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Spring 2012

Satori 2012

Winona State University

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Mission Statement
Satori is a student-run annual magazine that expresses the artistic spirit of the students of Winona State University. We publish student poetry, prose, and graphic art every Spring, as we have since 1970.

-Dr. Gary Eddy, Faculty Advisor
LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

First and foremost, thank you to everyone that submitted this year. Satori would not be possible without you. The many difficult decisions that we were forced to make this year prove that Winona is full of talented writers. In the end, there was no doubt in our minds that these poems were the very best and should represent Winona State University. Congratulations to those who were accepted, and we look forward to another year and another successful magazine!

-Elise Nelson

While this year’s selection of poetry is very small, I feel that it is the strongest poetry selection we have published in recent years. I am proud not only of our poets, but also our committee. Without Elise and our staff the poetry section would not be half as strong as it is.

-Spenser Santos

Though 2012 marks my third year working on Satori, this spring was my first year as editor, which proved to be even more intense than I’d imagined. This year we received 47 prose pieces, totaling of 249 pages, and I’d like to thank everyone who submitted their stories. This issue contains just a fraction of the wonderful works Winona State students have to offer, and I hope our campus can continue to publish Satori for many years to come. I’d also like to thank the fantastic prose panelists for making my job much more manageable, my fellow editors for being wonderful to work with, and Dr. Eddy (as always) for being our supervisor.

-Courtney Kowalke

This has been a hectic, but great year. I am so excited to be a part of this magazine. We have our largest issue ever this year. We owe it all to everyone for submitting. I am glad we were able to include so many works this year. Thank you to everyone who submitted. You made it possible. Also I would like to thank my team. They were amazing and did so much to make this possible.

-Meagan Lord
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MISTAKEN FOR A LEAF
Lauren Barker

Last week there was a piece
of white paper on the ground,
an eight by eleven folded in four.
This week that block of sidewalk
is completely covered with leaves.
Fall is coming and I’m
embracing it with a knife in my hand.
I’m ready but I don’t want to be.
I want it to be over and I need it to last.
The paper was white the day I first saw it,
the day it was born.
Each time I decided not to pick
it up it got dirtier
with brown specks of mud and
the front of a footprint.
Today I didn’t get outside until noon.
The gentle sunshine told me it wasn’t fall yet,
but that wasn’t real, it didn’t happen.
If you asked me I couldn’t tell you
if the piece of paper, my baby, was still there
when I passed that spot
on the sidewalk as the invisible clock
struck me on the head with its silent twelve.
And if you didn’t ask me
I still couldn’t tell you.
I’d rather go to sleep and not talk about it anymore.
The world used to know where I belonged in it.
Now when I ask it simply turns away.
I’m preparing for the rejection letters
but I think this feels worse
than being folded up and
left out on the sidewalk
to be passed by until you disappear.
I don’t know who tomorrow is;
it’s already forgotten me.
I don’t know where all those leaves came from;
the trees above me still have plenty.
I’ve forgotten what fall means.
I don’t know if anyone can tell me.
All the toothaches you’ve ever had combine
Into the thirteenth line of the sonnet, where you suddenly realize
That the source of the pain is in your chest.
But it still feels like a toothache. It metastasized,
The green balloon of despair floating up the skyway of your esophagus.

Maybe you’re still reading this because you’re comfortable here
Despite all my efforts to make this awkward, like the boyfriend
You’ve wanted to break up with since winter, but couldn’t find the way to let him go.

The rhythm of the line traces of the curvature of your spine;
Breathe in, out, but realize that, if you wanted, you could leave.
Maybe you don’t need words that rhyme; the colors of flowers will do:
Sanguine and azure and rusticated-bronze. You could be standing in a garden
Right now, but you’re still here. This is your reward.
He said he was on a diet, 
for real this time. 
No sugar, no salt, no butter. 
Friday night Chicago-style deep-dish pizza? 
Not allowed. 
Heaping handfuls of greasy Lay’s potato chips after work? 
Forget it. 
A slice of Aunt Karen’s fluffy lemon meringue cake with lunch? 
Absolutely not.

But on a Sunday morning, 
a smooth white box 
sat seductively on the counter, 
the orange and pink lettering 
revealing its sweet contents. 
His tempted fingers lifted the lid, 
and his nose was struck with the scent 
of sugary fried dough. 
Most were drizzled with vanilla or chocolate frosting, 
others were glazed or speckled with rainbow sprinkles. 
Some were even dusted with fine granules of sugar 
and filled with strawberry jelly or Boston Kreme. 
Senses overwhelmed by the irresistible arrangement of donuts, 
Salivating, his hand snatched one of the marble-frosted ones, 
and drew it towards his eager mouth.

Only one bite. 
Well, maybe one more. 
It seems silly to waste the other half. 
So I cheated today, 
but the donuts were tempting me.

He can’t stay on a diet and he can’t finish house projects. 
The upstairs hallway still needs repainting, 
the wooden drawers in the bathroom are still missing handles, 
the kitchen sink faucet still leaks, 
the flag pole light bulb still needs to be replaced, 
the furnace still screeches when we turn up the heat.
What he does do is spend hours “organizing” the garage, and paging through his hardcover edition of the Cabela’s catalogue, and yelling at the computer monitor when a website won’t load, and eating donuts when he’s supposed to be on a diet. That’s just Dad.
SAVE A LIFE
Sadie Ængels

Shouldn’t I help it, you think,
As your kitten swats at wings
Of a moth, injuring it so it flies
Lopsided, one wing flapping
For two, twice as hard, you can’t help feeling
Bad for not intervening.
It’s gross to the touch
You feel its fuzz
As you guide it to the door,
You feel brave,
As if sent here to save its life.
But it swooshes between your hand
As you reach for the door handle,
Mashed,
A shiny gold handle with a new smudge
Of fuzzy green insides.
DE PRODUNDIS
Marcia Ratliff

Playing the organ
in the dark cavern
of the cathedral
under spills of colored light,
rivers of sound pouring down
with each key and pedal—
profundity unlocking
the gates of grief after
death, that cessation of
fire so long held alive
in those child eyes, the deep-throated howl of the organ is
rising above the rows
of bending, silent pews,
surging above the white statue
where Mary forever
cries that final tear,
the waves crashing on the walls,
extinguishing the votive lights,
rising past the windows,
filling the roof, where saints
stoop to whisper the difference
between lux et iste—
“this near you”
you are pulled up with the torrent
and drowned in it.
a lady who I just met at the bar rambled to me,

that she had a lot of funny relationships,

and sex warmed and cooled

like flimsy hot dogs in a gas station rotary hot dog warmer.

a teenage emo who tried to beat her up

and a older nerdy graduate student

who flamed out and bloated up

as a researcher who would’ve helped

her understand biology

had he not lost his shit in the zoo;

based on these experiences,

boyfriends acted like idiots

she acted more rationally each time

hoping this boyfriend would be better than the last.

The last one took the cake.

Then she told me she is ovulating

and is having uncontrollable

breeding daydreams right now.
Awkwardly I told her that I couldn’t help you there

but I can help you order a craft beer

which in my opinion is better than sex. Period.
Breakfast is:
four candy corn flavored Hershey’s Kisses,
two slices of Hillshire Farms honey ham,
and one individually wrapped slice of Kraft Singles Pasteurized Prepared Cheese Product, American.

I take my time on that last one—
wrapped as if an individual,
divided but kept identical to the next,
always the same slice, just a different place, different time,
the same bright yellow, the straight edges
nearly transparent, all so samey
but unique, American.

What does America taste like?
Not like turkey or eagle but
the tepid iron taste of holy water,
salt tears, and deoxygenated blood,
acrid without the sweet vampiric tang
of communion wine.

No, America tastes like plastic
soaked in motor oil and coal smoke
with a pine tree air freshener
to mask the smell and
some non-dairy artificial sweetener
to bland up the flavor
until it tastes like
the cold, mushy nothing of freedom.
Call one Aurora, because she moves in horizontal lines, waving in Technicolor above everything, yet bending to skim the surface of the earth, gracing the cold with her presence in pink, in green, rainbow without rain, they smile and shake her glimmering hand.

Call one Luna, because she moves in night as well, but far out of reach. She doesn’t love the land as obviously as her sister, but every night she returns, staring down silver, beckoning the waters “come” when she changes – she always circles back.

Call them these names and split the sky between them.

THIS TWIN IS NOT THAT TWIN

Courtney Kowalke
It was one of those crisp fall nights, the ones that nip on the tips of your ears and cause your nose to drip. Clouds of misty fog bellowed out of my mouth and disappeared into the stillness with every heavy breath.

Beneath a streetlight, a shadow grew with the rhythm of my steps. The darkness swelled from my toes and spilled like a puddle of black ink that I couldn’t help tripping through.

Revealing, demeaning, the streetlight’s shine seemed annoying. I looked straight ahead to ignore the flattened figure beneath my feet, a shadow molded on the thought that my density blocks the rays of light that the city bought.

“If only I could live as a shadow,” I thought, “rather than create the dark that is the mark of my shame.” I didn’t need to be star. There were already enough people whose fame filled the world with fake illumination.

Transparently existing without taking up space, shadows could visit a place without leaving a trace and make their homes on the shoulders of those much bolder. I wanted to step out of sight into the darkness of night.

I ventured to the only place I knew where a net of high branches and tall, dark walls of trees would be waiting to wrap me in blackness. Away from the slumbering stars in their houses, I attempted to lose track of my shadow.

The steady beat of my feet on the pavement disappeared instantly along with the warm yellow glow of the streetlight as I ventured into the territory of the stars and moon. Darkness clung to my shoulders like a shawl and my shadow dimmed.

A soft mat of packed dirt and leaves stole away the sound of my thumping feet but my pumping pulse still drummed on with fury and my shadow still slinked behind me like a curious lost kitty. No matter how far I wandered, the jewels of the night and the far off
lights of the city managed to find me and define my stark figure on the forest floor.

If only the wind could have flown right through me, I wanted the light to pass freely beyond my corporeal reality. I was afraid of the mark, with pattern stark, that my shoes made on the path as I ventured alone in the dark. The world would not know me by the warmth of my touch but rather remember how darkness leaked out in a mess wherever I wandered in restlessness.

My choices were slim and my future was grim, for I had fallen short of the glory I should have found on this globe. Glitterless among the sparkling, stranded by the soaring and belittled by the bright, within me was not hope for even a spark of light. The inevitable alternative to shining like a star, I thought, was to infect the earth with dark. I was bound to leave blotches of cold, dark night as my body blocked the warmth surrounding me on all sides.

Unable to lose my shadow, unable to hide, I stopped in my tracks and looked up to the skies. The wind began to whistle a listless tune in my ears. The crickets chimed in and the rustling leaves did their part to surround me with emptiness and awaken my fears. The bite of night found me standing still and took the liberty to freeze my silent tears.

The symphony of night shattered with the snap of a twig as I shifted my weight to get a better view of the moon. I was disgusted that the impact of my step was so big, but the message I got from the sparkling lady lofted on high made me question my obsession with leaving no footprints behind. Her gentle gaze laced the gusty night with a glow not her own as she humbly stood staring down at my upturned face.

Even she, with famed majesty and grace, does not claim to be the source for the light she freely gives away. So how can my neighbors and friends pretend to generate loving light enough to warm the lost wanderers like me who don’t claim fame or inviolability?

Those of us with figures true awake in the morn covered in dew, despite the fact that some try to shine like little lighthouses that never blink out or admit that they’re glitterless. What would the stars in
heaven give to venture through day and night, always able to leave traces and occupy spaces rather than simply lending light to stir shadows into sight?

Shadows cast like puppets on a wall have power to tell stories only through the life of the light. Let my shadow linger, lastingly fastened to my form, so it can dance to the tune of the whistling wind while the sun watches on with care. Willing to let myself dent the earth’s surface as I trod, I now cling to my solid state with gratitude for the sun.

When the crisp fall night takes a turn in the mist to a soft autumn dawn, shadows shift and bulbs blink out as soon as they’ve lost their doubt. Restless stars envy the sun as their light is seen by no one, but those of us who breathe and leave shadows in our wake are given a fresh start to make the world see that true light comes from above. I glory in my shadow because it proves the presence of a glow that I met one cold night as I traveled alone.
The storm passes and the ivory owl 
Steps out from his hiding spot, the twisted 
Knot of an ancient Elm. Feathers reflect 
The sheen of jagged ice and flake. 
Suddenly, his ice tipped wings beat off his cloak of 
Crystallized snow. 
His wings are arched--sailing against the 
Inky black and violet hues of the dusky sky, 
His eyes, canary yellow, hang like orbs, 
Illuminating like two stars. 
Wind whips his eyes 
In his urgent desire to catch 
The current. 
Thick pines sway against the shoreline, 
Ice set aglow by the moon’s gentle light 
As it wanes in his desperate 
Journey to survive.
WAYS I LIVE AFTER A SUICIDE

Marcia Ratliff

I.
The kind of anger that makes my face
warm as I wrestle with my ugly side
under the covers, biting the pillow, silently
screaming and leaving a ring of spit,
or locked in the bathroom, grasping the
wall as if it holds me on the earth,
or outside running, faster, until the burn is
great enough to eat me, inside out,
and cold wind slaps my red face and makes
it livid, pale purple, then white.

II.
Books get bound in Nebraska.
I get bound in Minnesota,
where the line between love and
death comes with its own
color of chalk dust, as if to say
I am smeared here but who the
hell are you to jump across?

III.
It was actually childish,
the way I avoided my friend’s glance
and faked an interest
in the cracks of the sidewalk.
It was immature
the way I ended the conversation
with my mom before it really began,
because I had homework.
It was really shameful,
the way I avoided my own eyes
in the mirror,
pretending to be busy washing my hands.
When the moon is at its fullest and leaves
begin to change, the wind begins to blow.
Then the cattails start to sway to the flow
of the river’s voice—the soft voice, it grieves.
Saddened by the stolen warmth—those darn thieves—
from the river’s heart. Underneath your toe
leaves crunch and whisper way deep down, below:
Winter is coming…What does he believe?

Whistling winds snare across the dark sky
Disease infects the most simple of things
causing them all to shrivel up and die.
Too weak to carry on, too cold to cry,
or fly away from what the winter brings.
Now, winter is here; that long-lasting sigh.

THAT LONG-LASTING SIGH

Karin Chandler
I surprise myself sometimes,
becoming tired of boxes and
shelves where my selves are
organized, placed in categories,
or in jars bathing in formaldehyde,
staring out with eyes that were alive,
or in glass cases where I share long
rows with my dried-up facets and sterile
idiosyncrasies and wait for something—
light, perhaps? An explosion? A lab tech
wiping down the tables for the day,
eyes grazing over the jars of me, selecting
one for use?

Or is it a distant music
I find I can hear, ubiquitous through
the walls of my jars and cupboards,
music enough to summon me alive?

(DE)COMPOSITION
Marcia Ratliff
Sunstruck by artificial light,
I stare up slack-jawed,
numb and dumb while my words
slur as if chewed and never swallowed.

The doctor leans over me,
her drill-fingers long,
spidering to the back of my mouth
to examine the source of my wisdom.

Her sawblade nails
make the first cut,
an incision that takes away my vision
of what was and will come.

The dull ache slowly turns
from a low, rumbling growl
to the full-fanged roar
of the wounded lion.

And I can taste it then—
the molten-iron words of my wisdom,
her self-expression bound in blood
flowing to the world outside my mouth.

Under attack at her roots, the iron
coming stronger as the saw cuts deeper,
my wisdom gives way, leaving behind
a crater of knowledge past.

In time she will regenerate, and from
my mouth words will come alive again;
but for now she has been defanged
as I have also been.
SILLY GIRL
Molly Barret

Here, in the alley behind my apartment, you let me fall.
You pulled my lips into your lungs and let me breathe you in.
There, my heart like a canvas.
Covered with your brush strokes
Coloring the surface
Like a starving artist trying to make a dollar.
Heart like a four-poster bed
Like the one my grandma used to have
In the attic
Where I traded dreams with the ghosts in my head
And didn’t mind the real ones that sat in the corners.
Once, I told you, I had a had a bathtub full of tea
Where I let my waterlogged journal
Float towards the surface
As it steeped my words into your naked body
Making your heart like a sponge
Soaking up everything you let me be
While we were together
In the alley behind my apartment.
ART
SKATERS
Shawn Thompson
AN IDEA BLOWING HOT AIR

Kevin Ihrke
HAUNTING RIDE

Meagan Lord
MOUNTAIN REFLECTION
LAKE LOCHÉ
Mari Schlitter
IDEAS ON PLANES OF CONSCIOUSNESS PANEL 3
Kevin Ihrke
DISINTEREST
Meagan Lord
IBIB, APPLE, WOOD, AND TIME
Kevin Ihrke
SUNSET OVER LAKE VICTORIA, KISUMU, KENYA
Chelsea Hobert
GARDEN
Emily Malmin
"All I can Be is ME...
... Whoever that is."
—Bob Dylan

ALL I CAN BE
Hannah Jones
MUDDY BUDDY, BABY ELEPHANT AT THE DAVID SHELDRICK WILDLIFE TRUST ELEPHANT ORPHANAGE IN NAIROBI, KENYA
Chelsea Hobert
PROSE
So it’s Saturday night, and I’m waiting in the living room, wearing the tightest black pants and lowest cut shirt I could find. Of course, I had to jazz it up a little, so I threw on my sequined vest as well. That glitzy baby caught my eye right away in the store; it was the gaudiest thing I had ever seen. Then I took it home and added more sequins. Beautiful! And perfect for our bingo nights. All those old ladies with their purple hair, kitty cat brooches and jazzed up blotters, I’ll show them. Next week they’re all going to have a vest just like mine, but I’ll already be done with the vest and onto something new. Maybe I’ll jazz up a scarf. Or a head wrap. Yeah, a head wrap. They will just die. Although, that may be quite literal for some of them. I’ll have to keep the jazzing under control.

