild in others. Was he conning her, either here or at the firm? Which was the act? Or was it one? She tried to slouch in her seat, and averted eye contact before it had a chance to be made. *Go. Go. Go.* She tapped her steering wheel hand impatiently, and looked down into her console at nothing. She saw him hesitating a few feet in front of her quarter panel. *Yes. Fucking finally.* The line was moving. She crept up close to the bumper in front of her, and in the corner of her eye passing him saw on his arm, drawn in a gothic stencil, the words NO EXCUSES in the color of a dried out lime rind.

The city shortly gave way to fields of wending lines of soybean stems and corn stalks. She drove for just over an hour, puzzling through what she'd seen, periodically flipping NPR on and off (it was pledge season). Each small town she drove through had, at its very edges, shuttered gas stations and vines up to the windows on the old ceramic brick warehouses. Further in were some that were showed signs of life— grass cut, and billows from the steam stacks: the plastic utensil factory, the spark plug factory, Georgia Pacific, Airflow filters. She could taste the slight toxicity in the air passing them and closed the cabin damper, trying to recirculate the fresher air. It was often that she was buried in reams of safety guidelines and disclosures in past discoveries, a few times going to facilities to choke herself on the particulates of vinyl or fabric or foam kicked off by band saws, or resins and compounds that

she could only repeat when it was on paper in front of her, *something something* chlorate and *something something* silicate and *something something* oxide.

Her mother lived in a spacious clutch of houses, situated on about three acres apiece, that climbed up a slight terraced hill. Her lawn was traced with clean diagonal lines from the zero turn mower that she'd taken great pride in buying and operating. She had come to doing, seemingly without difficulty or conscious effort, the healthy thing and filled her days with small tasks like this. Grey pulled her car up the narrow drive, pulling to the right near the single garage door so as not to block it. The front door down the hill led to the lower floor, where her brother had been living. He was four and half years younger than her and worked four days a week as a stocker in the town grocery store. Grey came through the back door near the kitchen, shouting "*Helloo.*" Her mother popped into the main hallway from her bedroom, bleary-eyed, straightening up her blouse. The house smelled like sweet potatoes cut with freshly used bathroom cleaner.

"Hey, sweetheart. Sorry, I kind of dozed off there," she told her.

"It's your house. You don't lock this?"

"Well come here and give me a hug. Mmm, it's good to see you. Ugh, are you still smoking?"

"Not today."

Near the door, Grey pointedly picked up and let slip from her grip a small stack of hardwood samples sitting on a small table.

"Oh, tell me what you think of those. I'm thinking of putting new floors in the hallway and kitchen here."

"Yeah, they were here last time. I liked the hickory."

“Well, there’s some new ones in there *okay*, so tell me later what you think.”

They sat together at the dining room table.

“Are you cooking something? Can I help?”

“Mmm, no but don’t you love that? It’s a candle. You can help me later. I was thinking something homey, like tomato bisque and paninis.”

“Yeah, alright. So, Connor’s working today?”

“Until 10. I’ll bet he’d like it if you’d stayed the night.”

“Uh, I’ve got to prep for a deposition on Monday.”

“You guys never get together. My brother and I *still* see each other almost every month.”

“There’s nothing stopping him from coming to the city. He’s got more free time than I do.”

“Now why do you have to be like that?”

Grey snorted. “I’m not being any way. It’s true.”

“Well you don’t have to rub it in his face.”

“I’m not rubbing anything in his face. I just have a lot to do. It wouldn’t hurt if you expected a little more out of him.”

“He’s fine. He’s finally in a good place with himself. He’s always been a sensitive boy, and he’s worked out of the funk he’d been in for so long.”

“How’d he do that?”

“I don’t know. He said he found some social club in town.”

“*Social club*? I didn’t know he had any interests.”

“See, right there. He’s into lots of things.”

“Video games? Adult cartoons? Quoting movies? Trolling college towns? Growing a mustache? Creatine?

“Yeah. You’re hilarious. What’s creatine?

“Never mind.”

“Your brother is doing his best. That’s all any of us can do. He just—he doesn’t know what he wants”

Grey let out an exasperated sigh. “You got anything to munch on?” Grey got up and moved through the kitchen, staring into the cabinet and pantry closet, then the refrigerator.

“What were you watching,” she asked with her head in the fridge.

“I wasn’t. I was asleep. I spent all morning cleaning up.”

Grey emerged with an almond sliver cheese ball. She took it to the opposite counter, pulled off the cellophane and grabbed a sleeve of Ritzes from the pantry, bumping the door shut behind her.

“Okay. What *were* you watching,” she asked, making her way to the table.

“I don’t know. The news.” Her mother fiddled with the napkin holder.

“So what’s new...in the news?”

“They’re just piling on already.”

“Who, Trump? Wait, were you watching Fox?”

“He hasn’t even gotten in office, and they’re marching in the streets.”

“Yeah. I mean, what’s not to like? The lying, the incoherence, the lechery?

“Oh, please. You’d think there never was a Kennedy. Or a Clinton.”

“You said you liked Kennedy.”

“Everyone liked Kennedy when he got shot. Anyway, what did I know? I was 14.”

“You told me you wished you could’ve marched in ‘64.”

“I was a teenager. Anyway, it’s different today.”

“What’s different about it?”

“Lots of things are different. It was a clearer case, that’s all. People were beaten. Gassed and hosed. King and two Kennedys were shot. They wore suits and marched and gave speeches so they could vote and go to school. Now they can’t be bother to do either. Then, people were fighting for their place at the table. Now they want the table. And every day there’s a new group that we’re not paying enough attention to. Black lives will matter when *they* make them matter.”

“You don’t know any black people.”

