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The Tower Hill Collection

and other stories

by Anna Voisard

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.

Mentor: Fred Reynolds

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Acknowledgments

For my family, dead and alive, in my apartment and far away. You bring me close to let me escape.

~

Thank you to Fred, Linsey, and my fellow workshop-mates for your careful reading.

A version of “A Hungry Artist” appeared in Red Fez.
A version of “Dynamite Man” appeared in Promethean.
A version of “Good Neighbor” appeared in Newtown Literary Journal.

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Beyond A First

The man loves a good parking spot, and we pulled into one. Close to the arena gate and the lot exit, Dad straightened up in the seat as he squeezed his work truck into lines that were barely still yellow.

“If I believed in that kind of crap, I’d say it’s a sign,” he said, pointing out the highway as if he was the only one who could see it. “I bet we can make it home in twenty minutes from here.”

Dad’s rock concert dismount from the driver’s seat was nothing like his usual 5:30 slither. By the time I made it behind the truck, he was standing in the bed and the cooler was on the ground.

“Grill,” he said, forcing it down into my arms.

“Well, you can check that off,” I answered, almost dropping it.

Tendon. Their first tour in twelve years, and my first show. Dad told me they'd probably play a lot from *No Vacation*, their new album. So I'd been cramming. Last night during my shift at the Pizza Hut, I tried to put the album on for our three buffet customers. Elaine, who is usually my favorite manager, switched it off as soon as she realized it wasn't Lite 107, though I did get a song and a half played over the dining room speakers.

"No more of this depressive stuff. The people are losing their appetites," Elaine whispered as she punched the stereo buttons. As if Rod Stewart makes you hungry, I wanted to say.

Child labor laws send me home at nine on school nights, so Dad was still up and sitting in the kitchen when I walked in smelling like ingredients I can detect from across the street even without a breeze. He didn't look at the backdoor when it closed behind me or over at the pizza box I put on the counter. A legal pad in front of him and a pen twitching in his hand, I wondered if we were about to have one of those talks.

He asked what kind of beer I wanted for the Tendon show. It was beyond a first. The last time we discussed anything alcoholic he was busting me for chugging tallboys at Hochman Square.

"I don't care," I said to him, trying to sound normal when all I could think about was what I would pick from the refrigerator wall at the Shell station.

"Good. Then you'll drink what I drink."

It seemed like a threat, but I knew it meant whatever was on sale.

"Just no diet beer," I answered as I threw my uniform shirt down the basement stairs.

He wrote something down and then started reading aloud, looking up and over his check-out aisle reading glasses whenever he felt the need to explain an entry.

“Shrimp, wrapped in bacon, on soaked skewers so the wood doesn’t burn. Garlic bread, not like that bright yellow shit you push at the Hut. Chips and dip, the kind your mom used to make from sour cream and a powder packet. For old times sake. Grill, the small one in the garage, not the one out back. Bag of charcoal. Lighter fluid. Big cooler. Knife. Plates. Water. The beer. And ice.”

Now, Dad and I were unloading the list onto our pre-SUV-size rectangle of concrete.

“Canopy,” he said, handing me a blue-tarp colored nylon bag.

I looked at him. “Canopy? I don’t remember you saying canopy. Double-check that, will you?”

“Just put it together, smartass.”

I set up the canopy, but not because it was raining or sunny. It gave us an official place to stand, so we planted ourselves and crossed our arms over our dark t-shirts. I felt like security detail assessing the crowd. Dad was my experience and muscle. I was his speed and height.

Across the lane, three cars’ worth of college types were listening to a Tendon song from the new album. It was the theme for a television show I’d never been home in time to see. When the song came on twice within our first ten minutes, I rolled my eyes at Dad, who was already shaking his head.

“They’ll be humming along to every song until the encore,” he said.

Without putting down their plastic cups, two of the guys started tossing a football. The rest of them stood around the keg, which was in a trashcan in the trunk of a Honda Civic. A girl in a Tendon tank top sat on the bumper. Tank Top was following the throws back and forth, just like we were. She took a sip and twisted the end of her dark braid, more bored with each pass. The chipped polish on her short, possibly chewed fingernails was green. This girl could be a real fan. I couldn't wait to tell Elaine back at the Hut.

I'd been getting ready to ask for one when Dad knocked me in the arm and handed me a beer.

"Labatt's?"

"Dealer's choice," he answered.

I wanted to make fun of his Canadian tendencies and mimic his lingering accent, but let it go. He was letting me drink, and in public, and in front of Tank Top.

He watched as I pushed the tab down into the blue can. "We should eat," he said.

Dad sprayed the lighter fluid and lit the coals. Tank Top glanced over when the flames shot up, so I waved and gave a thumbs up to let her know that everything was okay. She smiled back. I slurped down some more beer and wiped my mouth.

I didn't want to look back over too soon, and had to remind myself not to. I drummed the thumbs-up thumb against my thigh to the only tune I could conjure up, some lame Eagles song that Lite 107 plays every ninety minutes.

"Watch out!" yelled one of the throwers, a guy in a fleece vest.

Dad was just putting the shrimp skewers on the grill when the football shot past us and lodged under the truck. I got on the ground and kicked it loose.

As I picked it up and attempted to throw a spiral, Fleece yelled again through cupped hands, “Thanks, dude!”

“No worries,” I said, cinching my beer.

Wouldn’t you know Dad yelled right over me and right at Fleece, “Watch where you’re throwing!”

“Let me throw it next time,” Dad said to me, yelling under his breath, “These fucking rich kids. Here, take some.”

“We’re the ones eating shrimp, Dad.”

“Jesus, I can’t buy a bag of frozen shrimp? Don’t get used to it.”

Dad grabbed his paint-covered boombox from behind the driver’s seat and put on *Topeka*, Tendon’s first album. He cranked it all the way up. It didn’t sound that great, but I knew all the words, so it didn’t matter. I wanted Tank Top to hear it. I kept singing along, wondering if she was watching me or just the football.

“Your mom and I came here for the 2000 tour. I wanted to take you, but she said it would be too much for your ears,” he told me for the seventy-third time in my life.

“You should have bought those headphones kids wear to the monster truck show,” I offered, for the seventy-second time.

“Those would have cost more than the ticket. She would’ve never gone for it. Besides, you stayed at Gramma’s house that night,” he said, finishing the conversation in its usual way before turning back to the food.

Still on guard, we noticed right away as the football came flying again. Dad tried to swat it down, but the ball tipped his fingers and slammed onto the truck cab’s roof.

“Can you see where it hit? Did it leave a mark?” Dad asked, now pissed.

“I don’t see anything,” I told him, knowing he was too short to see the ding.

I went to fetch the ball, but Dad stopped me with an open hand. “My turn,” he said, not looking at me.

He made his way between the cars and found the ball. With it under his arm, he went over to the thrower, a soccer player-ish kid in a gray Tech t-shirt. Dad gave Tech the ball after a string of close-to-the-face gestures. Tech must have rolled his eyes or mouthed something to his friends when my dad walked away. Even Tank Top laughed.