Thump. Ugh, there’s Agnes. She’s upstairs getting ready, and I’ve been waiting so long I’m starting to regret the color I painted my toes. 10 years my senior and she’s still trying to wear heels. Maybe she could do it if she would spend some of her fortune on a quality pair. That little old bitch has the best luck in the world. She divorces the wealthiest man in the county and gets half his loot, wins bingo every weekend, the jackpot every month, yet still smells like mothballs and cheese. By my calculations, she shouldn’t even have to brush her own dentures! Yet there she goes, acting like she has nothing, haggling with the lady at the grocery store every week about how much she got charged for a cabbage. If I could take a walk in her two-dollar thrift store shoes, I would never take them off. Well, probably for a new pair. I could be living on a beach with young, tan, sweaty men in Speedos with waxed chests delivering my margaritas and cigarettes. But I could never have my son living on a beach with me. He would lose whatever he has left of his mind. But a girl can vacation, right? That’s why I’ve got on my lucky skivvies tonight. These babies got me into bed with Elvis and I haven’t worn them since. I’m winning this bingo jackpot and spending every penny on myself.

“INGRID? ARE YOU HERE?” Whenever I hear her voice, I always imagine a big hairy rat, sitting in a red velvet armchair and smoking a cigar.

“Yes, Agnes, I’m on the couch! Didn’t you hear me come in?”
“HELLOOOO, INGRID? IF YOU’RE HERE, CAN YOU HELP ME FIND MY HEARING AID? I THINK I MAY HAVE FLUSHED IT AGAIN!” Ugh. She doesn’t have her hearing aid in. I could be chasing monkeys around her table with a blow horn and she would never know. As entertaining as this situation could be, I better help her find it if we’re ever going to get the good table at bingo. Otherwise we’ll be sitting with the phlegm clan, and I am not going through that again. I stand up and reach for the lid of the candy dish. I’ve found her hearing aid in there a hundred times, but only tried to eat it once. Sure enough, it’s right on top of a butterscotch candy wrapper. I pick it up and go upstairs. She’s in the bathroom, floor covered in water, plunging away at the toilet and yelling obscenities. I flick the light switch to let her know I’m behind her. She turns around, now yelling at the lights, then sees me, hearing aid in hand. She smiles.

“OH, INGRID, WHAT WOULD I EVER DO WITHOUT YOU?” I shake my head and give her the hearing aid. She puts it in.

“Jesus, Agnes, just because you can’t hear doesn’t mean I can’t. Do you always have to yell at people when you lose this thing?”

“Sorry, you know me, I just forget.” She gives me that I’m-losing-my-mind-and-completely-unaware-of-it smile. “Ready to go?”

I am just about to say yes, but then I notice the brooch she is wearing. It’s Elvis. Her lucky brooch. That night I got with Elvis? We were together, Agnes and I. We drove to the show, and when we got out of the car, Agnes spotted it right in front of the tire, an inch from certain death. She picked it up, pinned it on, and swears it’s lucky because that night she got a kiss on the cheek from the King himself. In those days, that’s what she called third base. What I did would have been called lighting the fireworks at the World Championship game on New Years Eve. I couldn’t bear to tell her; she still thinks I had been locked inside of an outhouse for half an hour.

“Agnes, don’t you think you could take off your lucky brooch and let some other ladies have a chance for once?” She laughs. I can’t help but get a little angry. I busted out my Elvis skivvies for this, there is no way I am going to let that thing overpower me! I’m a hard working lady, I take care of my son and bring muffins to church, and damnit I’m going to win that pot. What’s a
girl got to do to get somewhere at bingo? Then, a light bulb flicks on, flaring up right inside my head. Maybe I can boost my chances a little. I don’t have to hurt anybody, but I can certainly help my odds. So I start to talk in a whisper. “Yes, Agnes, I’m ready when you are. I’ll drive, my car is parked behind yours anyway.” I smile. She looks a little confused, but smiles and follows me out of the bathroom. Why had I never tried this before? I get giddy as we head to the door, and there’s a spring in my step I haven’t felt since I first discovered the push-up bra. I jump into the car before she even gets her door open, and turn the volume of the radio all the way down. I giggle. She gets in, puts on her seatbelt and looks at me, and I whisper, “I love this song!” I pretend to turn up the volume, and I start dancing as we drive away. Agnes smiles. I know when she gets confused; she gets quiet and smiles, a lot. Bingo.

We pull up to the casino and it’s dead quiet in my car. I’ve gone from whispering to just mouthing words, not making any sounds. I reach to unbuckle, and Agnes touches my arm. “INGRID, I THINK SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH MY HEARING AID. I CAN’T HEAR A DAMN THING!” I give her a concerned look and mouth some gibberish. “INGRID, I CAN’T HEAR YOU.” Her screechy rat voice hurts my ears in such a confined space. I reach over and pull off her hearing aid. I turn the volume as low as it will go, then hand it back.

“THERE YOU GO, AGNES, THE VOLUME WAS JUST TURNED DOWN. CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?” I yell.

“Oh, yes, much better, thanks. I don’t think Elvis would do me any good if I can’t even hear the numbers!” She laughs. I laugh with her. I’m a terrible friend.

We’re at the table. Spreading out cards, 10 each, lining up blotters (mine have jewels glued on), cracking knuckles, calling dibs on ashtrays.

“Ingrid, what are you doing the next few weeks? Are you busy?”

“No,” I’m yelling, but I certainly don’t care, “IF I’M NOT DEAD I’LL BE MALL WALKING OR JAZZING UP SOME OLD CLOTHES.” Agnes laughs. “WHAT, DO YOU NEED ME TO COME WIPE YOUR—”

She cuts me off. “Shh! It’s starting!” That interruption was probably for the best. Agnes may think I’m speaking normally, but the rest of the room knows better. Good thing they all hate us. But really, it’s mostly just her they hate. It’s really working in my
favor tonight, because none of them are going to tell me to shut up, and they’re certainly not going to tell Agnes she’s screwing up her cards.

“B16.” I slide on my purple horn-rimmed glasses and get to work. *Thunk, thunk, thunk.* I glance over at Agnes. She’s smiling.

“B16!” I yell.

She starts. “Wow, I didn’t even hear that! That guy needs to speak up or he’s going to get walloped.” *Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk.* Of course she has more to blot than I do. Bitch. I’m getting crabby with her again. She turns her head to flick the ash off her cigarette, and I switch our cards. Nobody saw. Even if they did, they’re not going to tell her.

“O 7.” *Thunk thunk.*

Agnes is getting frustrated. “What did he say?”

“O 6!” I yell. *Thunk thunk thunk.* No physical harm, no foul, right?

“Oh, Jesus, I’ve got to go the bathroom. Ingrid, do you mind blotting me?” Agnes is already standing up, looking at me, holding out her pink blotter. I take the blotter from her ink-stained fingers and smile complacently.

“OF COURSE, AGNES, TAKE YOUR TIME.” I watch her hunched back disappear and I get to work. She has the memory of a 100-year-old man, so I switch more cards. I don’t blot half the numbers they call. I blot ones they never do. I’m beside myself with joy, my cards filling magically, the pot growing bigger. I laugh, and blot, and laugh, and Agnes returns, smiling. I’m a terrible friend, but what can I do now? The big finale is coming. I can smell the tanning oil covering my servant’s body already.

“Oh, ladies and gentlemen, the night is almost over. Pull out your fresh cards, this is for the big time win!”

Agnes doesn’t hear a word of it, but all eyes in the room are now glaring at her. She notices that.

“Oh! It must be time for the jackpot!” She pulls out her last card. I pull out mine. I can feel the sweat beading on my penciled-in brows. I hope they don’t smudge. Neither of us has won a dime tonight, but this, right now, feels different. The air is buzzing. The cigarette smoke lingering around our perms is thick, our ashtrays overflowing, and even the phlegm clan has gone silent. Waves of anticipation are rolling off my body. I light up another cigarette and look at Agnes. She does the same. Our fingers twitch
on the blotters, and it begins.

“B27!” *Thunk thunk*. The announcer is yelling louder. Agnes can hear him. Shit. I shift in my seat, and suddenly remember my lucky charm. I get a chill of excitement. If I can conquer the King with these skivvies, I can certainly conquer an old lady at bingo.

“G13!” *Thunk thunk*. Our cards are tied.

“G4!” *Thunk thunk*. The world is stuck in a vat of molasses. Jesus, I could run faster than time if it keeps going like this. That’s really saying something; I haven’t run in 50 years.

“O17!” *Thunk thunk*. We’re both on the verge of a bingo, one spot away. I can see the sweat sliding down the hairspray-covered curls of Agnes’s perm.

The announcer yells “N32!” Not what I need. Typical, another man unable to satisfy me. Wait. No. No. Not again. From the corner of my eye, I see the pink, wrinkled fingers of Agnes’s hand, clenched around the blotter, shaking, poised above the card, ready to strike. Blotter side down. Everything is in slow motion. Her eyes bulge out of her head, magnified by her bifocals to look like a chameleon, her tongue swirls around her mouth, rubbing the inside edges of her bad lipstick job and finally stopping over her two giant, front teeth. No, no, NO! I lunge for the card, no idea what I’m going to do with it, I just don’t want her to win. The frugal old bitch can stand to lose for once. I’m lunging, when suddenly my sequined vest catches the edge of the table and pulls me back. I’m wrenched back into my chair, sequins flying off my vest and landing all around me, and her pink blotter is *thunking* right onto that N32 so hard that I get pink splatter right in the face. I deserve that.

“BINGO!” She yells, my heart sinks, and someone throws a plastic dart at her head. It gets caught in her hair, but she doesn’t even notice. She is dancing over to the announcer, swinging her winning card around. I should never have washed these skivvies.

We’re driving home. She’s counting the jackpot.

“So, what will you do with it all? That’s the biggest jackpot you’ve won yet.” She doesn’t answer. Ugh, hearing aids. What annoying little devices. Losing all need for tact, I reach over and pull off her hearing aid.

“HEY!” She grabs for it. I hit her hand away, show her the volume knob, and turn it up. Her face drops, and she looks like a bulldog puppy, all wrinkly and sad. She puts it back in.
“You turned it off earlier, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did, and I’m sorry. Well, sort of. If I were the one holding that money, I probably wouldn’t be apologizing, and I’d let you figure out the volume thing yourself.”

Agnes laughs. “Oh, Ingrid, how long have we been friends? 70 years? You’ve been selfish since I met you; I always believed you would grow out of it, especially after having your son. Ha! It’s been awhile since I’ve seen this side of you.” Agnes laughs more. My hands clench the steering wheel. I wish they were clenching her throat instead. Even just for a second.

“How can you call me selfish, Agnes? You’ve been winning bingo jackpots for years, you can’t tell me I’m being selfish when you’ve got a pile of money sitting under your buns and you’re telling me you’ve got nothing. Bullshit. I know you’ve got it somewhere; you told me how much you walked away with when you divorced Dennis. Where did that go, huh? Tupperware? You know, if you don’t want it, there are plenty of other people that would be more than happy to take the burden off your hands.” It’s silent for a bit inside the car. I’m screaming inside my head. I don’t want her money, that’s not the issue. I want her to spend more than ten dollars on an outfit. I want her to go crazy, have fun, take a vacation or donate to Africa or something. What’s the point in being old and rich if you’re just going to keep acting poor? She has no legacy to leave it to, the government will just swoop in and take it and they’ll find something to spend it on, that’s for sure. But I don’t tell her this. I don’t say anything at all. I pull up in front of her house.

“Can you lift all that money by yourself, or do you need me to carry it in for you?” She doesn’t say anything. She picks up her purse, digs deep, and pulls out an envelope.

“Here,” she says, not really looking at me. “This is for your son.” She holds up the envelope and I rip it out of her hands. I can handle jokes just fine, but talking about my son is not a line to cross. I take the paper out, glaring at Agnes, and read. It’s a savings account. Dear God, this is a savings account, in my son’s name, with an amount of money that could pay my young, tan, waxed servants salary for the rest of my life. For the rest of his life, really. I’m speechless. I honestly don’t think that has ever happened to me before.

“After Dennis and I were divorced, I was lonely. I know I’ve always said I didn’t want children, but I lied. I wish so badly I
had a child. Dennis was awful, but I would have loved to have his child. He was my last chance. I certainly wasn’t going to marry again, and as you can see, time hasn’t exactly been kind to me. But you had your son, and he was so beautiful. I loved him so much, and a baby like that was certain to never be able to be on his own. I watched you work yourself half to death to care for him, and it broke my heart. So while you’ve been calling me frugal, I’ve been saving. For him, and for us.” My face is drenched. I haven’t cried since they cancelled Three’s Company. But I suddenly couldn’t stop. And she laughs! I wanted to slap her in the face. We’re having a moment and she can’t stop laughing.

“I can’t believe you turned my hearing aid down! Have you been tricking me all night? Was all this so you could try to win the jackpot?” My face burns. Agnes looks at me.

“Ingrid, I have never seen your face so red in my life. Don’t be embarrassed. I know you well enough to know what you’re thinking. And by the way, you look terrible in red. I certainly hope your skin doesn’t burn to that same shade while we’re on the beach in Cabo.” My heart stops beating. I stare at her.

“Agnes, what are you talking about?”

“Well, you’re not busy the next few weeks, right? That’s what you said at bingo earlier. Or did I hear you wrong?” She smiles smugly. “I have this condo rented and flights booked and young, sweaty tan men reserved for the next few weeks, and I was hoping you would join me.” She smiles that I’ve-had-you-fooled-this-whole-time-and-I-loved-every-second-of-it smile.

I start laughing. “You frugal bitch.”
I stood in the doorway, waiting for the odd feeling to leave me. The sun slanted through one of the smudged windows and glinted off the particles of dust dancing through the air. Somewhere nearby a fly buzzed, bouncing off of windowpanes in its attempt to escape the house. A small table stood in the middle of the room, two chairs on either side of it. Immobile on the threshold, I took in the small kitchen with its rough wood floor and white painted cabinets. A cheerful enough room, but something wasn’t right about the hairs standing up on the back of my neck. The moment that I opened the back door of the farmhouse and walked into the kitchen, I was aware of an unpleasant feeling. One that was very unwelcoming, almost creepy.

Shaking my head and adjusting my ponytail, I took a few more steps into the room. A green checked curtain fluttered in the breeze from the open window, catching my attention. I walked over to it and bent slightly in order to look outside. It was all pretty magnificent. The green lawn shone in the sunlight, peppered randomly with dandelions. To the left I saw a row of outbuildings, each one adorned with chipped white paint and a faded green roof. To the right there stood a few more buildings, the king of which was the big white barn nestled into a small valley below the road. A quiet smile stole over my face as I gazed at it, remembering the tour that my uncle had just given me. The barn was picture perfect inside with the barn cats playing in piles of hay and the cows slowly munching their feed, all surrounded by gray stone that was cool to the touch.

Beyond the barn, corn stood swaying in the breeze. The glossy green leaves reflected the bright light, producing an effect similar to sunlight on water. It was like a green ocean swallowing up the surrounding hills. A neighboring farm was just visible on a distant hill, past that sea of swaying leaves. My eyes searched the landscape until they came to rest on the expanse of trees on the other side of the barn. I was told this was where the cows were let out to pasture. A narrow lane was fenced off for them to travel down, and then it opened out into a ravine. The rest of my uncle’s land wasn’t visible. Unlike other parts of the state, this area was anything but flat.

On the lawn next to the driveway, Uncle Rodney was prac-
tically jumping up and down while talking to the woman standing next to him. His only sister, and my mother, looked with squinted eyes at the things he pointed out to her. This was our first trip to his farm and it was obvious he was excited to share his knowledge about the property and farming itself. I knew my mother wouldn’t care too much about what chemicals he sprayed on the corn this year, but she nodded at the appropriate times and followed his gaze to the fields as he explained everything to her. My luggage was on the ground next to my mom, three big suitcases crammed full of clothes and other essentials that I would need during my indefinite stay. I felt excited, nervous, and lonesome all at once as I thought about living on this big farm with my uncle and his kids. Post-college graduation was not at all what I had expected it to be. I lacked the motivation that had propelled me through school and couldn’t find a job that I was at all interested in. So instead of working at the local bowling alley in my hometown I decided to come stay with my uncle and help him on the farm for a while. I was going to live here rent-free, taking on a few chores to lighten his load, and help take care of the house and kids.