“No, but I live in the world. I watch TV.”

“You watch Fox.”

“I see these black and Mexican rug rats running loose at the county library, making a big damn racket that we all have to pretend to ignore. I see who the cops are looking for every night.”

Grey tasted cheesy bile. “You’re right. There aren’t white criminals.”

“There’s more white trash than there ever was too, believe me. What they need are some work to turn that shiftlessness into some self-respect.”

“Not black people—they don’t need jobs. Blacks can’t have something that whites should be getting first, is that it?”

“Not...exactly. But if one of them can make it, they should all be able to make it. *You* know I voted for Obama the second time.”

“Not enough exceptional blacks for you, then?”

“I’m just saying. ”

“What are you saying? That its finally fair or they’re getting a handout?”

“*Well.* Why do you think most of them live in the city? They’re waiting in the wings— waiting in the wings for a better job than they deserve, a pity or a diversity hire, a desk job.”

“Ohhh, you mean a *white* job.” Who told you this? You’re best new fucking friend Bill O’Reilly?”

“Now just watch it there, young lady. You’re in *my* house. Well, I’ll tell you another thing. We’d *all* be flush in jobs if we didn’t send them all to China and Mexico. Trump may be a little...unsavory, but he said he's gonna change that, TPP and NAFTA and the like, and I believe him.”

“What do *you* know about TPP and NAFTA? Anyway, who is anybody in this family to talk about work ethic? You haven’t worked since the 80’s and, according to you, Connor’s ambitious for having been promoted from bagboy.”

"Why do you want to fight when you come over here? Is this fun for you? You like flexing your lawyer muscles on me?"

"This isn't fun for me. I just— I don't have time to explain the world to you."

"I don't need you to explain the world to me. I'm your mother. You don't live out here anymore. You don't know what it feels like."

"What *what* feels like?"

"To lose your grip on the world. To not feel safe in the future. To lose the world you understand. To see your children not have children, and see them replaced with other

people's children. To see men I went to high school with sweeping the lot at McDonald's."

"Old white men, right?"

"Make your joke, but you saw the election. Regular folk are an afterthought now—either 'deplorable' or low priority. Now, tell me I'm wrong."

"Jesus, mom." Grey rubbed her face. "It doesn't matter what I think. And I need a cigarette."

Grey sat on the wood bench on the second floor roof walk, tipping her ashes into the curled detritus of a potted hyacinth. The cars quietly crawled on the main road in the distance. Behind it was half a barn obscured by trees and cows that from there were black and brown dots sidling up and down the hilly pasture. It was usually a comfort to come here and see how little had changed, and from this distance, still little had seemed to. But it didn't seem sleepy to her anymore, or quaint. From there, it was almost exactly the way it was when she grew up, but they weren't allowed to enjoy it anymore. They were probably making less, as everyone seemed to be, but it wasn't about that. The problem was that they were asked to think about everything in a new way, asked to consider that they were wrong about almost everything, to assign political significance to everything, and told theirs was a narrative among narratives.

She came back inside to the sound of chopping. Her mother had an apron on and smiled up at her. She always did this—tried to start fresh, hoping the small lapse of time wiped away any resentment. "You want any of this chicken salad," she asked cheerfully. Grey, who always skipped breakfast, and never came and didn't eat, shrugged and nodded. "Well sit down. I'm almost done. I'll toast some bread." Her mother pulled

shredded chicken out of the fridge and put it and what she'd just prepared into a large bowl.

"I did have something I wanted to talk to you about," her mother said. "It's a little touchy."

Grey snorted again. *As if they were just trading their Oscar picks.*

"Well, I was thinking about your dad's money—his pension payoff, the bonds."

"What about it?"

Her mother put the sandwich plate in front of her; steam rose off the toast.

"Well, we both know that he and Connor didn't get along very well, particularly at the end. And the more I think about it, it seems like the fair thing to do—what he should've done—is split things evenly between you and Connor. And, well, given how things are going for Connor and how things are going for you, I thought that you'd think about cutting him in."

Grey was quiet a moment, then picked up her sandwich with both hands and bit into it. With her mouth full she said, "Well, sorry, but I'm not."

"Well, you don't have to decide today."

"I am deciding today. And I'm deciding what dad decided—that I deserved that money because he liked me. He liked that I could make him laugh, and that I always busted my ass in school and that I've had a job since I was fifteen. He liked that I could go without, and that I came more than once to see him in the hospital. He cared that I gave an interest in what he liked and knew; he cared that I would know what to do with the money, and I do. The money's already spoken for."

"What are you, playing the stock market?"

"It doesn't matter if am, or even if its already gone. He's not getting anything."

She got up and walked behind her, cleaning up her mess, and in defiance of Grey's resolve suggested breezily, "Well, just think about it."

Grey finished her sandwich, told her mother she had a busy day tomorrow, hugged her and left. She pulled left onto the main road toward the Kroger at the end of town. She parked behind a mid-90s model Cherokee at the edge of the lot that had a number of irregular rust blisters around the wheel wells. Since she'd last seen it, the rear window was covered in new bumper stickers. One was a foregrounded dodecahedron die framed in front of the letters, D&D. Another she recognized as one of the Rhodesian flags, with a pair of oryxes reared beneath a golden eagle. *He didn't study this hard in school.* Another one, which she'd never seen, but was penetrable enough, was a rooster on half a weathervane pointing West; beneath it was the word ProudBoy. With the car running, she got out and pulled a twenty out her purse. She folded it so the well-coiffed Jefferson was the only thing facing out. She pressed on the driver's side window and slipped the bill through the small opening. It fell, Jefferson-side-up on the cracked leather jump seat, and she drove home in the afternoon dusk.