Back under the canopy, Dad flung open the cooler and pulled out two more beers, the garlic bread and our big kitchen knife. The grill was hot, so he dropped the loaf on it, flipping the bread with his hands. He moved the bread off the grate and peeled back the foil before cutting it up. After putting a chunk on a new beer, he handed it to me. I jammed the bread in my mouth so I could open the can. Butter ran down my chin and I had to step back so it wouldn’t dribble onto my shirt. I saw my dad doing the same. With elbows bent, we held out our pieces of bread between bites and let the butter drip to the ground. Then we each took another piece. Dad finally said something.

“How long till Tech lobs it back over here?”

“Six minutes, tops. Fleece is better, but they both suck,” I said.

We watched as the football continued to fly. They managed to catch most of the balls, but looked over at us anytime either of them missed or stumbled. Dad just stared at them, gulping and chewing.

When Tech pointed his cup right at us, yelling, “Lombardi sweep, coming at you!” Tank Top bit down on her braid.

“Oh shit,” I said.

“What, are we part of their game now?” asked Dad, tapping his chest and lunging to catch the ball. It got by him, and me. The throw was easily Tech’s best and one of us should have had it, but instead the ball bounced just beyond our set-up.

Dad held his hand up into the air to signal that he would get it. Tech ran right over, arms pumping in that annoying, coming-off-the-field way, and he was almost under the canopy when Dad raised the kitchen knife. The large blade was pointed down, hanging above our heads. Dad’s first Saturday-of-month sharpening-habit didn’t seem excessive in that moment.

When Tech stopped jogging, the two of them stared at each other. I figured Tank Top was biting her nails, but I couldn’t check. I’d seen this look of glory in my Dad before and it didn’t mean a win. I tightened every muscle I could feel as he sunk the blade into the ball, pulling it right back out at the same slow pace. Once he squeezed the ball flat, he threw it out into the middle of the lane and I let my shoulders down.

Tech stood there, his eyes jerking between the two of us. He appeared to think I might help him or say something. With the knife still in hand, Dad rubbed his forearm across his chin. Skin rippled down toward his wrist. Tech flinched and took a step back. With the handle pointed toward me, Dad forced me to take the knife and started breaking down the canopy.

“Show’s about to start. Let’s pack it up.”

Tendon rocked.

Dad went out and got us a couple beers after a few songs, but I didn’t leave the seats until set break. I thought about spending half my paycheck on a t-shirt, but Dad

made a face when I actually asked for a large. On our second lap of the arena, I noticed the two types of fans, the ones like my dad or the ones like Tech. There were hardly any in-betweens, and even fewer chicks.

When they opened the second set with “Typical Believer,” I screamed with my arms in the air like I was in the front car of the Serpent. It felt fucking good. Dad slapped me on the back and kept on as he had for the whole show, nodding his head like a middle-aged robot.

After the encore, we walked out into the dark parking lot. The air cooled my hoarse throat.

“It doesn’t look like they did anything to the truck,” I squeaked as we got to the spot.

“I could have told you that,” he said, throwing me the keys.

“Dad, I had like four beers,” I said, gripping my throat.

“I’m too old for this. You drive.”

I got into the driver’s seat and lifted the lever to push back.

“You want something to eat for the ride home?” he asked.

Dad came back with a bag of chips and dip in a covered bowl, and handed me a bottle of water. He ripped the bag open and stuffed some into his mouth. He let me chug some water before tilting the bag my way.

“Thanks. No dip?” I asked.

“You eat it,” he said as he pulled back the plastic cover and shoved the dip into my lap. The metal bowl felt cold on my legs. “Head out to Route 5.”

I knew how to get home, but let him remind me. Taking a chip, I tried to scoop up the dip without looking down. Dad grabbed the bowl just before it slid to floor mat.

“I’ll do it,” he said as he sunk a chip into the dip and came up with it fully loaded. “Now, open,” he barked. I opened my mouth. He prepared another, watching as I chewed.

“Good, wasn’t it? Did it taste the same?” he asked as he shoveled the last of it into my mouth.

“Yeah, but water,” I said, reaching around for the bottle.

He took it from the cup holder between us, twisted the cap and handed it to me. Half-empty, I drank the rest without looking ahead as we pulled onto our street.

“Made it in twenty-two,” I announced as we rode into the driveway.

Dad reached over and pushed the garage door opener on the sun visor.

“I clocked it at twenty-three. But still, not bad.”

Aloha Acres

Seventeen-year old Jimmy Metzger stood on top of a heap of dirt. Technically still a boy, he twisted a strip of window blind in his hands and watched the lot next door. A new mobile home was being delivered in the morning. Somebody - his dad claimed it was one of the bastards at Aloha Acres management - had hired a crew to tow out the Hoyles' old trailer and clear away whatever else was left of their mess.

"Excuse me, think you could step out of the way?" asked the man operating the excavator.

"Don't think so, I'm good right here," Jimmy replied, throwing the metal strip without noticing where it landed.

"Come on, man. We're almost finished," the driver's partner pressed as he put tools into the truck.

Jimmy stood still with arms crossed. He shrugged his shoulders. "Looks like you'll have to work around me."

Kenny, Jimmy's dad, was positioned in the doorway of the family trailer, smoking a joint and watching the bright green machine drive back and forth over the neighboring 1/10 acre. He ignored the exchange and spoke to his son. "How long since the Hoyles got evicted?"

"Three years about," Jimmy answered as he watched the two-man crew. Jimmy's dad was amused, but decided not to get involved in this one.

The excavator driver hopped out.

"Just let us smooth it out and we'll be gone. It's like two minutes, bro." He said it to Jimmy, but glanced around as the words came out.

"Maybe you didn't understand me, *bro*. I'm good right here," replied Jimmy, spitting with his last syllable.

"If your padre wasn't babysitting you, I'd knock the teeth out of your head, you little punk. We just want to get out of here."

"What are you going to do? Run us down?" Jimmy laughed and looked over at his old man.

"I just want to finish the fucking job. Let me guess, you're both between jobs right now?"

Jimmy's dad stubbed the joint into the doorframe and started to move from the wooden deck he'd built years earlier after the original three steps collapsed. He yelled back, "Hey, you and your *amigo* better get off this property!"

The driver flailed his arms and motioned to his co-worker, "Vamos! Vamos!" He pulled the excavator up onto the flatbed. The men quickly secured it and hustled into a truck cab that had been running all day.

Dust flew up and into their faces as Kenny and Jimmy chased the mass of machinery that seemed to be going faster than possible. They threw rocks, none of which even got close.

"Fucking Mexicans!" screamed Jimmy, his stride and words elongated.

"Ecuadorianos!" yelled the men inside the truck, pounding on the dashboard.

Two sharp honks burst from the truck as the Metzgers stopped running at the county road. They looked up to see two middle fingers sticking out the windows like rabbit ears on top of a television.