I turned my attention back to the room I was standing in, straightening up from the window and looking around me once more. I wasn’t completely overcome with the odd feeling I had had at first, but it was still vaguely there, like an itch I couldn’t quite place. I was curious though as to what the rest of the house was like, so I walked through the kitchen and entered the dining room. It was darker here; the two windows on opposite sides of the room were shaded and didn’t get as much light as the kitchen. The front door stood on the south side next to one of the windows. It was open, allowing the warm August breeze into the house. I walked over and looked out, then chuckled under my breath as I remembered what my mom always said about Rodney not finishing the projects he started: where a front porch or stairs should have been, there was a large hole. But he was a good guy, a hard worker and a good dad. He was raising his two daughters, Hannah and Zoey by himself after their mom took off. They were now six and eight, but she left when they were so young that they didn’t have any recollection of her.

The honk of a horn shook me out of my musing and I watched out the screen door as a bright yellow school bus stopped at the end of the farm’s long driveway. Two girls, both with golden-blond hair, jumped down from the steps of the bus and began to walk toward the house. I hadn’t seen my little cousins for a year and
a half; the responsibilities of the farm made it difficult for Rodney to come visit. Even after the long separation and the distance from the house to the road I could pick out which one was which. Hannah, being two years older than her sister, was about a head taller. Her long hair was neatly pulled into a ponytail and she walked with a confident air, her backpack secured with both straps to her back. Zoey tripped along close to her big sister, having to take two steps for every one of Hannah’s. The breeze blew wisps of light hair from her pigtails and she carried her bag in her hand not on her back, occasionally letting it drag on the gravel of the drive. She didn’t seem to mind though. Starring up into the trees that lined the driveway, Zoey seemed engrossed in observing some sort of wildlife until Hannah suddenly turned and said something to her. Snapping her head down, she squinted in the direction of Uncle Rodney and my mom. My two cousins grinned at each other and then took off running. They had obviously realized that their long-awaited guests had arrived.

I smiled to myself as I watched their little sandals kicking up gravel, and then hurried through the dining room, back into the kitchen, and out through the back door so I could greet them. I wasn’t sure if they would remember me well but it didn’t matter. I was still excited to see them and hoped that they would feel comfortable with me in time. They had just about reached the adults as I stepped out into the fresh air. Out of breath but smiling, my cousins skidded to a halt next to their dad. My mother bent down to hug first one then the other. By the time I reached the group, the girls’ original excitement had ebbed and was replaced by shyness.

As I approached, I put on the brightest, friendliest smile I could manage. “Hi Hannah, hi Zoey. My goodness, you two have gotten so big since the last time I saw you!” I bent down and put my hands on my knees so I was a little closer to their level. Hannah smiled and gave me a little wave, but Zoey just stared at me with her big green eyes.

Uncle Rodney laughed. “Come on, you remember your cousin Rene, don’t you?” Hannah nodded and said something about playing Barbies the last time they had visited our house for Christmas.

“Yes, I remember that too. We had some fun, didn’t we?” I said smiling again. I racked my brain for some way to break the ice and get Zoey talking. “You know, your dad showed me around your farm a little bit today, but it’s so big I’m already confused.
about what’s what. Maybe you two could help me out and give me another tour. I’m sure you could show me all the important things, all the secrets of this place.” I smiled again, a bit conspiratorially; I wanted them to know that I was one of them, a friend instead of a scary grown-up. Zoey gave me a half-smile before hiding her face again in her dad’s shirt. But it wasn’t long before she was chattering away about the new calf she had named and dragging me by the hand to show me the playhouse she and Hannah had set up in the old granary.

“Who are these people?” I asked my uncle. It was the day after I had arrived at his farm and I had just noticed an old black-and-white picture hanging in the living room. It showed a family, at least a dozen people sitting or standing in front of the now non-existent porch of the farmhouse. The handwritten date in the bottom corner read 1921. Rodney looked up from the mail he had been sorting.

“Hmm? Oh, them,” he took a few steps towards me and pointed to the photo. “That’s Matthew Hibbert. The middle-aged man in the back. I believe those are his mother and father, the people who first built and worked the farm, sitting in the center there. Matthew’s wife, Roberta is standing next to them. And the rest, I think are all their kids. Matthew’s and Roberta’s, I mean.”

I gazed at the picture in silence for a few moments then turned to look at my uncle. “How do you know all that?” I asked. He had never seemed like the kind of guy to take an interest in genealogy.

He shrugged and gave me a worn smile. “Once you’ve put as much blood, sweat, and tears into a place as I have with this farm, you start to feel a connection to the people who have done the same in the past. Every day I’m in the buildings that they built, walking the ground they walked, and making a living the same way they did. Even though they lived a hundred years ago, I feel like I know them,” I must have been looking at Rodney with amazement because he chuckled, shaking his head with slight chagrin. “Yeah, I know. Your tough old uncle’s becoming a softy.” I just smiled. “But I can’t take all the credit for finding that stuff out. The guy who owned the property before me, some distant cousin of the Hibberts, had this copy of their picture and explained who they were. I hung it up because they kind of feel like my family, too,” he said and walked out of the room to go pay bills.
I turned back to the photograph and looked at each person’s face in turn. The quality of the copy wasn’t the best, but I could make out features well enough. The care-worn face of Roberta, her husband’s tired eyes, and the wrinkled faces of his parents. They were the ones who built this place, who saw it rise from the ground up. My uncle had boasted that this farm had been one of the biggest and most prosperous farms in its day, and this was the family that had been responsible for that. My gaze drifted to the children who varied in age from what must have been mid-twenties to a toddler sitting in a wagon. There were eight of them, but none of their faces interested me as much as that little boy sitting in his wagon, an older sister standing behind him holding it steady. He was smiling with his mouth open, as if he was in mid-giggle. It was then that I experienced again that eerie feeling I had got when first walking into the house. A chill ran through me as I looked intently at the little face as though I was waiting for it to come to life, to unfreeze from the stillness of the photograph. A high-pitched shriek somewhere in the distance made me jump and look around, but I quickly realized it was one of my cousins playing in the backyard. A little ashamed of myself for my rapid heart rate and my shaky hands, I shot one last look at the picture and walked to the kitchen to start making lunch.

That night was the first time I dreamed about the ravine.

A month had gone by and I was becoming accustomed to my new life. In fact, it was hard for me to believe that I had been there such a short time. I woke earlier than I ever had, making breakfast for my uncle, the girls, and Henry, a neighbor who Rodney paid to come to help with the milking and chores. Hannah and Zoey had their own set of chores to complete and I had mine so we were all busy for the first few hours of the day. I learned quickly that the farming lifestyle was difficult and tiring, although gratifying to be sure. I admired Uncle Rodney for taking a leap of faith and buying this farm. I could tell he loved it even when a cow got loose, the tractor broke, or he had to go down and spend the night in the barn when a calf was being born.

One morning, when I was washing the breakfast dishes, Uncle Rodney came into the kitchen and threw himself into one of the wooden chairs. He looked tired, a feeling I could relate to. I had gone to bed late the night before and slept restlessly. Lately, I had been having strange dreams where I was running endlessly through cornfields or staring down into a ravine that had no bottom. For no
reason that I could discern I would wake up frightened and in a cold sweat.

Uncle Rodney coughed, bringing me back from a contemplation of my nightmares. I knew something was wrong, but didn’t ask. He could be a little sensitive when it came to trouble on the farm.

“The manure spreader broke again,” he sighed, rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hand. “I’ve been meaning to replace it, update it, but it’s been working fine lately and I thought I could make do for a while. Plus, it’s not like I’ve had the money to spare.” I mumbled something about helping, but Rodney shook his head. “No, no I can handle it. Henry’s going to come back this afternoon and help me fix it. It’s just going to take me most of the day and I was planning on replacing that gate down in the barnyard. I just can’t keep up with all the repairs this place needs.” My mind jumped to the unfinished front porch, the half painted room where I slept, and the patched up roofs of the outbuildings.

“There has to be something I can do to help,” I said. “Anything, really.” He thought a moment and for the first time I felt guilty that I was living with him rent-free and that I couldn’t handle the more labor-intensive repair work of the farm.

“The girls have been bugging me to take them to the public library. I was planning on doing it sometime this weekend, but if you could do that for me… that would save me some time. And maybe you could pick up a few things from the store while you’re out?”

Later that day I loaded Hannah and Zoey into the beat-up old truck my uncle had given me to drive and we drove out toward the nearest town, which was fifteen miles away. The girls each had a list of the books they wanted to borrow from the library and took off the minute we walked in the doors. After I had called out a reminder to meet me back by the front doors in an hour, I began to wander around the building. It was small, but crowded with bookcases. There were comfortable looking chairs and couches in several corners and a row of computers along a wall for public use. A plump, blonde woman behind the desk smiled and asked me if she could help me find anything.

“No, thank you. I’m just looking around. This is my first time here,” I answered.

“Really? So you must be new to town. If you’d like a tour of the library let me know,” she said. I thought the idea of a tour was a little silly. Everything was in one large room. If I couldn’t find my
way around I needed more help than a tour guide could give. “And
don’t forget to check out our local history room. It’s down those
back stairs and to the right.”

Suddenly my interest was piqued. “There’s a history room
here?” I looked around for the staircase as the lady nodded. “Thank
you, I hadn’t known that.” I walked down the stairs with an excite-
ment and anticipation that confused me. I had always been fond of
history, but not to the point where I would feel giddy visiting a local
history room. I opened a wooden door at the end of a hallway and
walked into a cramped room with floor to ceiling filing cabinets.

A woman in her late twenties looked up from a desk.
“Hello. Can I help you with anything?” she asked, squinting at me as
if she had been staring at her computer screen for too long.

“No, not with anything in particular. This is my first time
here and the lady at the front desk suggested I come down and look
around,” I said and hoped I wasn’t disturbing her.

“Oh yeah, of course! Look around! I’m Megan, by the
way. It’s mostly old papers and things in here, but we have some
neat photos up of the town from back after the Civil War, during
the ‘20s, when World War II ended…” she trailed off pointing to
frames spaced out around the room. “So you’re new in town, huh?”
This sudden change of topic took me off guard. Megan stood up and
came around the desk to face me.

“Uh, yeah. I’m living with my uncle for a while on his
farm. The big one out on Highway F. With the white barn,” I added
when I saw her face become curious. Megan’s eyes lit up.

“The old Hibbert farm? Really? Wow, that place sure does
have a history to it,” she said almost longingly. “But I’m sure you’ve
heard the story.” Her eyes widened at my blank face. “Seriously?
No one told you the story about the Hibbert kid?” I shook my head,
starting to feel uncomfortable. Megan began to almost jump up and
down with excitement. “Okay, I have to tell you. Sit, sit, sit.” She
ushered me to a chair opposite her own.

“So back in 1923, Matthew Hibbert owned and worked the
Hibbert farm, the one his father started. His wife and him had had
ten children; eight survived,” Megan paused and I thought back to
the photograph hanging in my uncle’s living room. “The youngest’s
name was Willie; he was six in 1923.” The little boy in the wagon, I
thought to myself and cringed inwardly as I anticipated what Megan
would tell me. “One afternoon he fell down into a ravine and by the
time he was found it was too late. They carried him to the house and
he died later that day. A broken back and ribs. Probably a punctured lung. The interesting thing is…” Megan leaned closer to me across her desk. “His older sister Jane, who was then eleven, was blamed for what happened to him. She was accused of pushing him or causing him to fall somehow. They had been out playing together and when he fell she ran away. They found her out in a cornfield, inconsolable, running around in circles.” I felt my legs go numb. “Jane admitted to being there and watching as he tumbled down the side of the ravine, but they couldn’t get anything else out of her. She had always been a strange girl, according to accounts written after the accident. They said that something was wrong with her mind. I’m not sure if that was true, but a couple years later her family sent her to the asylum out in Dresley. Jane spent the rest of her life there, poor girl. Granted, it wasn’t a very long life. She died when she was eighteen.”

When Megan concluded her story she sat back and folded her arms. A triumphant look was on her face and she seemed to wait for a thank you from me. I was sweating and my hands were shaking. Megan narrowed her eyes at me and seemed to notice how uncomfortable I was for the first time. “Hey, are you alright? You’re so pale…” she said, sounding worried. “I didn’t mean to upset you; I just thought you’d like to know the story. It’s so interesting and mysterious. At least, most people think so.”

I quickly tried reassuring her that I was fine, but I wasn’t positive that that was true myself. “Could I just get a drink of water or something?” I asked. Megan got up and took a water bottle from her bag. The lukewarm water didn’t make much difference, but it gave me something to do while I tried to control my breathing. At last I felt my hands steady. “I’m sorry about that. It just sort of hit home. I mean, my younger cousins are around that age and I live in the same house the Hibberts did…” I trailed off hoping these halfhearted excuses would convince her. Megan nodded and looked at me sympathetically. “It was very interesting though,” I added to pacify her. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Would you like a copy of the newspaper article that announced the accident? I have it right here I could easily copy it for you,” she jumped up and found the clipping in a drawer behind the desk and brought it over to the copier. How could I convince her that I didn’t want a reminder of this horrible story, that I didn’t want to hear any more about it? But when she handed me the newly printed, warm piece of paper, I gripped it tightly in my clammy hand.
Half an hour after I had ventured down the stairs, I slowly walked up again clutching a copy of Willie’s death announcement. It felt like days had passed, not mere minutes. I looked around to see if Hannah and Zoey were ready to go yet. It was earlier than we had agreed, but I wanted to leave. My tired eyes ached and Megan’s words still rang in my ears. All I wanted to do was go somewhere quiet where I could close my eyes and forget them. But then I knew I would start dreaming again. The bottomless ravine. But now I knew it wasn’t bottomless. A little boy would be waiting for me if I ever ventured into it. And those never-ending cornfields, so much, I’m sure, like the one Jane hid in while her brother was dying. What did it mean? Why were these images stealing into my mind at night? This was the first time I had heard of Willie’s accident and yet, it seemed as if I was dreaming about it.

“Rene!” Zoey’s high-pitched voice shocked me back to the present.

“Hey kiddo. Did you find everything you wanted?” I asked trying to sound cheerful. Zoey’s smile faded as she looked at my face.

“Are you sick? You look like Hannah did when she had the flu and was puking all the time,” Zoey said, looking concerned.

“No, Zoe. I’m not sick. Just tired. Are you and Hannah ready to go or are you still looking?”

“I think we’re ready. At least I am. I’ll go tell Hannah to hurry!” and she sprinted off in search of her sister.

I folded up the piece of paper I was still clutching and put it in my jeans pocket. I was dreading going back to the farm where this horrible incident had happened, but at the same time I felt drawn to it. The image of the little boy in the wagon and his sister swam through my mind. In that moment captured by the photograph they were innocently unaware of the fate that awaited them. The thought of their happy little faces sent chills up my spine.

My descent into madness came on gradually. I became dangerously distracted and unaware of my surroundings over the next few weeks. I burned food and forgot to close gates, causing animals to get loose. The laundry went undone and I only cleaned when Uncle Rodney or the girls reminded me to do it. The story of Jane and her little brother utterly consumed me. I was constantly in front of the living room photograph or reading over Willie’s death an-
nouncement. There was no plausible explanation for my obsession, but I couldn’t control it. I noticed that my uncle was becoming worried by my sudden change of behavior, and one morning he brought up the subject while I handed him a plate of half-cooked scrambled eggs and toast.

“Rene, are you doing alright? You’ve seemed different lately. Distracted. Unhappy. What’s wrong?”

I knew he was right and I averted my eyes. “Nothing, I’ve just been,” I searched for a believable explanation, “missing my friends from home.” I suddenly got inspiration and added: “A boy, actually. I’ve been missing a boy I broke up with after college. Sorry if I’ve been a little sulky.” This seemed perfect; my friends had always been moody after breaking up with their boyfriends. I wasn’t about to admit to my uncle that I had become obsessed with the death of one of the Hibbert kids who had lived almost a hundred years ago.

“Hmmm. A boy?” My uncle looked skeptical. “I’m not buying it. You were fine until a couple weeks ago. Now you spend hours just daydreaming. I keep catching you in front of the photo in the living room. And you’ve started sleepwalking…”

“Wait, what?” I asked, interrupting him.

“Yeah. Last night I heard you get out of bed around two in the morning. I didn’t really think much of it until I heard the back door open and close. Rene, you were trying to get through the barnyard gate before I caught up to you. I only realized you were sleepwalking when you asked me if I had seen Willie. Who the hell is Willie?” Rodney’s face looked scared and confused. I knew in that moment that I was mirroring those emotions.

“I… I thought that was a dream,” I finally muttered. I had in fact dreamt that I was going out in search of Willie. I had been in the house, so different and yet so much the same as it was in real life. The day had been bright and sunny, but I had known something was wrong. Willie was gone, lost somewhere and I had to find him. I didn’t remember my uncle bringing me back up to the house, but apparently he did, putting me back to bed like a child. I remembered thinking that my name was Jane.