"That was bullshit," Kenny managed to say between sweeping pitches of his back. Jimmy paced, trying not to look down at his dad.

After an otherwise silent walk of gravel kicking, they sat on two plastic chairs in front of the trailer. Jimmy lit a Marlboro while Kenny recovered his roach. The smoke hovered in the humid, end of spring air. From the corner by the living room to the front door, the siding was partially charred and melted. It had been that way since the Hoyles moved.

“Kenny, that was some bullshit,” said Jimmy. He had stopped calling his parents Mom and Dad, and started calling them by their first names as a joke when they were both out of work. As he explained it to anyone who asked, if they were going to sit home all day on the couch while he was pinched into a little desk learning about quid pro quo and How to Kill Mockingbirds, they would stay Kim and Kenny in his eyes. The habit had stuck even though his mom was waitressing again.

“It’s the way it is now. Everybody wants a fight,” Kenny answered.

“You know I do. Think they’ll be back tomorrow?”

“I doubt that. Today’s the 31st. New trailer and new neighbors will probably be here in the morning. All I can say is they better be decent,” Jimmy’s dad said, flicking whatever was left of his joint onto whatever was left of the lawn.

“Look at it now, Kenny. Like the Hoyles and their stink were never there,” laughed Jimmy. “Can’t hate those Mexicans for taking care of that.”

Especially with the machines gone, the lot next door looked clean and empty. Jimmy, walking over to stomp down the dirt pile he’d claimed earlier, agreed with Kenny. He hoped the new neighbors would be better, or at least less embarrassing.

The Hoyle household had meant four cats and five people living in a two-bedroom trailer, not even a double wide. They fought like everyone else, the mom with the dad when he was around, and the mom with the kids every day. Aside from a few visits from the cops, their fights hadn’t been too exciting, just family fits.

As he stared at the neat rows of treadmarks on the dirt, Jimmy remembered the animals that used to climb all over the Hoyle place. He and his sister Molly used to peek

out at night when they were supposed to be doing homework, or just “keeping to yourselves,” as Kim would put it. Other neighbors had parties or a constant flow of visitors, but the Hoyle trailer only attracted animals. Raccoons, squirrels, opossums, anything with fur. They would walk right up like they’d been invited in for a beer. Even with four cats, they couldn’t keep the chipmunks or rabbits away. Kenny called the place Hoyles’ Ark. He thought it was genius.

Sure they had theories, but Jimmy and his family never knew what drew the animals over there. They all agreed that it must be some kind of smell, something only animals can detect. Kim was convinced there was a body buried underneath their trailer, like a secret baby or something. That was part of the reason Jimmy made sure to watch that excavator so carefully, hoping it would churn something up, like a skull or a blanket. But nothing appeared beyond tin cans and soda bottles.

By the time the Hoyles got evicted, the cats had taken to living behind the lattice around the bottom of the trailer. They wised up before the kids were old enough to do the same. Jimmy used to study the cats in the afternoons when he was home and his dad was stationed in front of the television. He’d steal some of his dad’s weed and a few bites of leftovers out of the refrigerator. Kim would have whooped him if she found out. Wasting perfectly good food to feed a cat, and a Hoyle cat? Jimmy got enough bruises.

“Those people are nasty,” his dad would say. “I knew the mom before she got so fat. I don’t blame them cats for moving. Big Stephanie probably ate all the Meow Mix.” He laughed the hardest at his own jokes.

The day after the County Marshal showed and made all the Hoyles stand outside while they locked the place up, Jimmy and a couple friends broke through the bathroom and picked it over. Jimmy took the dish set and put it away in the cabinet before Kim got home from the lunch shift, excited about a nice surprise for his mom. The Hoyles always ate straight from the Styrofoam, so their dishes were hardly used. But his mom knew right away. "It's new to us," he tried to explain to her when she threw the four sets of plates, bowls, and mugs out the window, the white chips of thin china littering the space between the trailers. Then she laid into Jimmy, "I don't want nobody's garbage. If they left it, then you know it's crap. I didn't raise no scavenger."

The Hoyles had been worse off than his family because their mom couldn't even clean motel rooms. The only thing Jimmy had ever seen her do was sit, either at the kitchen table or in the recliner he knew was lifted from another neighbor's yard. He thought the Hoyle mom was a waste, unless you think refilling prescriptions over the phone is something.

The night of the fire, Jimmy and his little sister Molly felt the warmth before they noticed it looked like the Fourth of July over the lake, only right outside their window. Jimmy would never accuse his mother of lighting up the place, but when he saw the flames at 3AM, he knew immediately that she could have thrown a lit cigarette in the general direction of the old Hoyle place. Like everyone else, his mother had a streak. Jimmy was expecting to hear cats crying after the fire department had pulled away, but there was nothing. No Hoyles to smell. No animals to watch. No junk to steal. Nothing.

Two weeks after the new neighbors moved into the trailer next door, Jimmy finally stopped threatening to beat up their three boys. They were all younger and had names that Jimmy liked to mangle: Hector, Herman, Hernando. Or as Jimmy called them, Nectar, He-Man, and Tornado.

“The youngest one can’t weigh more than ninety pounds. What could he possibly do to you?” Molly asked her six-foot tall brother. As long as he wrote at least half of a term paper with decent grammar, Jimmy would be graduating high school in a few weeks.

Molly was the smart one. At least, that’s what she thought. The teachers at Tower Hill High School thought so, too. She had perfect attendance and ranked eleventh in her freshman class. Jimmy took different hallways so he wouldn’t have to see his sister with her glasses and her notebooks, running into the chemistry class some of his friends were still trying to pass.

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Molly dug deeper into the box of generic Cheerios. Sensing Jimmy’s disgust with her eating habits, she pulled out a dusty hand and pulled down her shirt to cover the flat of her belly. She’d put on a few pounds over the last few months, but her pants still hung off her hip bones. Either way, the high school boys seemed to like her.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be? I thought you were helping Brandon on that landscaping job. That’s what you told Mom,” Molly barked.

“I’m going in a minute. It’s a good thing Kim left you to keep me in line. You know Kenny is working for me, don’t you? The old bastard listened in on my phone

conversation, practically begging to be hired. We're mowing those little squares of grass with one tree at the mall parking lot. Me and Brandon want to start a mowing company this summer. If Kenny shows up on time, I might keep him on," Jimmy laughed as he pulled a clean t-shirt over his buzzed orange hair.

Molly put the cereal box away after one last handful. She wanted to get ready and told Jimmy she was going to see her friend Mindy. Mindy's mother needed an oxygen tank. She was 35 and all the neighbors gossiped it was from drugs, a coke stroke she'd heard one say. Jimmy took the bait at the mention of Mindy's mom and spun into a coughing fit. Dropping to the floor, his performance swelled to seizure-level and ended with him slapping the back of the kitchen chair as though it might bring him back to life.

"I heard she used to be hot. You know, pre o-tank," Jimmy said breathing heavy and still laid out halfway under the table.

"Is that all you care about, who's hot?"

Molly was dying to tell someone, anyone, even her brother. As Jimmy jumped to his feet, he shadowboxed in front of her, his favorite new torment. He bounced from side to side and she mimicked him, flinching and squinting to duck his flying fists. She knew he would never hit her, or at least he hadn't hit her yet. His movements were fast, but hardly fluid. After thirty seconds of jabs and hooks, it was more disorienting than she could handle. Molly just blurted it out.

"I have a prom date."

He stopped and gave her the sour face he typically used when she said anything too feminine. "With who? It isn't one of my friends, is it?"

“Gross, I wouldn’t go with any of your friends.”

“Who then, some geek from one of your nerd classes?”

“Not exactly. Hector, the oldest brother from next door.”

“Nectar? The ugly one with the spiky hair? You’re fucking joking me, right?”

“Hector, the oldest one, the cute one.”

Molly smiled as she said it. She could see her brother’s best friend Brandon driving toward their trailer. He honked and honked again before Jimmy started for the door.

“My sister is not going to prom with him, you hear me?”

“Promise you won’t tell Kenny!” Molly yelled at him through the screen.

Molly watched the truck drive back to the traffic light and shut the door. No one else had showered, so she would have enough hot water for a bath. She hadn’t taken a bath since she was a kid and couldn’t remember ever running the water for herself. She squeezed the bottle of vanilla shower gel she’d given her mom last Christmas. Nothing. Five months had passed and it was still sealed. Molly should have known. Kim hated new things, unless she bought them. Peeling off the silver tab, Molly squeezed again. She stuck the shower gel bottle under the faucet and let the syrupy soap transform into bubbles. Sinking in, she scrubbed and lathered and hoped the matching vanilla lotion hadn’t been opened yet either.

Molly told Hector to be over at ten o’clock. And he was prompt, arriving with a red plastic rose from the pot beside his family’s front step. Her stomach churned with

whole grain and excitement. Before he would step through the door, he said he felt weird coming over in the morning. But Molly told him not to worry. Kim wouldn't be back from the Saturday lunch shift until after two.

When Hector knocked on the door, she grabbed him by the forearm and pulled him inside.

As she heard the gravel crush underneath the tires, Molly ran outside to Brandon's truck, catching it before Jimmy had his foot out the door.

"You said you'd be back by 5," she yelled, blocking his exit from the truck.

"Molly, it's 5:24," said Jimmy. "Can I get out?"

"Can you take me to the drugstore? It's a girl thing,"

"Jesus, no need to let us in on your nasty secrets," answered Jimmy. Both boys were covered in dirt and smelled like grass and gasoline.

"You don't mind, do you, Brandon?" asked Molly as she climbed over her brother and into the middle seat. She tapped Brandon's leg.

He shrugged and threw the truck into reverse.

Molly turned to Jimmy and asked him as quietly as she could. "Jimmy, do you think I can I borrow some money?" He stuck out his chin and rubbed the length of his neck. He did it again, even slower, leaving streaks of red in the path of his fingers. He didn't look at her but just stared at the red light that would let them out of Aloha Acres.

“Shouldn’t you ask for money *before* you ask for a ride?” he answered, snapping his head in her direction.

“It’s an emergency, Jimmy. Please?”

“I can lend it to you, Molly,” answered Brandon. He smirked, reaching for his wallet.

She touched his leg again. “You don’t mind?”

“I know you’re good for it. Otherwise I’ll kick Metzger’s ass. How much?”

“I was thinking \$40, just to be safe.”

“Metzger, you hearing this? She’s lucky we just worked this job,” Brandon said as he handed Molly two twenties.

Molly jumped out of the car and ran into the pharmacy. When she came out, neither boy would look at her bag.

Back home, Molly pushed the front door open and saw her mother still asleep on the couch. Jimmy nodded when Molly turned and gave him the index finger to the lips “quiet” sign. They both waved silently to Brandon and he drove away, rubbing his forehead.

Molly stepped into the tiny bathroom and took off her short denim jacket. She felt hot, and fanned herself off before opening the biggest box of pads the drugstore had and taking one out. She opened the soft pink plastic wrapper and removed the cotton pad, rolling it up and placing it at the bottom of the garbage can. She made sure the wrapper was noticeably on top before putting the box under the sink.

Reaching for the faucet, she pushed it up and as far to the cold as she could get it. She took a small box from deep in her jeans pocket. Punching the lone pill through the clear plastic sleeve, she pinched her eyes and threw the pill down her throat with a few gulps of tap water. She let her mouth sit under the streaming cold before moving her whole face into it. She knew she couldn't let that happen again, and she hoped wouldn't. Hector was sweet and she wasn't mad at him, but she didn't feel right asking him for the money either. Quickly, Molly dried her face with the thin, rough hand towel and put the remnants of the pill's packaging back into her pants. After tightening the ponytail until her forehead hurt, she smoothed her tank top and headed down the narrow hallway.

In the room she shared with Jimmy, he was stretched out on his bed with his hands behind his head and his legs crossed. She knew he was pretending to sleep and could feel him paying attention to her. Picking up her backpack, she took out "The Grapes of Wrath" and sat against the pair of large peach-colored pillows on her bed.

"You done in there already?" asked Jimmy, eyes still closed.

Then, quickly, he sat up and folded back the blinds with his hand to let the sun right in. "I saw your hickey. Come over here in the light and show your brother what that neighbor boy did to you," he whisper-yelled, now staring at her.

"Excuse me?" Molly replied.

"I saw your fucking hickey in the car. It was staring me right in the face. You should have thought of that before you started begging for money and rides. Using my friend to pay for your fooling around."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I got my period."

“That is bullshit. \$40 sounded like a lot, but I get it now.”

“I just want to make sure nothing happened.”

“Too late for that. When you need the morning-after pill in the afternoon, something has already happened.”

“It’s not like that. I mean, it’s not that bad. I don’t know, Jimmy. I had geometry with Hector last year. I told him I’d be home alone today and he came by. We didn’t plan it. It just sort of happened.”

Jimmy flung his feet to the floor and braced his hands on the bed frame. “Molly, you disgust me. I hope you give birth to his child. You deserve it,” he said slowly and under his breath, before he pushed himself up and walked into the bathroom with a pair of slams.

At 8:00, Kenny called to speak with whoever answered, as long as it wasn’t Jimmy. He was making his way home from the job, he said. Normally if Kenny worked, he liked to spend his money that same night. He always came home by the next morning and then slept all day. Molly shared the news, but no one said anything.

Kim just kept on, sitting at the kitchen table watching a rerun of Cops. “I’m not working tomorrow, so we’re going to church. Jimmy suggested it and I think it’s a good idea,” she said as Molly spooned mashed potatoes from a mug that was still warm from its spin in the microwave.