I became Jane in my dreams more often than not. I became concerned, but didn’t get frightened until my conscious and unconscious states began to overlap. There would be mornings when I would wake up confused because my large room was missing the
other beds of my siblings. It would take a few minutes for me to re-
member my name was Rene, not Jane. After I started sleepwalking,
my uncle locked my bedroom door to prevent me from wandering
around and injuring myself and I would often wake up, desperately
trying to unlock the door while tears streamed down my face. There
were moments when I wouldn’t recognize Uncle Rodney and I
would accidentally call the girls Lucy and Ruth, only realizing my
mistake when they gave me frightened looks and ran away. My head
usually felt foggy and I could never keep track of what day it was.
There were times when my mind wasn’t my own, when my body
refused to take orders from me.

Jane had a one-track mind and when she took over I had
no choice but to follow. We always went outside, down the gravel
drive to the barn, through the barnyard and down to where the cows
were let to pasture. She seemed to know where we were going and
I was curious. I knew deep down that she was in search of Willie, to
the ravine where he fell, but we never got to where we were headed.
Someone would interrupt, hold me back, or I would come to my
senses before we’d reached our destination. It wasn’t until I found
myself out in a rainstorm at five in the morning (I had somehow got
through my locked bedroom door) with bare feet, and soaked paj-
mas that I admitted that something was terribly wrong with me.

I told my uncle about all the dreams, the confusion, and
my unreasonable obsession with the Hibbert child’s death. We both
agreed that I needed to leave the farm as soon as possible. I needed
a change of scene, a break from this house and its history that had
seemed to have taken possession of me. It was decided that I would
leave in two days, giving my mother enough time to drive up and
get me. I was afraid of falling asleep, I was afraid of being alone.
A foreboding seemed to settle on the house and I felt it wrapping
around me like a thick black cloak.

It is night. I get up out of the bed as carefully and quietly as
I can so that I won’t wake the man sleeping on the floor. He was sent
there to guard me, I feel. To stop me from going to my brother. A
quiet voice in my head tells me it’s no use, that I can’t do anything,
but I know different. This voice pleads with me, but I ignore it as I
have done so often before. Time is running out and I have become
desperate. The locked door turns easily in my hand and I seem to
glide down the stairs. It will be some time before my guard is roused
and realizes I am not in the prison of a bedroom they have kept me
in these last two days. My feet carry me where I want to go. The ground is so familiar; Willie and I spent whole summers playing between the trees and rocks of these pastures, teasing the cows and racing each other home at milking time. Before I realize where I am, it opens up in front of me. The ravine where father has warned us many times not to go. If you tell a child not to do something, it only makes them long to do it more. Such as it was with Willie. I followed him there and tried to drag him back from the edge when he got too close. But he pulled away from me and I lost my grip and he stumbled and lost his balance so close to the edge and he was suddenly falling, tumbling before I knew what was happening. It seemed to last forever. An eternity was fit into the seconds that I watched him fall; bouncing off the rocks, rolling until his little body finally reached the bottom and was thrown to the ground. Time stood still while I looked at his disfigured form. And then I started to run. I tried to find my father, my brothers, anyone, but they weren’t in the cornfield as I had thought. So I ran, trying to find my way out of the sea of green, out of the leaves that cut my face, away from the picture of my Willie lying in a heap at the bottom of the ravine.... He is there now, at the bottom. I can’t see him, but I know. I hear his little cries of pain. My Willie. He is down there broken, bleeding, dying. I don’t think twice this time; I don’t run to find help. He needs me and I will go down to him. Willie, my sweet boy, I’m coming. At the edge, I lean over and look into the darkness. I take a step and fall.
Somewhere deep in the mountains, a dark castle perched atop the cliff and overlooked a sprawling city of blocky towers and twisted roads. A film of algae floated upon the moat, occasionally disturbed by ripples as some enormous creature brushed the surface, revealing jagged spines running down a scaly back. Cracked flagstones that had once been white had long since faded to grey from years of neglect. Cobwebs that draped from the ceiling and hung from the walls shone in the silver-blue torchlight. Dust coated the chandelier made of demon bones. Normally this castle rested in dismal silence, but not tonight. Tonight a meeting took place in the great hall.

An ensemble of monsters sat at the table in the great hall, devouring the banquet set before them. All kinds of food imaginable, and some that defied imagination, graced the table. Steaks marinated in ear wax, graveyard sausages, flying mushrooms, fried emus, frog legs dipped in batter, beetle kabobs, and glowing, green cheese piled high upon platters. Pots of malodorous soup bubbled on the table. There were other dishes, dishes so mysterious and complex that no description did them justice.

The monsters ranged from as small as a broken fingernail to the size of a giraffe standing on an elephant’s shoulders. Some were green, some were violet, some were all colors and some kept changing colors. Some had horns, others had fins, and a few had more appendages than they quite knew what to do with. There were ghouls, goblins, wyverns, werewolves, yetis, swamp monsters, and a small platoon of hyper-intelligent rats. There were many hybrids and even monsters that had no inkling of their lineage.

Seven monsters, larger and more fearsome than the rest, had seats at the high end of the table. A slouching beast by name of Grath, a mix between a gorilla and a boar, occupied the third seat from the right. Grandfather, an antediluvian creature resembling a very large hermit crab, made his home in an upside-down ship-wreck he carried on his back and was so old that his brain could be replaced by a plate of scrambled eggs and no one would notice, including him. Sebastian von Pech III, who sat next to Grandfather, was king of the rats and had three heads; the middle head spoke elo-
quently and the other two could talk if their mouths weren’t always full. Zkrttick, a flea of veritably gargantuan proportions by insect standards, sat across the table from Sebastian. Since Zkrttick spoke only in arthropodic gibberish, a werewolf named Sarah, who knew the flea’s language, acted as interpreter. Next to Sarah sat Rusty, an ancient automaton that loomed over their heads; his eyes were dim, glass screens and his bulk was a maze of gears, pipes, valves, and metal plating. No one knew who built him and no one knew what purpose he was built for. At the very head of the table Thanatos leaned forward, more shadow than flesh and her head was that of a vulture’s.

“Ahem!” Thanatos stood and cleared her throat, “Attention, everyone! We have summoned you here to—“

Thanatos looked over at the snoring that suddenly interrupt-ed her and saw Grandfather fast asleep, his face resting on a plate of mashed potatoes. Stalking over to the monster with lumbering strides, Thanatos leaned down until her beak was right next to where Grandfather’s ear might be.

“WAKE UP!” squawked Thanatos.


“As I was saying,” continued Thanatos as she lumbered back to the head of the table, “We, the Aberrational Council, have summoned all of you here to take part in the centennial meeting during which we are supposed to come to a decision of some sort but usually don’t.”

“Um, excuse me, can I have another cookie?” asked a voice from behind the monster.

A ball of grey fuzz sat in a cage suspended from the ceiling by a chain. He had big, green eyes and stubby little limbs. His name was Gear, but the monsters hadn’t bothered to ask when they captured him…which was managed with a coil of rope and a sign saying “free cookies.”

Thanatos sighed and held a cookie up behind her head for Gear to grab. A squeak of delight and happy munching sounds meant that she might actually get around to the announcements sometime that night.

“Kindly desist from spraying cookie crumbs all over my neck feathers, I’m not a napkin,” Thanatos picked up a scroll and said in a bored voice, “All right, let me start out by saying that I would like to remind the cellar-keeper to keep the rats out of the wine cellar...we don’t want to wake up to find all the furniture had
been stacked on the roof again. Another thing, the glowing green acid that spews out of the courtyard fountain is *not drinkable."

"Moderate do-it-yourself stoats!"

Everyone paused and Rusty sat down. Whenever he spoke, it never made any discernable sense whatsoever. He’d been spouting nonsense for centuries, so they were quite accustomed to his spontaneous non-sequiturs.

"On to the matter at hand. You all know why we’re really here, to discuss a crisis the likes of which we have never before faced. Our kingdom, our castle, has been invaded by a foe that not even our strongest warriors can vanquish," announced Thanatos.

A dull roar of muttering rose up from the banqueters. They whispered among themselves, sharing accounts of their own encounters with this terrible invader, this abhorrent threat. Thanatos tapped her foot impatiently while waiting for the muttering to stop. She waited for ten minutes with much harrumphing and pounding on the table with a mallet. Finally, a small monster, way at the back of the hall, stood up and raised a hand. Everyone settled down.

"Perhaps we should all hear an account of recent events, just to make sure that everyone," Thanatos’ gaze lingered especially long upon Rusty, Grandfather, and Grath, "understands the situation."

A bulky ghoul sentry stood up, shoulders slumped. He fidgeted with his hat in his claws.

"Well, it all started when me an’ the fellows were all on sentry duty, like we always are," began the ghoul, his head bowed, "It was a night like any other, nothing happening in particular, when I heard a noise off ‘round the corner. It sounded like a pebble thrown, so I went to investigate."

"A pebble?" asked Thanatos in a deadpan squawk.

"Yessir, a pebble."

Thanatos said nothing, but she picked up a pad of paper and scribbled: *Note to self: hire smarter guards.*

"When I turned the corner, I felt something land on my back. Something bashed my head in and the next…the next thing I knew something had taken my keys," continued the ghoul, "Those weren’t just the castle keys, either…my house key was on that ring…"

The next monster to stand up was a ragged creature patched together from discarded bits of armor and old clothing and brought to life by magic. Instead of a face it had an upturned bucket set
upon its shoulders.

“It was horrible, I tell you!” it groaned in a voice like rusty nails on an anvil, “The fiend was a whirlwind, fighting like twenty men! It moved so fast, darting and dodging, that we couldn’t get near it, then it left us bleeding in sorry piles of—”

“I beg your pardon,” interrupted Thanatos, “but aren’t you and your kind constructs of magic, immune to physical harm and exempted from inconveniences like bleeding to death?”

The ragged construct sat down in a hurry, “Well, that’s what it felt like.”

More accounts emerged; the intruder had wreaked havoc throughout the castle, room by room. Injured monsters spoke of a savage killer, enormous and merciless. Armed with a huge sword, this intruder left the barracks in shambles, looted the storerooms, and clobbered anyone in the way. The intruder’s appearance varied; some said it was a ten-foot tall fiend with wings and horns, others said it was a knight with a sword over seven feet tall. All concluded, however, that they were facing an army of one.

“After three days of this terror, we have at last discovered the nature of the creature we face. Behold…” Thanatos uncovered the easel behind her.

Everyone stared at the sketch of a small kangaroo with big eyes, long, pointed ears, and big feet. A poncho draped over his shoulders and he held a dagger in his little hands.

“This!” screeched Thanatos, “It seems you have all forgotten to mention that this intruder is a diminutive marsupial!”

Thanatos’ annoyance was temporarily diverted by the whistling snores that issued from Grandfather, who was once more facedown in the mashed potatoes. She picked up two pan lids, lumbered over to the ancient crustacean, and clanged the lids together until Grandfather raised his head and looked around blearily.

“Care to contribute to our meeting, Grandfather?” requested Thanatos in a sugary voice.

“I told you it was a moose,” yawned Grandfather.

“What do you lily-livered pansies have to say for yourselves?” demanded Thanatos.

Everyone fidgeted, muttering into their plates and looking anywhere but at the monster at the head of the table. All of them, at one time or another, had fought the little intruder only to flee with bumps, bruises, and heaps of humiliation. They had never faced anything so small…and so determined.
Zkrttick hissed.

“This was no ordinary marsupial,” translated Sarah, “We’re dealing with a kangasaur.”

“I had a canker sore once,” remarked Grandfather.

“No, no, kangasaur,” repeated Sebastian as he pulled a field guide from his vest pocket and opened it to an earmarked page, “A kangasaur is a biped marsupial that normally inhabits semi-arid regions. They are social animals that form tribes and have developed many traditions over the—“

“Since you know so much about kangasaur, Sebastian, perhaps you would be willing to deal with him,” suggested Thanatos.

Dread flickered across Sebastian’s whiskery face—at least the face of the middle head, the other two kept eating as if nothing happened—and the field guide fell from his paws. He remembered all too well the outcome of his last battle with the kangasaur and had the bashed tail to prove it.

“I think I have done my part already,” he squeaked fastidiously, “I slowed the little beast down for a total of two minutes, after all.”

Of course, thought Thanatos, Sebastian was far more comfortable giving orders to his rats from the safety of his lair. That he had gone into battle at all was surprising enough.

“Excuse me, why am I in a cage again?” asked the captive, his little grey paws wrapped around the cage bars.

“For the tenth time, you are a fledgling form of a fearsome monster from beyond the stars! You are our only link to finding the ancient city of Donan Ghan, where secret spells rest hidden for millennia! And small, fuzzy things annoy me,” replied Thanatos.

“I have to find a city?” asked Gear.

“Oh, I obviously we cannot allow this intruder to get any farther,” said Thanatos.

“I got lost in a city once,” remarked Gear.

“If this were up to me, of course, I’d have the little wretch baked in a pie!” boasted Grath.

“Hacksaws taste much better in pies than wrenches,” said Rusty.

“Nonsense! You can’t make a good pie out of wrenches!” snorted Sebastian.

“I was walking around in circles all day. Sure was a lot of people there,” said Gear.
“It’s settled, then. We’ll leave the intruder to Grath,” said Thanatos, hoping to get this over with quickly.

“Wait just a minute! I pulled a muscle while fighting that kangasaur earlier! I can’t fight in this condition!” whined Grath, the hulking hill of fur that could rip the roof off a house.

“But I did find a shiny doohickey on the ground, so it wasn’t too bad,” said Gear thoughtfully.

Zkrttick hissed.

“Zkrttick is a giant flea,” translated Sarah, “What would you have him do, whap the kangasaur with his weak little arms? I don’t care how ugly he is, fleas just aren’t built for combat.”

“Aren’t you a werewolf, girly? Werewolves are good at tearing things apart. That and prunes. And moose,” pointed out Grandfather, pointing a shaky claw at Sarah.

“I’m a staunch pacifist,” replied Sarah.

“Rusty, I’m certain you could…” Thanatos looked into the blank glass, devoid of any shred of intelligence, that was what passed for Rusty’s eyes and reconsidered, “…never mind.”

“Would anyone care to contribute a relevant thought to this discussion?” asked Thanatos, her rough squawk tinged with desperate begging.

“Biggest moose I ever saw,” said Grandfather before he slumped over, face-first into the mashed potatoes, and went to sleep. Thanatos’ forehead hit the table repeatedly.

A swamp monster, dripping with mud, way in the back stood and yelled, “I say we band together and confront this intruder!”

“Aye!”

“That’s the spirit!”

“We’ll pulverize the little worm!”

“We’ll crush him!”

“We’ll squeeze the stuffing out of him!”

“We’ll stomp him flat!”

“What are we, mice or monsters?”

The uproar brought a smile to Thanatos’ dull, black eyes since vultures, after all, could not smile with their beaks. It was times like these that she was so proud of her subjects.

“Splendid. Absolutely splendid. He’s at the door,” announced Thanatos.

The banquet hall went absolutely silent, not even a breath stirred the air. Eyes wide with horror, fur, spikes, and hair standing
on end, tails curled around their legs, the monsters clung together like little children listening to a ghost story.

“Have you no shame?” demanded Thanatos, her knobby fist slamming down on the table, “We are monsters! Monsters! You have demolished armies! You have slain knights by the thousands! You have driven sorcerers mad!”

“That was an awfully long time ago…” admitted Sebastian as he scratched the back of his neck self-consciously.

“I can’t believe what I am hearing!” Thanatos squawked, “We are monsters! We are the eyes that shine in the darkness; we are the shadow under the bed, the creak on the stair, the tapping at the windowpane! There are hundreds of us; no reckless little hero is a match for all of us combined! Let us join forces and dispose of this insolent invader!”

Hearty cheers made the rafters shake and the cobwebs shiver. Everyone was in favor of the idea, but none could agree on how to go about it. Grath called for charges and chases, Sebastian wanted to send out a scouting party, and the two argued about which needed to come first. Zrktick suggested an ambush, but no one could agree on where to stage it. Cricket monsters asked for pit traps that no one wanted to dig, especially not on the nice stone floors of the castle.

One monster suggested that they needed to install more pressure-switch activated doors. The ghoul sitting next to him declared that was nonsense; the eighteen-inch tall invader had trouble reaching doorknobs in the first place, thus making a door open by stepping on a switch set in the floor would only make it much easier for the little creature to get around the castle.

“Ah, but what if we installed pressure switches that opened a door on the other side of the castle instead of the door next to it?” said the monster who suggested it.

“Then we would all go insane.”

A sea phantom suggested that they flood the castle, drowning the intruder. Since many of the other inhabitants either had an intrinsic aversion to water or just did not want to spend weeks mopping up, this suggestion went nowhere. Another monster built upon the idea and recommended that they flood the castle with lava; this suggestion garnered no support because none of the monsters liked being set on fire. A wild-haired monster proposed a plan so complicated that no one could make heads or tails of it, only that two major components of which were pumpkin seeds and baling twine.
“We need a moose,” said Grandfather.

As the arguing continued, the doors opened with a creak inaudible in the hubbub. A shadow slipped into the hall. The cobwebs shuddered and heaved as tiny paws climbed them all the way to the ceiling. The chandelier swayed, its bones clacking gently, in indication that something landed there. The chain by which the chandelier was suspended squeaked and clanked as tiny paws tugged. Suddenly, the chandelier whooshed down, chain rattling as it whipped through the pulley. It had almost reached the table when it came to a sudden stop two inches above a plate of quiche, and off hopped the banqueters’ worst fear.