Molly stopped mid-bite and looked at her brother. "Jimmy suggested it? Why? You get in another fight? Prayers can't save you from juvenile hall."

His one-note laugh punctured the air. "Right, like I'm the one who needs prayers. Even Dad says it can't hurt to go," he answered.

Molly held up another spoonful, realizing not to fight Jimmy over the idea. "Fine, but not the one where people go up and give testimonies."

"Why? You need more time?" Jimmy smiled.

"Leave your sister alone or I'll give you something to pray for. She's practically got straight As. We'll go to the Methodist off Springdale Pike, the one with the thrift store and the woman pastor. They have better food anyway," agreed Kim.

"Molly has been pretty hungry lately," Jimmy said, mimicking his sister's spooning.

Molly turned to the sink and yanked up the faucet. Without feeling the temperature, she drank swallow after swallow until she had to breathe. Kim swatted her daughter across the back of the head and growled into her ear, "Come on, Molly, act like a lady."

Good Neighbor

He offers to do it for ten dollars.

"Ten dollars? For what?" she asks as she shuts the back of her old Jeep.

Mary parks on the street because the house she's renting doesn't have a garage.

She faces the skinny man on the ten-speed bike and waits.

"To shovel your walk."

"That's ok. It's not bad yet."

Mary notes his lack of gloves or shovel and the bit of snow collecting on the bill of his baseball hat.

"Well, it's going to keep coming down. I can come back when it stops."

His voice cracks open with each word, like he's spent too much time smoking in the cold.

"Thanks anyway. I'll manage."

Mary pulls the iron gate behind her and heads up the cobbled path to the front door.

"Do you know who lives in that house?" he asks.

Turning around and annoyed, Mary answers, "Which house?"

Though she already knows which house he means, Mary still falls into her habit of continuing conversations that should end. The house on the other side of hers is abandoned, and so is the one next to that. The question reminds her: it's not pretty, but she's finally living alone.

"That one," he says, pointing.

"Not sure, they have kids and I hear their German shepherd."

She looks to the right at the white two-story with the sloped porch, its small fenced yard covered in dog droppings. Given the place's history, she can't blame the tenants or the owner for its state.

Resting on the bike's seat, the man shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

"How long have you lived there?" he asks, throwing his chin toward her place.

"I've been in Tower Hill since September. I'm hoping it's a temporary thing."

Mary tries to smile.

"My best friend used to live in that white house with his wife and kids. Good place for running around and making trouble. I always liked it," he says.

"It could be nice, but it needs a coat of paint. Who knows, maybe one day someone will fix it up." She steps closer to the door, eyeing the shut gate between them.

Mary can see the man is stalling, fiddling with the gearshift and adjusting his hat. Before there is a chance for more eye contact or neighborhood chatter, she slips in the key and closes the door behind her with a slight click.

Inside her two-bedroom house, Mary makes a cup of instant coffee. She'd prefer the bite of real beans, but her clothes are still cold to the touch. She can't wait. Sitting at the round table in her kitchen, she blows into the hot water, forcing the steam around her face.

Beyond the table and out the window, Mary can see through the uninhabited house next door. The boards on the windows have been split open, perhaps even by an axe. She wonders how long the place has been empty, and how long it will stay that way. Neighbors are good, she thinks. She wouldn't mind one or two more.

The Tower Hill neighborhood depresses people, she knows that. When cars drive through, whether by accident or for the spectacle of what once was or because their grandparents grew up somewhere around here, passengers always shake their heads and give the same half-smile, the one that wonders, "What happened to this place?"

Mary knows how these streets look from the back seat of a station wagon. Her mother used to drive her and her brother down the blocks and through the alleys, the same path every year on her grandfather's birthday. She'd point out grassy lots where houses had been demolished and the grocery store that now serves as a food pantry. The remnants of the store's green awning still flap during storms.

Mary can't imagine living anywhere else right now. Her marriage had been short, but hardly sweet. She's happy to be thirty-five and living with eleven plants instead of

one man and two dogs. Her life now is just Mary, leaving early for a nurse's aide job at the hospital and coming back to the neatest house on the block.

Content as she is, she still keeps the spare kitchen chair wedged under the knob of the back door. The fields of empty houses spook her. It's like an aboveground cemetery, lined with two-story caskets that have been raided, torn apart, nailed shut, and raided all over again.

The boarded-up homes blur and the white of the snow returns. Mary pops the chair out from under the knob, and throws the door open. The cold saunters back in.

"Hey! Hey!" she yells.

Mary looks around for the guy on the bike. Without shoes, she can't step out from under the porch roof. Checking to the left and then right, she doesn't see him.

"Change your mind?"

Whipping toward the fence and the sputtering voice coming from the side of her house, she sees bones of the old neighborhood, pretty and clean under snow. Then she notices him, steering the bike into her square of yard. He extends his arm to catch some icy flecks in his hand.

"So you want me to shovel, don't you?" he asks, throwing the snow into his mouth.

"But you'll wait until it stops, right? I can't afford to pay you twice."

She wants their mutual status to be clear. She's the new girl, but she's no different, maybe just tidy and employed. The people who actually live around here have to stick together, she thinks. Maybe she can trust him to look out for her, maybe he's just a nice guy.

"No problem. I'll be back when it's over. You should stay inside. It's only going to get worse," he says.

Mary circles the dead bolt on the inside of the door with her finger.

"I should tell you about that house over there, since you just moved in and all. I mean, unless you don't care," he continues.

"You make it sound like it's something I should know."

"Well, I'd want to know. But maybe that's me, cause I was there. I mean, I used to be there a lot, hanging out with my buddy and his kids."

An image of children in loose socks sliding across the floor, while their dad and his friend sit with their elbows on their knees watching basketball, comes to Mary's mind.

"My best friend, he died in that house. People still talk about it. You really haven't heard about it?" he says.

"No. Did it happen recently? I mean, I'm sorry. But when?"

It happened years ago, long before Mary would have ever considered moving into the neighborhood. Blame it on the nostalgic family trips down, but she'd always kept tabs on Tower Hill.

A few days after the killing, she'd driven by in the afternoon. The place looked nice for the neighborhood, the kind of home where someone lit a fire every night it fell below freezing and opened the upstairs windows when the summer set in. She remembered wanting the house to look unsafe, forgotten. But, back then, it didn't. The grass was watered, along with the flowers near the front steps. There were toys on the

porch. She thought, how could someone step over blocks and bears, only to slash someone open like a tire?

At the time, Mary had been in love but not yet married. She recalled that the man's wife even did interviews with the local news station and the paper. Both used typical murder adjectives to set up the story: grisly, unexplained, senseless. Brutal killings sound so ordinary, Mary thought at the time, just like love.

Mary wants to toughen herself up enough to feel safe in her new home. She wants a garden to prune and grass to cut. She feels protective of the house next door and what it used to be. She has faith in the place, in the whole neighborhood.

"It was back in 2004."

He taps one of the bike pedals and they both watch it spin around and stop.