Ryker the kangasaur brandished what was a dagger to most but a long sword to one as small as him. The monsters all shrank back, remembering the last time they fought him.

“I clobbered all of you before, but I’ll fight you again if you want!” he challenged.

The monsters fled in panic. All it took were fourteen words and the banquet hall was empty in seconds. There Ryker stood, big ears cocked askew in surprise and just a little bit of disappointment. Never one to be discouraged for long, Ryker made his way to the head of the table. The plentiful and elegant dishes reminded him that his last meal had been a cracker for breakfast, but right now wasn’t the time to think about food. The reason he fought his way through the castle, room by room, foe by foe, sat suspended in a cage high above his head.

“Gear!” shouted Ryker with relief.

“Ryker!” Gear rushed to the front of the cage and gripped the bars.

Ryker looked up at Thanatos and smiled not with his mouth but with his eyes, making them squinty,” You didn’t hurt Gear, so I’ll go easy on you!”

“Ahem…as Chairmonster of the Aberrational Council I reserve the right to one pointless monologue before engaging in physical combat,” pointed out Thanatos.

“Huh?” Ryker tilted his head to one side.

“Sit down and be quiet while I do some talking,” clarified Thanatos.

Ryker sat down but kept a hand on his sword.

“As you probably don’t know, the Aberrational Council and the territory it rules has been searching for it sister city and long-time ally, the ancient Donan Ghan, for five centuries now. We’re…
not very good at finding things. The number of socks, pens, and string we lose each year is atrocious. Anyway, our attempts at divination have led us to conclude that locked somewhere in your friend’s mind are memories of Donan Ghan, clues that could help us find the city and aid our ally.”

“But you stole Gear!” interrupted Ryker.

“Well…”

“You burst in and took Gear. Next time, ask before you take something, especially if it’s a person!” insisted Ryker.

Thanatos paused, tapped a claw against her chin, and finally said, “Very well. Here is what I’ll do. Afterwards I will lock myself in my bedchamber and cry for having been reduced to this. Then, in a few month’s time, after we have possibly found a more reliable form of divination than cloud patterns, I will find Gear again and ask, politely, if he would please help the Aberrational Council find the lost city of Donan Ghan.”

Ryker’s mood brightened.

“Okay. I’ll be rescuing Gear and leaving now. Can I have the key, please?” asked Ryker.

It just didn’t seem right to let a captive go, even upon the word please. Thanatos drew herself up to her full height.

“Be aware, child, that I am Thanatos! The shadows are my wings and claws; from my gaze no secrets hide! I am the wind that howls on a winter night! I have felled warriors by the thousands, dare you harbor the delusion that you stand a chance against me?”

Ryker leapt to his feet and replied, “You don’t scare me! You took Gear, so now I’m taking him back!”

“Yay! Get ‘em, Ryker!” cheered Gear, pumping his fists in the air.

Thanatos gazed upon that sword and her blood ran cold with fear. She looked left; there was no one there. She looked right; there was no one there. Sighing with relief, she now knew exactly what she had to do to emerge from this situation with all her wrinkly old skin intact.

With no warning, she kicked the table leg. While Ryker looked on in confusion, she hopped up and down on one foot, gripping the other in her claws.

“Oh, dear, it seems I have suffered serious injury at the hands of this dreaded kangasaur warrior! That is surely what the others will think when they see my bruised talons! Oh, no, I just dropped the key to Gear’s cage!”
Ryker jumped down from the table, grabbed the heavy iron key, and in five minutes unlocked Gear’s cage. Thanatos grabbed them both by the scruffs of their necks, or in Gear’s case, the back of his head, and hauled them out to the drawbridge. She deposited them on the road beyond the moat.

“There, you have your friend, now out you go!” said Thanatos before disappearing back into the castle.

“Thanks, Ryker!” squeaked Gear.

“It took forever to find you, that was a big castle,” said Ryker as they started walking down the road.

“It was, but it was nothing to worry about. Those monsters don’t know how to be bad, just silly,” agreed Gear.

“Those are my favorite kinds of monsters,” said Ryker.

“Mine too.”

“We should visit them again sometime.”

The two friends walked down the road as the sun rose and tinged the horizon with a gentle dawn.
The wildflowers stood like skyscrapers as we ran towards the rickety garage. Our eyes darted like swallows, soon fixated upon the rustic looking shears. I think holding such an item brings pride to a young boy with the opportunity to succeed or fail against danger. That day I aspired to succeed.

My grandparent’s house brought the smell of swisher sweets floating above the grass and into our young and tender nostrils. That old house begged for adventure. Ancient toys had seen their days come and go; their primary coats of paint chipped and passing like old disappearing friends. New journeys were almost demanded. We were there to conquer.

Some of us wielded garden clippers, while the older, more experienced cousins firmly grasped the shears themselves. That yard stretched further than a football field, with the strong oaks positioning themselves like goal posts. We darted towards the jungle in full strides, disregarding the proper way to carry anything but our exhilaration. The fence, quickly approaching, proved useless against our skills, always forgetting the opening on its wounded left side. We evaded its sharp claws every time.

The task set before us was simple: cut. Little did we know, our elbow grease chiseled out a utopia mapped out by the king himself. Not even the snakes could stop us. Every detail was considered, including the bathroom; a simple task for four boys. The living room was large enough for a party, too. Our television picked up wonderful signals of cars passing by.

Although I wasn’t a musician, the shears played wonderful melodies. The quick and fatal blow of their two fragments gliding together mimicked that of a well-oiled machine, moving fiercely at 30 rpm. The wildflowers didn’t stand a chance, I would say, as their weak stems bowed down at the very sight of our glistening brows and shears.

As the sun began to set we retreated. Returning home, the old fence still cursed us as we drove through its weak and open side. We didn’t mind. Passing by the goal post trees, we gathered our weapons and placed them back in their mysterious home. The pea-green shag carpet greeted us warmly, treating us to rug burns that glowed like the setting sun.
These days, the wildflowers have been replaced with concrete and yellow striped lines. But, if you listen carefully, you can hear them scratching from below.

Waiting to be cut down by our sharp and mighty blades.
She couldn’t help thinkin’ that there was a little more to life somewhere else, after all, it was a great big world.

She shifted into fifth gear and moved over into the left lane, skipping her blinker, because really, who was going to be out here at 3 a.m. anyway? Sure enough, her mother’s voice sounded in her ears, “Blinker EVERY TIME, sweetie. Please. Really. Are you trying to get us killed?” *Fuck you, fine. Next time.* She unfolded the coffee stained map that was in a rumpled pile on the passenger seat. When her boyfriend asked, that bemused smirk on his lips, if she wouldn’t rather just borrow the GPS to go out on her “dumbass adventure”, she had decided the pros of knowing exactly where the hell she was did not outweigh the cons of his machine telling her exactly how the hell to get there. So she had grabbed her keys and his duffel bag and bought the map at the first gas station on her way out of town. It was better than following the moon, anyway. Being as she had no idea where she was headed, a coffee stained map seemed like the lesser of two evils.

*After all, it was a great big world, with lots of places to run to…*

She cranked the radio. Tom Petty. Sometimes it even surprised her at how the radio sometimes managed to match her moods. Or maybe the middle aged DJ who was getting paid a little more than minimum wage working the graveyard shift figured everyone out on the road at 3 a.m. listening to the local station was either A). A drunk who wanted a song to sing along with, lungs close to bursting as they navigated that familiar gravel road home. Their head would be shaking as they remembered those same back roads from high school, where they had the pretty girl on their arm, where now only their ten-year-old dog rode shotgun, or B). A girl estranged from her abusive boyfriend setting out in the middle of the night to try to get away, already accepting her fate of spending the night in a motel ten miles out of town and running back when she ran out of money on her debit card. Well, fuck that. She could like hearing “American Girl” on the radio and still prove them wrong. She *was* an American girl, goddamnit. And she was getting the hell out of there.

She pushed harder on the gas, moving in to sixth gear as
she turned her brights on the long stretch of deserted highway. Even though she was only going 70, the landscape blurred by like she was in a tunnel in space, and she had to squint to keep her eyes from crossing as she exhaled into the dashboard. Keeping her left hand on the wheel, she reached down to the floor of the car, flicking her wrist past empty Diet Coke cans and Snickers wrappers, old receipts, movie tickets and packs of gum, before she unearthed the rumpled pack of Marlboro 27s. Grabbing a florescent green lighter from the cup holder, she flicked it and watched as the end glowed. After one deep drag she cracked the window and consulted her map again. Where the fuck was she going? A set of lights in her rearview mirror caused her to squint again, this time realizing they were coming way too fast for someone that just happened to be going for a joy ride at 3 a.m. in Tennessee. There’s only one lane, buddy. And I’m not speeding. I don’t have enough money to afford a ticket. Realizing the lights were coming closer and faster, she started to breathe faster, on the brink of a panic. She remembered she had taken her anxiety medicine this morning, only now too late remembering she had left the bottle in her damn medicine cabinet. No doubt he would be calling her tomorrow, pleading with her to come back, saying that she forgot her “crazy pills”, and “who the hell would want her without those?” Plenty of people, you jackass. She knew if she panicked now, she could lose control of the car and then lose everything. Her phone wasn’t even charged. She was in the middle of nowhere. She needed to keep it together. She slowed down to 50, then 40, then 30, as she slowly drove towards the narrow shoulder. The lights behind her didn’t even slow as they raced past her, blaring the sound of the whirr of tires that made her skin crawl, even with the radio still cranked. But she was safe and alone again. She exhaled. And if she has to die tryin’, she had one little promise she was gonna keep.

She started to speed up again, shifting from third into fourth, and finally into fifth and sixth and then cruise control. She hadn’t noticed her cigarette was now down to the filter, the end completely dark brown and the car reeking of stale smoke. She flicked the butt out the window and kept driving, her mind spinning with the thoughts of what had happened leading up to this moment. He had hit her, again and again and again. And although she was a college educated, well-spoken, beautiful, funny and endearing white female in her early twenties, she still considered herself a complete dumbass. She stayed with a man who had physically and mentally
abused her for the past three years, tarnishing the last few shining
moments of her youth. She had managed to hide the bruises and the
kick marks and the missed family outings this entire time, but today
was the last straw. She knew if she spoke to her friends about it, they
would tell her she found her bottom. And maybe that’s what it was.
Although it sure didn’t feel like one, with no part of her leaving him
today being sparked by a specific instance of abuse. She didn’t feel
at the bottom at all. More like she was at the base of a deep canyon,
with her legs and arms outstretched to either side. If she reached just
a little further, she could manage to kick herself back up.

They had been sitting on the couch, legs intertwined,
watching the History Channel. She had compromised with this
choice, being that she had picked out the trashy T.V. from the night
before. They were watching a special on Armageddon, which he
seemed completely enraptured by. The only show they had watched
together on this channel that she actually remembered was the
special on F.D.R. She remembered his life within his family was
described as “distant”, according to the monotone narrated voice,
stating that he preferred for his wife to raise their children herself. At
the time, they had got into an argument over how a theoretical politi-
cian should raise their family.

Of course, she thought just because he was a politician
didn’t mean he couldn’t be an involved father. He, however, didn’t
see any shame in “letting her do what she was put here to do”. Since
then, she learned to keep her mouth shut when watching his shows.
She paid little to no interest in this one, instead choosing to watch
the bridge outside their window, counting how many cars made it
over by the time she could take in three breaths. It was a little game
she played with herself, and surprisingly, made the time pass by
rather quickly. Sometimes she pictured the people in those cars,
whether they were crossing the bridge for fun or for circumstance,
and if they enjoyed the company they were with or if they were suf-
fering through pained exchanges that are only felt when in the close
proximity of a car with someone you’d rather not spend time with.

This time, there were only three cars that passed over the
bridge in the allotted time span. Every time there were less than
five by the time she could breathe in and out three times, she felt a
little guilty. *Come on, you guys. I know more of you want to make it
over.* All three cars happened to be blue. Her boyfriend snapping his
fingers in front of her eyes, she turned her attention back towards the
television.
In between commercials of the show, the announcer stated in a monotone voice: “This program is a theoretical account of the worst-case scenario for global disaster. This is not a real emergency.” For some reason, the words made her skin crawl. She knew that a small amount of people would actually be dumb enough to take this show as the re-capping of true events. But she couldn’t help wondering: what if they did? What if someone turned on their television and actually believed the world as they knew it was coming to an end? Would they panic? Leave their homes? Or just continue making dinner, settling in for the inevitable end?

The segment opened with a wide shot of a city, so generic it could have been copied and pasted from Google images. The announcer came back. “Nothing could have prepared us for what happened. Millions dead in a matter of weeks. Billions across the world. America was devastated. Nowhere was spared. Without food, water, or power, cities like ours became wastelands.” She looked around their meager apartment. Her toes were resting next to the spot in the couch where the cover had ripped through, exposing the sickly yellow foam of the padding underneath. On the coffee table in front of them, an ashtray overflowed with Marlboro cigarette butts, one still smoking in the exact middle, like a bulls eye on fire. She took in her ripped jeans, her chipped midnight blue nail polish, the ratty college t-shirt that was riding up on her hipbones. She caught a glimpse of the faded tattoo she had got one night after too many drinks with her girlfriends.

It was a crescent moon, done in shades of blue, the gradient fading towards the center. The outline was hazy now; the points that used to be exact now faded into each other, and the whole thing looked like you were looking at an image through a glass of water. She hated looking at it, not only because it was ugly, but also because she hadn’t even picked anything meaningful. Not that she believed that having a rose because her grandmother happened to loved roses more than anyone ever did would be a better representation to have on her body forever, but she could of at least picked something she believed in. She hated the moon. The way it guided her in the dark without ever being bright enough to see. She preferred the lightest of days, where she wasn’t forced to look behind her back at who might be chasing her. She wasn’t chasing anything these days, it seemed.

The show went to another commercial, but the quote still rang in her ears. “Nothing could have prepared us for what hap-
pened. Millions dead in a matter of weeks… cities like ours became wastelands.” Well, if her little bubble of life, in the slums of East Gatlinberg, Tennessee, in the one bedroom apartment three stories up and two windows to the left, was any indication of her “city”, she was already living in a wasteland. “Cities like ours became wastelands.” She couldn’t help thinking about all of those cars crossing over the bridge. Cities like theirs. Those people didn’t live here, probably. Maybe they were just passing through. On their way to something better, something over the bridge, something far away where they might be prepared for what could happen.

She got up, untangling herself from him, getting off easy without a hit this time because the show was too good for him to be bothered, and headed to their bedroom. She started grabbing her meager belongings: two pairs of jeans, her hard cover copy of *On the Road* she had never managed to actually read all the way through, her one nice dress, and her sunglasses. After she stuffed it all into his old college duffle bag, she flicked off the light. Something in the corner of the room caught her eye. There, right above their bed, in the farthest corner from the window, was one single little light up star. It looked like the ones you would get in a prize pack from a birthday party as a kid, or something you picked up at a garage sale to soothe a scared toddler. She wondered how she had never noticed it before, wondered how the hell one solitary glow-in-the-dark star had even got stuck to their ceiling in the first place. It looked so stupid, glowing there, like she was finally leaving her childhood bedroom and had forgotten it was there until everything else was packed up.

**Oh yeah, all right. Take it easy baby, make it last all night.**

She grabbed her car keys and wallet from the coffee table, stooping down to pick up the rest of his cigarettes. “Where the hell you think you’re going?” he mumbled as he tried to swipe the cigarettes back from her.

“I’m leaving. On an adventure. I don’t think I’ll be back,” she said, turning away from him and headed toward the door.

“Good luck makin’ it twenty miles without any money, honey. Sure you don’t wanna take my GPS?” she heard the smirk in his voice and realized at the same time this wasn’t the first time she had tried to leave. He knew she would be back because she had always been back before. She had run away, sure, but only to her mother’s house for a few days, and always came back when she missed him. She still missed him, the smell of old smoke on his
clothes, the glint in his eye when she said something funny, the way he held her after he had been especially rough. She put up with the beatings and the swearing because she hadn’t known other way to get out of the Armageddon of their apartment. He thought she would be back because she gave him no reason to think she would be gone for good.

Well, it was kinda cold that night, she stood alone on her balcony, yeah she could hear the cars roll by. Out on 441 like waves crashin’ on the beach.

Focused back on her driving, she recalled the song again. She always thought it was cool that the song featured a highway she knew like the back of her hand. She wasn’t much for believing in fate, but Tom Petty’s guess was as good as any. She consulted the map and realized she only had three more miles to go until she met up with 441. From there, she could follow the Newfound Gap through the mountains and see how far they would take her. It was now 4:15 a.m., and she didn’t feel tired in the slightest. She lit another cigarette and fished around the floor of the passenger seat for any other materials that might influence her decision. True, she had no real destination in mind, but she had to call someone sometime, and saying she followed the moon and Tom Petty because she was an American girl didn’t seem like the sanest explanation.

Her hands grasped the familiar feel of glossy photo paper, and she pulled it up into her lap. Keeping her left hand on the steering wheel and one eye on the road, she glanced down at the folded paper. There was a burn in the left corner from where a stray cigarette had met its fuel, and the top was soggy with spilled soda that had congealed in the carpet. The top graphic said Moon Travel Guides, the second “o” in “Moon” colored in halfway to make a crescent moon. Like I need another fucking reminder of my tattoo, she thought. She scanned the inside, until she found something remotely interesting. “Visit Rockefeller Memorial, where former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt formally dedicated the park on September 2, 1940”. I’ll show that little bastard what being a strong woman means, she thought. The memorial was farther up U.S 441, in Sevier County. Housed in a national park, she figured she couldn’t be reprimanded too much for visiting a memorial in the early morning of a Tennessee summer.

She had a little more than a quarter tank of gas and figured she could make it to the park at least, walk up to the memorial, maybe say a few curse words, and camp out for the night until she
got her footing and a real plan. She consulted the map again, realizing the park was only about twenty miles up 441 off of Clingman’s Dome Road to the right. She put down the map and replaced the brochure in her hand, eyes flicking back every few seconds between the road and the print, trying to find anything more that could give her a reason for driving to a national park in the middle of the night without telling anyone. Although she still felt high on the adrenaline of leaving him, of leaving home, of leaving out on her own with little more than her clothing and stolen cigarettes, she was beginning to feel the ache that always came when she was completely alone.

And for one desperate moment there, he crept back in her memory.

She realized she was only about 100 miles from home. Not far enough that he couldn’t come take her back within the day. Not far enough that he couldn’t find her.

God it’s so painful when something’s that’s so close is still so far out of reach

She pulled the second-to-last cigarette out of the pack, putting it between her lips as she shifted her shoulders, rolled her neck, and looked at the road ahead. Remembering the brochure in her lap, she pulled it up and began to scan. The memorial marker was described to read, “For the permanent enjoyment of the people”. That’s stupid, she thought. Nothing is permanent. Especially enjoyment. She thought for a second about turning around, about finding a gas station or a Wal-Mart or any human contact and finding out a real destination. She didn’t even know much more about FDR than what she had seen on that stupid show, anyway. But I’m mad at him. I’m mad because he ruined the shell of the person I thought I was, and he doesn’t think I’m worth anything, and he’s not even awake thinking of me right now; he’s probably just passed out and will get up and smoke a cigarette and not think about me and I’m still going to be alone and I’ll have nothing to show for it except visiting a stupid memorial that I ran to because I had nowhere else to go and because I felt like my world was caving in like it really was Armageddon in my little apartment, and all I want is to just be like those little blue cars going over the bridge.

She was coming up on it fast, the sign for the Newfound Gap Road and the Clingman’s Dome turn only a few miles ahead on her right. When she finally saw it, a small green sign with an arrow pointing its way into the park, she slowed into second gear, easing the car up the steep hill that brought her up to the rock face.
A wooden sign to her left was illuminated in her headlights: “Clingman’s Dome: The Highest Peak in the Smokies”. Well, even if she didn’t make it very far, she made it as high up away from him as she could possibly get. She laughed faintly at her own joke, realizing she was most likely sleep deprived and should not necessarily be letting her mind wander while she meandered a mountainous path up towards the memorial.

Her headlights shone up on a parking lot up ahead, completely deserted. She pulled the car into a stop, pulled the e-brake, grabbed her last cigarette and lighter, and climbed out. To her right, through the haze of the early morning, she could make out just how high up she was. The mountains of Tennessee rolled on as far as she could see, the moon still a small sliver in the sky. She walked over to her right, coming across a podium that reminded her of the hikes she would take with her dad as a kid. He used to hoist her up on his shoulders, pointing out spots on the map as she traced the same places with her fingers. He always took her to the same rock, every year, near the base of the hill they hiked down. In it, a golden piece of mica was embedded, seemingly just under the surface. “If you get out the gold, you get a million dollars,” he always told her. She tried for a good ten minutes every time they visited, truly believing she was loosening it each year. When her dad died, he had come with her to the funeral. They had hiked up as a family back up to the base of the hill, but he pulled her away before she could touch the gold piece. “Don’t touch it. I don’t want you crying all the way home.”

She squinted down at the podium, struggling to read in the not-quite-early-morning light. “Newfound Gap is the highest point through the Smoky Mountains, at 5,046 feet”. Holy shit. She was 5,000 feet above ground. Even if it was stupid and trite and no one was there to see her visit, she felt accomplished. She was somewhere she was sure he had never been. She was alone, 5000 feet in the air, finally able to breathe. Another sign, smaller, next to it, read, “Straddle the State Line! North Carolina and Tennessee!” How fucking corny, she thought, although her legs were already moving into place, her left foot in the state she had grown up in, her right in a state she knew little about. She immediately felt dumb standing there like an idiot, especially when it was something so trivial. So she was in two states. So what? She was still stuck. She spotted a retaining wall farther down the trail from the parking lot, with a large plaque that she figured to be the memorial. This is what they wrote a brochure about? she thought, silently cursing her intuition to trust a
random pamphlet she found lying in the car.

She thought the memorial seemed more like an altar, with the plaque at the bottom half of the retaining wall, with a higher one above it, reading an older inscription. There were old stone steps leading up to the top of the structure, which reminded her of a fairytale, as they seemed to be embedded in the land itself. Running her finger along the inscription at the memorial, she read the paragraph describing FDR’s dedication speech in 1940 at that exact location. 

*You asshole. You can donate five million dollars to a park but you can’t even raise your own kids?* She flipped the plaque the bird and kept climbing. As she neared the top, she realized she could sit on the flat rock and look over the mountain gap. She crossed her legs and made sure to keep a good five feet from the edge as she took the last few drags of her cigarette and watched the moon over the valley. Through the haze of clouds, she thought it matched her tattoo more than it ever probably would. *I should take a picture to send him...* she thought, immediately then pushing the thought away. She closed her eyes and pulled her knees into her chest, breathing in deeply, letting the stress of the day wash into her and over her, imagining it spilling out into the valley, as far away as it could possibly get.

A few minutes later, she was suddenly met with the sinking suspicion that she wasn’t alone. She thought she heard a swift change in the breeze, the distinct swinging of arms as they climbed higher to their destination. With a stifled gasp, she realized a man, about her age, was also climbing up to the top of the structure.

“Seriously, don’t freak out. I didn’t think anyone else would be up here. Jesus. It’s almost five in the morning. Sorry. I’m sorry. I just didn’t...”

She caught her breath and took him in. He was slightly shorter than she was, although it was hard to tell with her on the ground. He wore baggy jeans with mud stains on the knees with a white waffle knit long sleeved shirt, rolled up at the wrists. He had eyebrow-length brown greasy hair, which he nervously swiped at with his palm.

“I can leave, if you want. I just... I just wanted to come up here. I’m... sorry. If I scared you.”

She stared at him another moment, realizing there was little she could do now if he suddenly decided to hurt her, and instead shrugged her shoulders.

“It’s fine. I don’t even know why I’m out here in the first place.”
She watched as he slowly moved to her left, finally sitting down cross-legged, mimicking her, about ten feet away. He looked out into the valley and smiled.

“I love when you can see the moon. Although, I think it’s sad that we only have one. Here on Earth, I mean.”

She stared at him, raising her eyebrows. Great. Some high college grad student comes up here and wants someone to unload his ramblings to. Fine. I have nowhere else to be.

He continued. “Did you know Jupiter has fifty known moons? Except most people only know about the four largest. Galileo discovered them, although there’s some dispute about that too. But only nerds know that.” He stifled a small chuckle at his own comment, and she just stared, waiting for him to finish, which she guessed he would. She was right.

“You know, those four moons influence each other in the most interesting way. Their names: Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto; I don’t know, I just think they’re so beautiful. But their names are just the beginning. Io is in a constant tug of war with Ganymede and Europa. But the crazy thing is…”

She cut him off. “Look. This is all really fascinating, but I’ve had the worst day in a long time and I came out here to maybe get some peace from my shitty boyfriend, who was kind of the catalyst to my shitty life, and I don’t really care for the moon. No offense.”

He smiled a small, sad grin and turned to fully face her. “You know, there are close up images of Europa’s surface. There are places where the ice on the surface has broken up and moved apart. There are so few craters, some scientists think that there might be a new ocean that exists there today. It’s crazy though; we’ll never know, will we?”

She turned her body, gripping her knees with her fingertips, and looked at him again. He wasn’t looking at her, instead faintly smiling out over the valley and drumming his hands on the surface of the rock.

Quietly, almost in a whisper to herself, she found herself saying, “I guess I never realized just how small we are. How I’m just one person on one planet in one solar system. There’s another planet with fifty moons alone. All of which I will never learn the names of, although I’m sure you could list them all.” He laughed and his eyes met hers for the first time. She started back with slight awe, as they were the brightest green she had ever seen. They flickered gold in
the center with excitement, as he nodded out over the valley as he spoke even more quietly than she had:

“But the thing is, it doesn’t even matter how small we are. We will always be insignificant. We are made up of stardust, of millions of atoms colliding at just the right moment to make a living, breathing, thinking individual. But we are not special. We are, in a sense, the same as the fifty moons of Jupiter. Just another piece of the big picture.”

He grinned at her and shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry for the philosophical bullshit. None of that really makes us feel any better, right? By the way, I didn’t catch your name…”

She considered telling him her real name, the one she gave out at every introduction she had made in her life thus far, the one on her birth certificate, the one her parents and boyfriend and friends screamed in anger or delight. But this guy didn’t know her. Not at all. She could start over. She chose her father’s name. “It’s Loren,” she said, her hands extending to meet his. He stretched his torso and met her hand with his, gripping it more firmly than she would have liked. “And yours?” she asked. He smiled slightly, and then shook his head. Confused, she drew her hand back and watched as he began to stand up, arching his arms behind his back, revealing a patch of tan, smooth skin beneath his shirt. He took a few steps forward, closing his eyes and flexing and unflexing his fists, a small smile on his face.

He took two more steps towards the ridge separating the rock structure from the cliff below. Her breath started to speed up as she realized how close he was getting. *There’s no way I would get that close with a complete stranger right next to me,* she thought. *Guys always pull this shit. Here I am, 5000 feet in the air, and there’s still some douchebag trying to spout his psychological bullshit and see if I’ll get scared.* He stopped moving his hands and turned completely back around, facing her again. “Can you promise me something?” he asked her. When she just stared, her eyebrows raised and her body ready to run, he laughed. “Please. Just one thing.” he said.

“Depends on what it is,” she said.

“Just promise me you’ll think of me when you see the moon. Hey, maybe we aren’t as small as we think we are. I hope it’s better up there.”

Before her brain could make the neurologic transmission of what was happening, forcing her synapses to fire, forcing a thought
into action, it had already happened. When she recalls the story, she says that it seemed to happen almost in slow motion, although this angered her, as of course time slowed down in her memory, because she was powerless to stop it from slowing down in reality. In real time, the act took all of three seconds. The man raised his right hand, and quickly, after a quick mock of a military salute, he bent both his knees, extending both arms as wide as they could go, and jumped up and out over the Newfound Gap, out and down the 5,046 feet, a few feet shy of the state line dividing Tennessee and North Carolina; out over the Great Smoky Mountains, sailing down past the plaque commemorating the “permanent enjoyment of the people,” past the hiking trails where families had taken group photos, down past the parking lots where teenagers had snuck to make out, past the trees that might not exist in another 1,000 years.

She rushed over to the edge, screaming and screaming until she could feel her lungs giving way to gasping, flailing her arms in the air, her body automatically reacting to a situation she had no control over. He just jumped. He jumped. Off the cliff. Right in front of me. She kept on screaming, collapsed on the base of the rock, and started to sob. It took her a few minutes to realize the correct plan of action she should follow: go to car, get phone, call police, call family, get help, get help, get help. With shaking legs, she pulled herself to her feet, getting ready to jog back down the steps towards her car. It was so close. She could see it more clearly now, the sun just about to rise. Just as she was about to move, she found a small piece of cardboard on the ground near where he had been initially sitting. Oh my god, it must be a note, she thought. I can’t handle this. No. No. No. She picked up the piece and looked it over in her hand. No actual note, no markings at all except for some dust around the edges. She flipped it over so the smooth backside was facing up, and saw that there was a small star etched in ballpoint pen in the center of the piece. In tiny, almost microscopic letters around the prongs of the star, were the words “There is nothing to fear but fear itself.”

I try to use my fangs to open the beer bottle. I gnaw on it for a while, but it’s no use. I clutch it in my white-gloved hands and twist, but by now I’ve lost all dexterity in my fingers. The Wolf Man peers over my shoulder and asks if I need help. “No,” I tell him. “I’ve got it.” I pull open the door to MR. WEINSTEIN’s mailbox and clamp the cap in it. I tell Wolfie to hold it shut. He says I’m going to spill it. “No,” I tell him. “I won’t. Just hold it shut.” He flattens both hands against the mailbox door and leans into it. I crank the bottle and the cap pops off, beer spraying all over MR. WEINSTEIN’s credit card bills.

“How’d you do that?” asks Wolfie.

“Magic,” I say. I spit my fangs out into my open palm and take a swig. It’s one in the morning and all of the little ghosts and Power Rangers have gone home for the night. My furry companion asks me if I’m going to get lucky tonight. “Not unless the bride of Frankenstein is looking for some action,” I say.

“Come on, dude,” he says. “Let’s just go back.”

I ignore him.

By the time we get to the party, I’m already staggering. I haven’t thrown up yet. Having chugged half a bottle of vodka before I even left my apartment, I’m proud of that. Glancing around the room at the pirates, goblins, and hookers, I wonder what she’s wearing this year. Last year we dressed to match. We were Zorro and… wait for it… Lady Zorro. Not exactly congruent with official Zorro continuity, but she did look good in those black boots. This year she won’t want to talk to me, but I’ll try anyway.

I bump into a guy wearing a Superman costume. He gives me a big grin with straight, white teeth and says, “Excuse me, sir.” All smarmy with his blue tights, red underwear, and oily, black hair with a spit curl glued to his forehead. Douchebag. Why would he want to dress up like a big, blue Boy Scout? Batman is way cooler.

He asks me if I’m one of those sparkly vampires from Twilight. “No,” I tell him. “I’m Dracula.”

I ask him why in God’s name would he dress up like a pansy like Superman.

“Superman is the modern symbol for the goodness of humanity. He’s an inspiration to us all.”

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“But he’s an alien.”
“Who better to show us the error of our ways than a visitor from beyond the stars?”

I wonder if he’s like this all the time or if he’s just in character. Before I have a chance to ask, I catch her out of the corner of my eye. I have to do a double take, because the first time I spot her, she doesn’t look familiar. She’s a blonde now, dressed in a red skirt and a tight blue shirt with a big “S” stretched across her busty chest. I always suspected she’d make a hot super-heroine.

She looks me right in the eye and wrinkles her nose in disgust, just before giving her Superman a big, sloppy smooch that should be mine. I clear my throat and tell them that Superman and Supergirl are cousins. That’s incest.

Supergirl calls me an asshole. I call her an inbreeder.
“What are you doing here?” she asks.
“Spreading good cheer,” I say. “It’s Halloween, don’t you know? The season of giving.”

She asks if she has to get a restraining order against me. I tell her she might want to look into it.
“I need to talk to you,” I say.
“No,” she says, stroking Superman’s chest. “I’m busy. Go home.”

Superman asks if we know each other. I introduce myself and he tells me to leave.
“Give us five minutes,” I say to Superman. “Just five minutes.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he says.
“I’ll talk to him,” says Supergirl. “It’ll only be two minutes.”

He kisses Supergirl on the cheek, the bastard, and wanders off into the crowd, keeping his eye on me.
“What the hell are you doing here?” asks Supergirl.
I tell her I screwed up. I tell her she made a big mistake. I tell her I’ve become a better person. The usual bullshit.
“You’re wasted and you’re hitting on your ex-girlfriend,” she says. “You haven’t changed at all.”
“What do I have to do to get you back?”
“Nothing,” she says. “I’m not going to change my mind. It’s over. I can’t make it any clearer than that.”
“But we were in love,” I say. “We had plans. We were go-
To get married someday, remember?"

“I wanted to get married,” she says. “You just wanted a giant wedding cake shaped like the Millennium Phoenix.”


“We have nothing in common. I never gave a shit about any of that geeky stuff you were into. I feigned interest to be supportive.”

She’s getting all worked up now. Before I have time to retort, a red-blue blur leaps into frame from stage right. The Man of Steel to the rescue. He tells me to leave the lady alone.

“Back off, Boy Scout,” I say. “I may not be Batman, but I am a vampire. I’ll fuck your shit up. Throw some kryptonite on your ass.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder and tells me to let her go. She’s much happier with him. Just let her go.

That’s about the time I take a swing at him, but my knuckles glance off the edge of his chin without leaving so much as a scratch. My hand-eye coordination is all messed up.

Superman grabs me by the back of the collar and drags me to the front door like I’m a baby kitten, then hurls me into the air. For half a second, I’m weightless. I’m flying like a super-hero, until the lawn rushes up to knock the air out of my lungs. Finally, gut rot begins to set in. What am I going to do with myself? What a sad, lonely vampire I am.

I brush myself off and stumble down the street alone. Wolfie yells after me, “Yo, dude! Wait up!”