Mary presses on, realizing it's too late not to play dumb. She directs her questions to a story she already knows. He's dying to tell her, and she lets him relive it.

"Was it an accident?" she asks.

The skinny man grabs the handlebars. Even against the fresh snow, his white knuckles and fingers, pulled tight around the metal, look like eggs lined up in a carton. He stops and peeks out from under his bill.

"It was pretty bad."

Mary sucks a stream of winter air through her teeth and crosses her arms, wrapping her hands around her elbows.

"He was in bed with his wife. The two kids were in their rooms. Everyone was asleep."

He points to the second floor of the house on the corner.

"You see the first window, the one shutter?"

Mary looks up and nods, blocking the snow from her eyes. She'd spent a lot of time studying the house from the loveseat underneath the window in her living room when she first moved in. The closest house with people legally living in it, she was drawn to that side, the one facing the rowdy dog and the sounds of a real household. While she doesn't mind the solitude of her new home and her new life, she doesn't want to feel like an island.

"Well, it was in there. Two guys busted in the front door, ran upstairs, and stabbed him over and over in the stomach, in the neck, in the chest, everywhere," he explains.

"Oh my God. Why?"

"Well, it was an accident or a mistake or whatever you want to call it. But I blame it on the house. They were supposed to hit the second floor of that big white house, that one over there, not this one."

Mary pictures the scene and it plays out as it has before, like she had been the neighbor back then. A sunny morning. She anticipates the knocks, the turns, the footsteps. She watches herself sitting under her window, squinting as she sees the men at the door, then hearing the screams. She bangs on the window, calls the police, yells for the kids, fears for her life.

Mary follows his finger, as he points back and forth toward the other place across the street. Two houses, both run-down, more gray than white, but both big and on corners.

"So the guy that should have died, or was supposed to die, he survived. I heard he even watched the whole thing go down. Maybe he was waiting for those boys to show up. Maybe he knew something or a friend tipped him off. You see what I mean? I blame it on the house."

"Mistaken identity or something."

"Yep, a little neighborhood history, thought you'd want to know. You better hope that nobody in the house across from you is into any trouble. It's yellow, just like yours."

Cold and chewing on the inside of her bottom lip, Mary wants to get inside. She pulls some money out of her front pocket and begins to count it out.

"Here, take the ten dollars. Don't worry about shoveling the walkway. Go buy some soup or something. It's terrible out here."

"You don't need to do that. I'm trying to make some easy cold-weather cash. I'm not begging for hand-outs, especially from a new neighbor."

"Can you shovel early tomorrow? I leave by seven."

"You bet. I'm an early riser, too," he answers.

"So about the family, if you don't mind. I'm just wondering. What happened to the wife and kids? Are they still in the neighborhood?" she asks as she stuffs the money back into her pocket.

"They never left. They're still T-Hillies, if you can believe it. And living with me right down the street."

Mary chomps down and swallows. Her lips are close to frozen so it doesn't hurt, but she tastes blood. Hoping he doesn't notice, she pulls on the cuffs of her wool sweater and rubs them together in front of her face.

“Wait, you and your friend’s wife are together now? You live together?” she asks, covering her mouth.

“It’s been a few years. And the kids, well, they’re basically my kids now. I take care of them.”

Reaching inside, Mary grabs a few tissues from the box on the narrow mail table.

“What happened to your lip?” he asks.

The man lets his bicycle drop to the ground. He squats down and scoops up some snow. Walking toward her, he makes his way up the few steps to where Mary stands underneath the roof. As he cups the back of her head and neck, Mary jolts. He moves her arms out of the way and presses the snow onto her mouth.

“You should get inside,” he says.

Mary nods her head, but not enough to dislodge his grip. Breathing hard through her nose, she doesn’t look down.

She steps backward over the sill of the door and into the house, grabbing the man’s bent elbow and pulling him with her. Now that she is near him, she can see the patched tears on his down jacket and smell his mix of white bar soap and fresh air. He doesn’t look like he’s dependent on his next ten dollars.

Mary takes the snow from his hand. As she carries it to the sink, she hears him take a step to follow and then stop. She washes her hands in warm water before leaning her mouth into the stream and watching the clear go quickly red and back to clear. The cut must be small, Mary thinks as she reaches for a paper towel.

Hearing another footstep in her direction, Mary jerks again at the feel of his palm, now pressed into her neck. This time, his hand continues down before stopping at her lower back and trailing off.

She swipes at his arm and misses, instead grazing his hip. Embarrassed, she twists the paper towel and turns to face him.

“Look at that, you’re all healed. Nothing like a bit of snow to make everything look new again. So I’ll see you tomorrow?” he asks.

Mary’s eyes stay open at the suggestion. She feels stuck and lost at the sight of this visitor in her kitchen. Leaning into a chair, Mary decides she wants one of their dogs back. She’ll ask him for Gemma. He always liked Queenie better anyway.

“To shovel your walk?” the man continues, waving to break Mary’s stare.

“Right, just make it early,” she finally returns.

“Maybe you’ll have a few more minutes for another neighborhood secret,” he says as he moves to leave.

Mary watches from the front window as he shakes off the snow on his bike. With no chance for riding, he guides it back through her gate and out to the sidewalk, staggering and balancing. Once he’s swallowed up by the white, she pulls the curtain closed.

List

One by one, Henry Dise slowly pulled his fingertips away from the paper. And one by one, each small patch of pink-gray skin stuck momentarily before letting go and revealing a small wet circle. A direct line of heat pulsed from his dank armpits to his fat hands. He was hot, sticky, sweaty, clammy. He was everything you didn't want to be on your way to do something important.

Henry let out a proportionately big breath through his large nostrils and tried to kick himself. In his attempt at self-punishment, his brown leather shoe slammed into the underside of the train seat. Hardened commuters instantly glanced in his direction. The collective thought shouted out loud and clear, "Do we have a crazy on the train?" They watched and waited. Nothing followed, so the masses returned to their books, music, and blank morning stares.

Henry sat up very rigidly in his perspiration suit. The packed train car felt like the inside of an oxygen tank. He closed his eyes and attempted to inhale deeply on his own, fighting the surrounding rhythm. It was 8:30 in the morning.

Henry couldn't believe that he'd kicked the seat so hard. He wanted jump from his orange seat and hide beneath the free daily papers piled under the row in front of him. Luckily, the collective shrug blamed a nervous old man for the loud bang. No real threat there.

Henry tried to move past the embarrassingly loud kick. He had a bigger, more familiar problem. He couldn't stop sweating. His undershirt was one thing. But his finger tips? He knew people heard the kick, but was anyone noticing this?

Henry needed to get his mind off it, change his focus. He'd suffered from these sweating episodes in the past. If he didn't stop worrying, the sweat wouldn't stop coming. Then he'd start worrying about sweating, in between worrying about everything else. He'd have to wait until everyone got off the train to stand up. It had happened before.