“She’s not worth it,” I say. “She’s not worth the anxiety. It’s all over.”

“No, dude,” he says. “No. You can’t give up like that. She’s your dream girl. She’s your princess in shining armor. You can’t give up now.”

“She’s got her own Superman now. I can’t compete with that.”

“He’s not a real super-hero, dude. Come on. What’s that guy have that you don’t have?”

“My girl.”

“Let me tell you a story about my dream girl,” says the Wolf Man.

I tell him I’m not in the mood. He sits me down on the curb and plops down beside me.

“She’s really cute,” he says. “She has blue eyes. Bright,
blue eyes. I’ve never seen eyes like those in my life. They’re like a lake, dude. But a really clean lake, you know? Like a freshwater lake. Usually I get scared when I look into a girl’s eyes and I feel like I’m going to hurl on her or something, but I wasn’t scared with her. It was just nice. You know? I just liked being in the same room with her. I didn’t need to be grabbing her boobs or anything. It was neat.”

“You never mentioned her before,” I say. “What happened?”

“She left for college and hooked up with some other dude.”

“Christ’s sake, how is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“The point is that I still haven’t given up. I go on dates with other girls and stuff. But I haven’t given up on that one girl. I’ll get her back someday. I don’t know how, but I will.”

“That’s great,” I say. “Really.”

“You just need to do something to show her how much you care,” he says. “If you really want to show her you’ve become a new man, you’ve got to take drastic action.”

“Drastic action? Like what?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “You’ll think of something. Just don’t give up. Come on. Let’s go.”

We stand up and start down the street again. Halfway down the block, Wolfie points across the street and says it looks like someone is having a barbecue. I look up and see black, billowy clouds of smoke puffing out of the windows of the big white house. “Holy shit,” I say. “That place is on fire.”

I dig through my black trousers for my cell phone. Pulling it out, I carefully dial 9-1-1, making sure to hit the right buttons. I hear a bunch of rings and then a lady’s voice asking me what my emergency is. I tell her there’s a big white house on fire. She asks me where I am.

“Where are we?” I ask the Wolf Man. He staggers back to the last road sign we passed, then comes back again and tells me we’re on Boner Street. “We’re not on Boner Street,” I say. “Check again.”

He wanders off again, then comes back and says, “Boweeearner.”

With a groan, I follow him to the end of the block and look up at the big, green street sign. “Boerner Street,” I tell the lady. She asks me where on Boerner Street. I look up at sign again. “Third
Avenue.” She says she’ll have a fire truck sent right away. I tell her that’s good, because there’s a house on fire.

“So what do we do now?” Wolfie asks. I tell him we wait for the fire truck. He says he bets everyone inside will all be dead by then, fire that big. If someone called the fire department earlier, they might have had a chance, but it looks like we were the first to call it in. Their neighbors are probably all sleeping. They’re gones. I tell him he’s wrong, but he’s got a point. Odds are they won’t make it out of there alive. If I were a super-hero, I would save them. I bet Superman could do it.

Superman.
Of course.

“This is it,” I tell Wolfie. “This is what I’m going to do to win her back. She wants a hero? I’ll give her a hero.”

“That’s a bad idea.”

“You said I needed to take drastic action.”

“I meant like buying her flowers or singing her a cheesy love song or something.”

I stagger across the street. Wolfie asks where I’m going. I tell him I’m going to be a super-hero. Stomping through the front lawn, I notice how nicely cut the grass looks. I climb the single doorstep and knock three times. “Hello,” I say. “I’m here to save you.”

Nobody answers, so I hop down and line myself up to ram the door. That doorstep is going to make it hard to maintain momentum. I move back a few more feet, clench my fists, and start sprinting. I hop over the little step and slam into the front door, bouncing right off and flying backward onto the sidewalk. “Son of a flying monkey, that hurt,” I say. But I can’t give up now. I take another run at it. This time, I crash right through. The door flies open and I collide with a lovely lady. We topple over together and I land on top of her, pinning her to the floor.

Hot damn. Things are finally looking up.

“Who are you?” she asks.

I tell her I’m her hero.

“My husband is unconscious.”

I look at the pudgy, balding man sprawled out across the carpet beside her. “Okay,” I say. “I’m not really into that sort of thing, but I’ve had a few drinks tonight, so who knows?”

“Get off me,” she says.

I stumble to my feet and look back at the door. No splin-
ters. No broken chains. How the hell did I do that? It takes me a few seconds to figure out that the lady opened the door for me. I saunter over and tell her that her house is on fire. She knows that, she says. Her husband tripped and fell down the stairs. He hit his head and knocked himself out.

I ask her if she’s sure he’s not dead. She says he’s not. “He looks pretty dead,” I say.

“He’s not,” she tells me again.

I ask her if she’ll go out with me if her husband doesn’t make it. She tells me to shut up and help her carry the big lug out of the house. “I’m not a linebacker,” I say, “but vodka makes me stronger, so I’ll give it a try. I reach down and grab hold of the man’s ankles, then yank his feet up into the air. I ask the lady what her name is. She says her name is Carla Weinstein.

Weinstein? Why does that name sound so familiar? Oh, right.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, “but I think I may have spilled beer in your mailbox.” Carla lifts Mr. Weinstein’s arms into the air and we drag him out the front door. I toss his feet in the grass and Carla yells at me to be careful with him.

“Well, it looks like my work is done here,” I say. “No need to thank me. Just another day in the life of a super-hero.”

But she’s sobbing hysterically. She tells me her daughter is still upstairs.

“So go get her,” I say. “Do I have to do all the work around here?”

“I can’t,” says Carla. “She ran back upstairs to save her goldfish. The fire is spreading too fast. She’s trapped.”

Mother.

The daughter’s name is Jessie. I shuffle back into the burning house and hop, skip, and jump up the stairs, using my cape to shield my face from the flames. “Jessie?” I yell. “Where are you, little girl?” I can hear her crying through her bedroom door. The door’s locked, but she won’t open it for me. I tell her to back up. After waiting a few seconds for her to get clear, I kick the door in. Hell yeah. I knew I could bust a door down if I really wanted.

Little Jessie is huddled in the corner of her stuffed-bunny-filled bedroom, crying like a baby. “Don’t worry,” I tell her. “I’m going to save you.”

I take two steps toward her and she screams, “You’re a
vampire! Get away! Get away!” She grabs a wooden cross off the wall above her bed and shoves it in my face.

I tell her I’m not a vampire. It’s just a Halloween costume. She calls me a liar, taking off down the hall. I chase her to the bathroom, but she’s already locked the door. “Kid,” I say. “Hey, kid. The house is on fire. We gotta go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” she cries.

“It’s just a Halloween costume,” I say. She tells me to prove it. I spit out my fangs and she opens the door just a crack. I drop them into her open hand. She closes the door for a few more seconds, then opens it again, peeking her head out. “Okay, I believe you,” she says.

“I told you. Now come on, you little brat. Let’s get out of this heap before it caves in on us.”

“Wait!” she says. “My goldfish!”

Oh, for the love of crap. She rushes off to her room, emerging again with a giant fishbowl sloshing and spilling all over. I take her by the hand and we dash down the hallway. It’s only when we reach the staircase that we realize the fire has spread too far. We’re trapped. There’s no way to get downstairs.

“What are we going to do?” asks Jessie.

“I don’t know.”

Wait. The fish!

“Kid,” I say. “Put the fish in your pocket.”

She swirls her hand around inside the bowl and tries to snatch him up. “He’s too slippery,” she says.

I flex my hand to make sure I’ve gotten my dexterity back. Hopefully the adrenaline has sobered me up a little. If I can’t open a twist cap on a beer bottle, how the hell am I going to hold onto a flipping goldfish?

I dunk my hand in the bowl and snag him, but he slips through my fingers. Little bastard. I don’t want to squish him. I just need to get a good grip. I follow him around the bowl with my hand, then finally manage to grab hold of him. “Gotcha!” I say, stuffing the goldfish into the pocket of my trousers. I take the giant fishbowl and dump it out onto the staircase. It doesn’t put all of the flames out, but it does clear a narrow enough path for us to hop through. If we hurry, we should be able to make it down the stairs without getting too scorched.

I tell Jessie to run. She takes off and I stumble down the stairs behind her. She’s already to the front door when the ceiling
collapses between us. Now I’m the one who’s trapped. I can’t see Jessie, but I know she’s almost out of the house. “Go,” I say, not sure if she can hear me. “Leave me here. I’ve got nothing to live for. I’m just a stupid, worthless, shit-faced vampire.”

Over the sound of roaring flames, I’m sure I hear the little girl say, “Mommy!” I imagine her wrapping her little arms around Mrs. Weinstein and I know she’s safe.

So this is how it ends for me. I save the day and now I won’t even get any credit for it. Well, I will. But I’ll be dead. Posthumous honor. Worthless for my purposes. All I wanted was to win my girlfriend back. I wanted to prove something. Wanted to prove I could be something better than I am.

Oh well. You win some and you lose some.

After resigning to my fate, the next sound I hear is a loud crack as someone kicks in the back door. The fire behind me sizzles under the spray of water from a hose. Not a fire hose. A garden hose, with one of those spray nozzles attached to the end of it. I look up and expect to see the Wolf Man standing there, finally getting into the action, or Carla Weinstein, ready to return the favor for saving her husband and child. No such luck. As it turns out, Wolf Man’s a coward and Carla doesn’t give a shit about me. The man I see standing in front of me has a big red cape and an “S” printed on his chest.

Just my luck.

“Don’t worry,” says Superman. “You’re safe now.” He leads me into the backyard and I collapse in the grass. He asks me if I’m all right.

“Why?” I ask him. “Why on earth would you run into a burning house to save me?”

“Because I love her, and she wanted me to save you.”

“I knew it,” I say. “She still loves me.” Superman shakes his head. “No, she just doesn’t hate you enough to want you dead. It’s more of a general care for humanity, really.”

“Oh.”

“She really doesn’t love you,” he says. “I just want you to know that.”

“She used to love me.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

I ask him how he would know that.

“I don’t, really,” says Superman, “but I know how I feel.
It’s her eyes, man. When I look into her eyes, I know that no matter what happens, I’ll always feel safe with her. Hell, I’m content just to be in the same room with her. As long as she’s nearby, I feel good.”

What is this all this lovey-dovey crap people keep talking about? I’ve never felt that way about anyone before. Maybe she’s not my dream girl after all. This guy seems to care a lot more about her than I ever did.

“I guess you’re not such an asshole after all,” I say.
He takes me by the hand and helps me to my feet, then leads me around to the front of what’s left of the Weinsteins’ house. I see flashing lights and a big, red truck. Just in time to catch the grand finale. Nice of them to finally drop by.

The Wolf Man stands in the middle of the lawn, mouth hanging open, staring at the burning house. “Dude, you really did it,” he says. “I can’t believe it.”
“I suppose you were the one who called Superman.”
“I thought you needed someone to save you,” he says.
Before I can respond, something knocks me to the ground. I look up and see Supergirl giving Superman the big, sloppy smooch that should have been mine. Tonight, he gets to play the hero. He can have the credit. I don’t want it anymore.

I feel a tug on my black cape. Little Jessie looks at me with teary brown eyes. “My goldfish,” she says.
“Oh, yeah,” I say. I reach into my pocket and pull out the pathetic excuse for a family pet. He’s barely breathing. “Get him some water.”

She clutches the fish to her heart and smiles. “Thank you, Vampire Man.”
Vampire Man.
I like the sound of that.
My name is Beatriz Guadalupe Villagomez. I go to school at West Oak Valley Elementary, about four blocks from where I live with Mama, her husband Roger, Abuela, and my little brother Martin, who is nine months old and half-white because he is half Roger’s. Mama’s name is Maria Manuela Villagomez Iglesias. You may not recognize the name, but you would know her face because she is a model for J.C. Penney underwear. She also works as an interpreter at the hospital because Roger does not work at all in the wintertime. He fixes roofs all summer, so that he looks almost Latino by September. I was eight years old when Mama married Roger, and we moved to this smallish yellow house because Roger said it was a fixer-upper. It is funny that he fixes roofs and houses, but our own house is half wrapped in paper and half covered in mossy, rotting yellow siding.

Abuela tells me Mama’s story in pieces, by accident. Mama left work at the restaurant late, after the bar was clean and the tables wiped and the doors locked. There were men in the dark, laughing loud around the bushes behind the restaurant. Her manager was one of them, and he stumbled out of the bushes with alcohol on his breath.

“Maria.”
“Who’s there?”
“It’s me, Pedro.”
“Don Pedro, you could have gone home hours ago. Why are you still here?”
“I was waiting for you, Maria. Ever since you have started working here I have wanted you.”
“Why didn’t you ask my papa?”
“I was afraid. Your papa is powerful in the business. You are a beautiful girl!”

Too many men there, all drunk, Abuela says, and they did not care that Mama was a virgin. She tried to run away but Pedro, his eyes red and glittering, hit her with a bottle and raped her. I wonder how Abuela knows what color the eyes were, or the part about the bottle because thankfully, blessed Mary, Mama does not remember that part. The next morning Mama was pregnant with me. She was fifteen.
In Nicaragua it is illegal to get an abortion, and my abuela is Catholic, so every morning she went to the church and prayed that I would die soon inside my mama, so I would not have to be born and bring shame on the family. I grew inside Mama for several months, not dying. Mama was very sick and couldn’t work anymore, so Abuelo pulled Abuela aside after mass one day, pinching her arm in an alcove beneath Saint Eulalia, and said, “You must take Maria to the United States.” There they do not mind so much if a girl has a child when she is fifteen. So they went, Abuela and Mama, first to Texas, where they stayed with my great-uncle Miguel then to this cold place, Wisconsin, where I was born.

Today I am home from school because I am sick with pink eye, and I have ruined Mama’s day. She has had to stay home from her interpreting job because I might make Martin sick, and Abuela has gone to the hospital in downtown Mapleton for her ulcer, and Roger is out helping a friend fix up his basement.

The phone rings.

“Hello?” It is better to answer the phone in English, because if Roger catches me answering in Spanish, he pours hot sauce on my tongue.

“Hola Maria?”

“No, this is Beatriz. Un momento.” I am about to put the phone down and get Mama.

“Ay, Beatriz, hola. Soy su abuelo.” My grandfather?

“Abuelo?” I have never met my abuelo, but Abuela talks about him sometimes and says she misses him. She says it is not fair that I can go anywhere because I was born a citizen but she has to stay in the United States for another five years to get her green card. It’s very complicated for her because she went to visit Abuelo when she was not supposed to, but what could she do because he had a heart attack.

“Si, si. Donde esta Maria?”

“Un momento, porfá.”

“Mama!” I call, careful to speak softly so I don’t wake Martin.

“Beatriz! I told you to be quiet! Why are you in the kitchen? Have you been eating again?”

“No, Mama, it’s Abuelo on the phone.”

A strange look crosses Mama’s face. She looks hopeful, then angry, then she bites down hard so her jawbones show through
her thin cheeks.

“I’ll get it in the office,” she says.

She goes into Roger’s office, which I can’t go in or I get more hot sauce or a belt to my thighs, and she shuts the door. I tiptoe into Martin’s room to check on him. He’s still sleeping in his crib with all the decorations Roger’s mother bought for him spinning slowly above his head.

I tiptoe back to the office door and sit in the hallway, my back to the wall beside the door, and I listen. Mama is speaking in Spanish, and her voice sounds beautiful and smooth like she is a singer. It never sounds that way in English, and I almost never get to hear it.

Mama says how it has been such a long time since Abuelo has called. She asks when he will visit. She asks how his business is, how the economy is in Nicaragua. I have never known what Abuelo’s business is. He seems to be always rich, always hiding. Sometimes he does not call for years, and Abuela says we must wait until it is safe. There is a long pause in the office, and I scoot closer in case I am missing something. Then I have a great idea, something I have never thought of before. I can go into the kitchen and pick up that phone and hear everything and Mama will never know.

Abuelo is talking. His voice is low and smooth and musical like Mama’s, and he coughs sometimes between sentences. He is saying how much he misses his Maria, and how he sometimes is sorry he sent her to the Estados Unidos.

Mama sounds angry now, and she is asking why he didn’t just pay for her to have an abortion and then she could have just stayed in Nicaragua and not had all these problems with all these men and she would not drink as much and she would not have to take care of Abuela and her modeling would not make her so sick.

Now Abuelo is silent, and I wonder if Mama has offended him with her disrespect or if he is shocked that she wanted to abort me, because that is a very American idea and not at all Catholic.

“Maria, I gave you the future I wanted to give you all along.”

“It is not like you think it is, Papa. It is not as easy to have children in the United States as it is in Nicaragua.” Mama’s voice has grown lower, and she seems to be choking back what she really wants to say.

“I know, Maria, chiquita, but if you had stayed in Nicaragua, things would not be good.”
“Maybe you don’t really know. Maybe it would have been wonderful.”

“Perhaps if we forced Pedro to marry you,” Abuelo’s voice grows sharp.

“Papa! Never!”

“Exactly. Maria, I did not make a mistake in sending you to the United States.”

The conversation gets stale at this point, and Mama is grasping for something to say. “Roger does not want to stay married to me,” she says finally, heavily, with a rush of breath I can almost feel on my ear. I press the phone tighter on my ear.

“Why?”

“Abuela and Beatriz make him so angry. He only loves me and Martin.”

Abuelo is silent, but I can hear him cough in Nicaragua.

“And yesterday he came home late, drunk, and punched his friend for dropping him off at the corner instead of in front of the house. I am only glad that he does not beat Beatriz.”

I have never told Mama about what happens all winter while Roger is not roofing. My long sleeves and long pants cover the bruises.

“Maria!”

“Si, Papa, and today I am home from work because your wife is at the hospital for her ulcers and I have to care for Martin.”

“What about Beatriz? Can’t she help? She must be twelve by now.”

“ Eleven. She is sick today. And even if she was not sick, I cannot trust her. She does not pay attention in school, and the only thing she cares about is singing.”

I am listening so hard I don’t notice I am crying until my tears spill on Roger’s tax forms. I dab them up with my shirt and listen for Abuelo’s voice.

“Maria, Maria, where will you go if Roger leaves you? Try to make him happy.”

“I do try. He’s just waiting for something else to go wrong.”

“Maria, what can I do? I am in Nicaragua.”

“Come visit us. I have to go now, Papa. I hear Martin.”

“All right, hija. I will call again later.” Abuelo hangs up, and Mama mutters something about next year, he will call next year when we do not have a home any more. I wait for her to hang up before I place the phone in its cradle and tiptoe to the couch, where
I open a magazine and pretend to read. Mama comes into the room with Martin, who is sniffling and sucking his thumb. Still, he is such a cute baby, and I can talk to him about anything and he listens.

“Beatriz! Why are you sitting on the couch? You need to clean the bathroom and the closet and then—” Mama stops in front of me, lowering the magazine with her stiff, bony hand. “When will you stop being contagious?”

“At three-thirty.”

“Then at three-thirty you may take Martin for a ride on your bike. Now, clean, and do your homework so you don’t get even further behind.”

“Yes, Mama.” I know the best thing I can do is be quiet and wait for three-thirty when I can escape. I turn on the radio and listen to Rihanna find love in a hopeless place.

When people see my mama, they all stare at her because she is beautiful. Men buy pictures of her to put up in their garages and basements where their wives can’t see them. But most people don’t know how my mama stays beautiful and how whenever she smiles for the camera, she really wants to cry. I have been used to hearing Mama cry since I was very small. Abuela says I was a good baby, and my earliest memory of being a child is hearing Mama cry in the bathroom and throw up. As I got older, I realized she threw up a lot, more than me or Abuela ever did, or Simon, her first husband, or Roger. Mama would sit at the table with me, feeding me, and telling me to eat whatever she had left on her plate, because she did not want to waste it. Sometimes she left the whole plate and went away to the bathroom right away.

“Abuela, why is Mama sick?”

“Your mama wants to be a model. They have to be sick a lot to be beautiful.” Abuela sighed. She was very tired always, from staying with me, and she was very fat so that when she smiled, her eyes got very small, and when she frowned she looked like one of those basset hound dogs the man who lives by the park has.

My mama came back to the kitchen. “My naturalization counselor told me that the only good job for a girl like me is modeling. She said I have the body for it. She said all I have to do is lose twenty pounds and start sending pictures of myself to the magazines.”

When I look at pictures from when I was small, I notice I am always fat and ugly and Mama is always skinny and beautiful. By the time I started second grade I weighed 80 pounds, and Mama
told me I was disgusting and needed to lose weight. She said I was the reason Simon didn’t like her, me and Abuela, and that we were ruining her life. Now I weigh 120 pounds and she says the same thing about Roger. But I like to think that I am growing taller too, so one day I might be as tall as Mama and almost as small around. Abuela always tells me to be kind to Mama, because she was raped and she was not supposed to have me. Abuela tells me about all the votive candles she lit in front of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who had the immaculate child but surely understood that I was not immaculate at all.

At 3:25 I get my coat and my mittens and Martin’s little snowsuit and boots and hat and go to Mama, who is in her bed. I have not seen her eat anything all day.

“Mama? I will take Martin for a ride now.”

“Good. Make sure he is tired by the time you get back.”

So I have two hours before Roger will come home. I want to be out when he comes home, so that by the time I get back with Martin, Roger will be playing video games or drunk or something and not notice me with his sunken eyes. Even Mama cannot light them up anymore, even in her lingerie. The walls in this yellow house are very thin.

Martin does not want to go out in the cold, so once we are on the sidewalk riding towards the park, I start singing and he stops crying. I turn around to see his face.

“Martin. I love you.” Martin looks at me. “Do you think I am fat? Do you think I am irresponsible? Do you think I should have died before Mama left Nicaragua?”

I realize this is a horrible thing to ask a nine-month-old. He does not know death exists. But he claps his hands and smiles with his four teeth, all slimy and sweet in his pink mouth. I want to kiss him, burying my lips in his cheek, but I keep riding and sing again. The park is empty and looks like a black-and-white photograph, and a few drunk snowflakes swirl down and land on Martin’s face. I pull his hood tight around his face and park the bike by a bench.

I try to picture Abuelo as I scramble up the playground equipment. I like to be on top to think about things—my art teacher would call it perspective. I have seen some photographs of Abuelo from when Mama was young—he has a round belly but long legs, and he has a little mustache and neatly combed hair. He smiles with his lips, not his teeth like people in Wisconsin do. What if he did come to visit?
I do not have a watch, and the sky is cloudy, so I do not know how much time has passed, but I guess I have a while before it gets dark. Martin is scooting around in the baby seat, getting fussy, so I give him a little bit of milk from his bottle and leave the park. I cannot think of anything to sing that matches how I feel, so I make something up in Spanish, a song that sounds like a dirge, a song about Mama. I decide to ride farther, to the other side of the park, and go down the big hill. I like to go extra fast and fly down it, feeling the wind across my ears and making my eyes tear up. Martin likes the hill too, but I usually slow down for him. Martin is asleep in the seat, and I remember that Mama wants me to make him very tired so he sleeps all night and does not wake Roger.

I will wake him up when we go down that hill. We pass the basset hound man’s big, low, dark wood house and stop at the top of the hill. Then I push off and start pedaling. The wind races over my hair, whipping it back over my neck. The sides of my vision blur with tears, and I blink hard, not sure whether the tears are from the wind anymore. I want to be on this hill forever, effortless, weightless, because I am learning in school that a heavy thing falls just as fast as a light thing. I bank left at the bottom of the hill and hit a patch of sand.

Suddenly I am sliding sideways along my left ankle, and I can feel the sand burning on my skin, which means I must have torn my pants, and all I can think about is Martin—where is Martin, but time drags, the sky whirls above my head, I hear scraping sounds and feel an electric pain all down the left side of my body. Then my bike spins to the right as I put out my hand to stop us, and we grind to a stop by the curb.

Abuelo comes to the door. It’s a surprise.
Mama opens the door, after Roger yells something about how we are bothering him so much with all these interruptions.
“Papa!” Is she surprised? Angry? Excited?
“Maria!” He is smiling with his teeth this time, and he embraces her, kissing her on both cheeks. He is using a cane, which she did not know.
“Papa, are you all right? You use a cane now.”
“It has been eleven years since you have seen me. I use a cane, yes.”
Abuela comes to the door too, and she is crying. She kisses him on both cheeks, silent.
I hug Abuelo too, and he touches me lightly and begins to
exclaim about Martin, what a beautiful baby.

Later, we are sitting in the living room. Roger comes out of the basement with mustard stains on his shirt, nods at Abuelo, and goes to the refrigerator. He thinks Mama’s family is all strange, but his mother plays bingo all day and his father lives in California with another woman.

Abuelo has gifts for all of us, a rosary for Abuela, a rattle for Martin, a blue glass for Mama, and a piece of chocolate for me, which I cannot eat because I wonder how he knows I am the fat one.

Abuelo is expectant; he is the benefactor, and he wants our thanks. But we are confused at this man who has blown into our lives with as much substance as a Wisconsin wind.

Then Mama asks what we have been wondering all along. “Where the hell have you been?”

I open my eyes without realizing they were closed—how long were they closed? Martin is in his seat, awake and silent. He has that look on his face that he gets before he starts howling. But my own face is trembling, and I pull my left leg out from under my bike. Blood is pooling under my bike and pulsing out of my ankle—I must have scraped it really deep. I can’t—I can’t do this, and I start to cry, those gulping sobs that make me sound like my two-year-old neighbor Muhammed.

Martin is fine. He does not have a single scrape. I pick him up out of his little seat in my shaking arms, but I can’t carry him because I might drop him—he is so heavy, and so big, almost as big as me. How will I ever get up this hill with Martin and my bike? I need to get back to the park, back home, or Mama will be angry with me, and Roger will say I might have killed Martin; I am irresponsible, of course, and how could I be so stupid?

I push my hair out of my face and notice that my right hand is bloody. I lick my lips and taste blood. I am glad I cannot see myself—big and fat and bloody with a screaming baby on my hip.

I look up the hill, so long and cold. On my ankle, every step is a knife thrust between my bones. There is a man walking down the hill with two basset hounds on bright pink and green leashes. The dogs are barking.

I know this is how people get kidnapped, when they are helpless and cannot run. But the basset hounds remind me of Abuela.

“Hey!” The man must have seen the whole thing. He looks concerned and starts to run down the hill towards me.
“—Um,” I want to ask for help, but my throat is clumped in a knot.

“Do you need help? Are you okay?”

“Um, I need some help,” I manage to gasp. For some reason looking at his kind face, the first kind face I have seen in a long time besides Martin, makes me cry even harder. I want him to pick me up and carry me away.

“Here,” he says. He takes off his sweatshirt and presses it to my head. Then he takes Martin off my hip and onto his. He’s holding the leashes in a strong fist. He takes my right arm, the good one, and loops it around his neck. “Can you limp?”

“Yes, yes, I think so.”

So we are climbing the hill, Martin and me and this kind stranger with light eyes that hold so much more concern than I have ever seen in anyone’s eyes, even Abuela’s.

“Where do you live?” the man asks, breathing hard beside me.

It is hard for me to talk because of the pain, but I manage, “203 Sparrow.”

“Is it all right if I drive you home? I can put your bike in the back of my truck.”

“Yes.” Mama will be mad, this man might kill Martin, but he is a good man, a man like my art teacher, I think.

We get to his house, the low dark wood one. “I will take you inside and see if my wife can clean you up a little bit,” he says.

I nod, biting my lip. It’s almost dark by the time we walk up the driveway. Inside, his house is filled with golden light. The kitchen is warm, and the fridge is covered with pictures of a little boy. A big, cushiony-looking sofa sits in front of a crackling fireplace. We have never used our fireplace because there are dead birds in the chimney. Roger said he would clean them out last summer.

“Roxy! I’m home.”

A woman comes out of a hallway, her reddish hair done up in a bun behind her ears.

“Brian! Who is this?”

“Um, this is… what’s your name?”

“Beatriz. You can call me Bea. And my little brother is Martin.”

“She took a pretty big spill at the bottom of the hill.” Brian guides me to a kitchen chair and pulls his sweatshirt away from my head. I can hear him suck in through his teeth.
“Think you can take care of this, dear?”
Roxy nods, placing her hand on my shoulder. “I’ll be right back. How old is Martin?”
“Nine months.”
“Do you have a bottle for him?”
“On my bike.”
Roxy looks at Brian. “Could you go get it?”
Brian nods. “Yup, I’ll put everything in the truck.” He takes Martin over to the high chair at the table. “Be right back.”
I can’t help it. I can feel my lips pulling themselves down over my chin, and a gasp comes out of my mouth. Roxy puts a hand on my shaking shoulders. “Let me go get the first aid kit.”
I sink into the chair and close my eyes against the tears and try to think about something besides these faces. Roxy comes back humming.
“Are you hungry, sweetie?”
I can’t answer that. I don’t think I can answer that. “No. No, thanks.”
She places a cool cloth on my head. Then she takes out a little bottle of medicine. “This is gonna sting. Just sit tight.”
It burns, it stings like hell, but I have never felt such warmth. It’s like coming inside and putting my cold hands under warm water just to feel that burn and know that coldness doesn’t last. It’s like taking a long, hot shower after an afternoon of hiding from Roger.
“How is your stomach?”
I lift the side of my jacket. “Pretty bloody.”
Roxy bends down to look at my side. I expect her to make some disgusted face, like Mama does, because I am so fat, but she shakes her head and says, “It’s a nasty scrape, but we’ll clean you up like new. What about your ankle?”
Honestly I have forgotten about my ankle. I look down to see a blood-soaked shoe and a torn-up, bloody pant leg. I can feel every heartbeat in my ankle, now that I think about it, and as Roxy lifts my pant leg up, she makes the same sharp breathing noise Brian made when he saw my head.
“The cut’s pretty deep. I’ll see if I can clean and wrap it. It’ll probably hurt a lot more.”
“That’s okay.”
“Do you want to call your parents and tell them where you are?”
I hesitate on this one. “Not really. They won’t be worried yet.” Not about me, anyway.

Brian comes back in with the bottle. He pops it in the microwave for 30 seconds, then slides Martin out of his high chair and plops down with him on the couch. Martin is quiet, and I think he likes Brian, because Martin has never let Roger hold him.

“Do you have kids?” I ask Roxy, who has moved down to my ankle.

“We had a little boy,” says Brian. His face is riveted on Martin’s. Roxy looks up at me.

“He died four months ago. Fell.” Her face is drawn, and she looks down again.

I am silent, Martin is sucking loudly on his bottle, and the refrigerator is humming.

Roxy wraps my ankle in soft gauze and a stretchy bandage. “Be sure to clean the cut once a day, and don’t run around on your ankle until you’ve had an x-ray.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“Sweetie, it was the least I could do.”

Brian comes into the kitchen. “You are welcome to come over any time.” I am sure they are just being polite and lying, which is what Americans do, Abuela says.

“I will. Maybe I could walk your dogs for you.”

Roxy laughs. “Brian loves to do that, but you could go with him.”

“Ready to go home, kiddo?” Brian asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ve got your bike in the back. Hop in.”

When we get to my house, Brian rolls the bike into the garage, and we climb the steps together. We go into the kitchen from the mud room, and Roger is there waiting over a bottle of scotch and a plate with sloppy joe remains on it. Mama is at the stove stirring something.

“Hello, Mama. Hello, Roger.” I smile brightly, the cut on my head smarting when I move my cheeks, and I set Martin down in his high chair. “Sorry I am late. I fell off my bike. This is Brian, the man with the basset hounds by the park. He helped me.”

“Hello,” says Brian.

“Thanks for helping,” says Mama, looking up from the stove. I can tell we have interrupted a fight, and all I want to do is go
home with Brian and have dinner with Roxy.

“No problem. Just don’t go so fast down that hill, kiddo,” he says to me, tapping my shoulder. I smile weakly.

“Well, gotta get going. Have a good night, everyone.”

“Thanks, Brian,” I whisper.

“Hey.” He leans over a little bit so his eyes are level with mine. His eyes know so many things—so many things about me and my family, so many things nobody has ever known. “Come on over anytime.”

As Brian leaves, I limp to the fridge and get some mashed carrots to heat up for Martin. Mama is silent. Roger is looking at me. Then he turns around and reaches for the stack of tax forms by the phone. He looks at them over the tops of his glasses.

“Maria!” When he says her name, he makes the “r” all long and heavy, not light like her name is supposed to be.

“Yes, dear?”

“Who got water on my tax forms?” His voice is too quiet.

“I don’t know. Why did you leave them in the kitchen?” It is stupid of Mama to ask this question.

“I can put my papers wherever I want! This is my house! Don’t forget that! Now, I want to know who was messing with my stuff!” He turns to me because I am the only possible vandal around here.

“It was me, Roger. I spilled a little bit of water on your papers.”

“You bastard!” Roger is warming up. “First you mess up my stuff, then you almost kill my son. You could have killed Martin with your clumsiness! What made you think you could ride so fast with a baby on your bike? Who the hell do you think you are? Not my daughter!”

“No. I am not! Not your daughter. So leave me alone!” I want to eat my words as soon as they are out of my mouth. Abuela tells me never to yell at Roger, because he is a sensitive man, much like Abuelo.

“I will not leave you alone.”

“Roger, please.” Mama stirs the pot madly, like it’s boiling over, her skinny elbow going in and out over the stove.

“I’m tired of your daughter ruining things around here.” Roger paces into the living room and back into the kitchen. Martin squirms, and I move closer to him, stroking his soft hair and placing the congealed carrots on his high chair tray.
“Get your hands off my son.”
“He’s my brother, and he loves me more than you.”
Roger scoops Martin up with a lunge. He whirs to face me.
Then I see Roger’s hand flash beside my face.
What I know next is this: for the second time tonight I am sobbing with blood running down into my eyes, Martin is screaming and pounding Roger with his little fists, Roger’s face is frozen in horror and he is shouting, sobbing, “I’ll get a divorce! It was her fault! I’ll get a divorce!” Mama is shouting too, “You’ve never hit her before! How could you hit her?”

Then Mama is whispering on the telephone, and Abuelo is not there.
SATORI

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