Henry looked to his right. A young man with bright white pods in his ears. No chance with this guy, Henry thought. And to his left, a woman, around 50, her face covered by a Patricia Cornwell novel and framed by a plume of burgundy hair. Now this was someone he could talk to.

After a slight roll of his shoulders and an even slighter lick of his lips, he turned to the coiffed reader. "Can you believe this weather? I couldn't believe when I saw the weather last night. Three more days of sun, right through to Thursday. They're talking about 85 degrees. I couldn't believe it. A little warm for my taste, but not bad."

The woman shifted her book to reveal her face. She gave Henry the public transit once-over. Pretty and a bit older than he'd anticipated, she looked friendly enough.

The women nodded and curtly replied. "Yes, I did see that. Quite nice, actually."

"Well, you know I used to love these summer days. Run around with the fellas, get into some trouble. Nowadays, it's enough for me to walk around the block for the laundry."

The reader smiled in apparent agreement and returned to her own saga.

The brief round of small talk worked to calm Henry down. He felt cooler already. Until he remembered his list. He had a lot riding on it. Maybe too much.

Henry wasn't going to work, but his breath was just as palpable and heavy too. He was going to meet with a therapist. He needed help. He hoped his sweaty list would prove it.

Henry looked around to make sure no one was reading over his shoulder. He soon realized that no one really cared, especially not his lady friend.

He had dictated some of the list to his daughter as they sat in their kitchen a day earlier. But for the most part, Marisa had written it. Aside from the birth, death, and marriage dates, it basically could have been her list. Henry and his daughter had spent the afternoon sitting at the table, peeling their arms off the vinyl tablecloth, eating saltine crackers, and reviewing the timeline of his life. Marisa had a lot to add. Since she had been born, she had become the determining factor in Henry's luck. And it wasn't good.

Henry only had a few stops before his transfer. And after that, just another couple stations. No real time to get any memorizing done.

His timeline began quietly and typically. Henry didn't swim in bad luck like his daughter. He wasn't born into bad luck, but he wasn't born into money either. His luck, pre-daughter, seemed pretty good, or possibly just non-existent. For a long time, it translated into a childhood that was fairly standard. A few fights, some bad grades, a girlfriend he stole from his brother. But nothing that his parents or his brother or he himself couldn't get over.

1946 Born, Brooklyn

1950 Brother George born, Brooklyn

1951 Moved with parents and brother to Tower Hill

1963 Kennedy assassinated

1964 Graduated High School

1970 Married Pamela

After leaving his grandparents' house in Canarsie, Henry along with his parents and younger brother found a narrow, two-family house far away in Tower Hill. They lived on the ground floor and rented the top floor to another young family. Henry spent most of his time playing ball and throwing sticks in the backyard with kids from the neighboring houses.

Back then, nobody had fences. The grass ran clearly and cleanly straight across six backyards. Now, metal, fire code-meeting barriers stood solidly between each patch of property. It was impossible to peek through the security fences and see actual

neighbors or their small squares of ownership. If your house went up in flames today, those metal fences would keep you confined to your own yard. You'd be stuck with a great vantage point of the inferno, and really no option other than to watch your home sizzle and smoke. As Henry often repeated, "No one has picnics or children anymore."

During those first summers back in the fifties, kids ran from yard to yard, all day and into the night. The mothers and fathers sat on their lawn chairs drinking, talking, and smoking cigarettes. It may have seemed perfect, but it wasn't. Windows were shattered, kisses were stolen, and drinks were thrown. But on the whole, life was ordinary and manageable. It wasn't the best of the times, but it wasn't a nightmare either. The mothers wore skirts and made coffee. The fathers wore dungarees and left early in the morning. The children wore uniforms to the Catholic school and tormented each other endlessly along the way.

Henry looked up at the Monday-morning faces around the train car. His reader friend appeared to have her life together.

"So, you heading into work?" Henry asked, continuing his quest for dryness.

She dropped the book again. "Yes, I am. Another Monday morning, just like all the others."

Henry started salivating. He assumed a lot about this woman. From his hard orange seat, he figured she, and everyone else on the train, was happy and normal and employed. Not sick and poor and helpless like his daughter. He wanted so much for her. But she wanted nothing for herself.

As soon as he sat down on the rush hour train that morning, his skin started to dampen. When he noticed the small, wet marks, he clenched his teeth and shifted his

grasp. He was preparing for a quiz on his life. As he worked to recall the timeline, he pictured himself clearing his throat and standing confidently at a podium. As he closed his eyes, Henry declared the pure depth of his pain, frustration, and disappointment as if he stood before the audience of his life. His graduating class, his buddies from the neighborhood, his old partner at the heating and cooling company, all of the U.S. presidents, his wife, and even his daughter. He wanted the social worker to know just how bad it was.

Henry and Marisa had been dealing with social workers for a long time, but always for her and never for him. Henry had managed to keep his own life in a bit of order, but finally he sunk into his daughter's bottomless pit of a situation. After summoning him for thirty years, his daughter's bad luck finally reeled him in. Now his luck was just as bad. Miraculously still alive, Marisa had taken him prisoner.

Of course, he still loved her and felt a duty to make sure she would survive as long as possible. He owed it to his wife Pamela. Although he had stopped visiting her grave, he thought about Pamela every day. He needed someone to share awful news with. His friends and neighbors were tired of hearing it. Sure he talked to his friends about the weather, the rising cost of sandwiches, and his own big sleep, but his daughter? They were tired of hearing about that. That's why you get married, he believed. Bad news never stops and it is too hard to handle alone.

Marisa was diagnosed with HIV right after Pamela died. Pamela wasn't ill for very long, but it was an exhausting, scary, depressing few months. Cancer robbed Henry and Marisa of the primary energy source in their otherwise dreary family. Pamela's death had prompted Marisa to get a physical, her first in ten years. And boy was it a doozy.

Marisa spent two hours with a doctor she'd never met. Between the urine test and blood draws, she checked off many, many boxes on her physical questionnaire. Had she ever been pregnant? Yes. Had she ever had an abortion? Yes. Had she had unprotected sex? Yes. How many drinks a week? A week, she thought. How many a night, times seven. So, 35ish didn't sound too bad. Did she use drugs? Not any more. Did she have a family history of heart disease? Actually, no. Marisa had always been proud of her family medical history. Everyone, until now, had lived long lives. But now, she had to check yes in the cancer column. Another yes, she thought. At that point, Marisa's health, despite her self-medicating, self-sabotaging tendencies, was decent. Her vitals were good. Her weight was below average. Despite the grim warnings about unprotected sex and substance abuse, she actually left the doctor's office smiling that cloudy day almost fifteen years earlier. She hadn't visited a doctor in so long. It hadn't been that bad. She felt healthy and hopeful, and surprisingly so considering the last few months of hospital visits and funeral arrangements.

She remembered the doctor saying, "If you don't hear from me, consider yourself lucky. If there are any issues with your blood tests or anything, I'll call you in a week to ten days."

Marisa almost forgot about her physical and the full battery of tests. The visit to the doctor had almost revitalized her. Sure, she was grieving for her mother, but her attitude about her own life was changed. She felt a sense of focus that was unfamiliar and borderline intoxicating.

Eight days later on May 4th, 1995, Marisa picked up the phone at her parents' place after the fifth ring, just catching the call.

“Hello?”

“Yes, this is Marisa.”

“Oh, hi Dr. Adler. How are you?”

“Sure, I can come in and talk. Is something wrong?”

“Yes, I understand, but I’d rather come alone. My father is finally back at work, and I don’t want to worry him.”

“Ok, so tomorrow at ten. Thank you, Dr. Adler.”

That was the last time Marisa would thank a doctor. Marisa visited Dr. Adler’s office the next day and was escorted to his actual office, not to an examining room. She waited for ten minutes, and had started to inspect the family and pet photos on his desk when he finally walked in. He shut the door and adjusted the lapel of his lab coat.

“Marisa, how are you doing today?”

“Well, I’m not sure yet. I’ll guess I’ll find out,” she said weakly. She felt her fresh, new-found focus begin to recede. In a wave that pushed on the inside of her the whole of her face, the anger, tears, and heat started to pound.

“I know we briefly discussed the possible outcomes of risky behavior like unprotected sex and drug abuse. I think you understand that you’ve set a dangerous stage for yourself, health-wise,” explained the doctor quite seriously.

“Yes, I understand,” Marisa whispered as she attempted to subdue the growing mass in her throat and chest.

“Well, I don’t know how to say this other than to just say it. And trust me, it’s not an easy thing to say.”

Marisa folded her hands and crossed her ankles and looked down at her fingers.

“Your test results came back positive for HIV. Of course, we will test you again. But false positives are rare. Yes, they do happen occasionally, but I just want you to be prepared for the worst.”

Marisa looked at the doctor. He looked so tough and strong, but sad. She pictured him pulling up to a big, worn country house in the middle of nowhere and straightening his suit jacket as he stepped out of the car. As he approached the front door, he repeated the name of a soldier. He knew exactly how to share horrendous news and tell parents and wives that their sons and husbands had passed.

She took a minute to allow some tears to drop from her cheeks. Then she stared back at the doctor. Another wave hit her, cresting and coming down from her forehead to her chin. The soft tremble worked its way into her stomach, through her arms and legs, and to the ends of each soft, brown hair on her body. She knew she was a casualty.

“So, what do I need to do?” she managed.

Speaking slowly, he replied, “Well, first we’ll re-test you. And once we get the results back, you’ll come back to see me here and we’ll discuss the options.”

Marisa’s second test came back positive. She was back in Dr. Adler’s office the next week with HIV and without anything else.

Give It Up

He didn't walk, he ran. He didn't rise up, he jumped. And he certainly didn't think, he just gave it up.

An open-minded kid, he'd try anything. The slugs, he licked. The worms, he ate. The weird pink soup that Mrs. Kovaleski served up after school, he wolfed down. But he wasn't a show-off. He just did things to do them. Well-positioned in an adolescent nook somewhere between leader and follower, Matty Muhleman was all in. Always.

"Sure," he'd say in an indifferent tone. The new age Matty Muhlemans probably say, "I'm down" or "Whatever" with the same coolly lapsed enthusiasm.

Having moved back to the States after four years in West Germany because of his father's exporting gig, eight-year-old Matty was way behind on the important fascinations of the mid-1980s. Luckily, his family had lived in Munich near a U.S. Army base, providing him access to some pop culture from the states. Every Sunday morning,

he listened to American Top 40 with Casey Kasem on the radio. He knew a-ha, the entire Thriller album, Footloose, and that good Sheena Easton song.

But beyond those hits and what he'd gathered from the weekly episode of "Solid Gold" the Army played via satellite, he knew nothing of an American kid-hood. No "You Can't Do That on Television." No Cinnamon Toast Crunch. No Commodore 64. His parents still didn't have a color television.

After Deutschland, America felt like an amusement park and Matty had a season pass. Every classmate and neighbor had something that required introduction. Computer games like King's Quest. Sisters with Cabbage Patch Kids. Fluff and peanut butter sandwiches. The Quirks, the flashy, VCR-owning family next door, even took Matty to browse the Beta section at the video store. Sure, he'd seen "E.T." before, but dubbed in German. One Tuesday afternoon after watching "Annie" with Molly Quirk, he ran home.

"I think I'm gonna like it here!" he sang to his mother.

"That's great. Now set the table or you'll get cold mush for dinner."

Inside a wide ring of raccoon-filled hills, Matty's new town was nothing like the chalets or high, solid fences of German living. As far as he could tell, Tower Hill had a mix of two-story clapboards for families, dinky one-stories with lacy curtains for old people, plus a bunch of industrial warehouses that glowed and stank day and night. He embraced this new world. There was even a country club and a 7-Eleven. And Slurpees. Ahh, Slurpees.

His own house was strange, a bi-level. Upon entering, a decision had to be made. Up or down. No in between.

Given Matty's nature, he accepted invitations from many kids in school. Even girls wanted to play with him.

"Matty knows all the words to *Papa Don't Preach*. Can he sleep over?"

While his mom wouldn't let him stay at a girl's house overnight, she did let kids hang out in their driveway and listen to Matty's boombox, his recent birthday present.

One Friday after school, Erin, a girl from down the street, was teaching Matty how to do a headspin. They put a flattened moving box on the grass and blasted the radio. Matty's snake and backspin were getting pretty good and fast, even on cement. He hoped Erin's older brother, the neighborhood's best breakdancer, would come by and show them some moves.

"Do you want to come with me and my family to this thing on Sunday? I can bring a friend. It'll be fun. They'll be lots of kids."

Matty, upside down, let his feet flop and skid onto the corrugated section.

"Let me ask my mom," he answered.

"Ok, awesome. My mom told me that we can pick you up at three and be home by six for dinner."

Matty opened the front door and yelled up into the house.

"Mom, can I go with Erin and her family on Sunday?"

"Where? What time?"

"Three! There'll be lots of kids!"

"Of course!"

That night, Matty's parents took him to the hot dog shop for dinner. He'd heard about the cheese dog and begged to go all week. He already decided he was going to get his with ketchup.

Matty and his parents sat on the stools in the window and looked out over the sidewalk. Across Main Street, a man and woman in the narrow jewelry store pulled the display, rows of diamonds and gold, from the window and laid down a piece of brown velvet in its place. They disappeared into the back for a few minutes before shutting off the lights and locking up.

"I know how they get the cheese in it," Matty said.

"How?" his dad asked.

"They use a special tiny needle to shoot it in. Then pull it out really fast so nothing escapes."

"You might be right," his father answered.

"So what is this thing you're going to on Sunday?" asked Matty's mother.

"It's at the Vo-Tech."

"Aren't you a little young to learn welding? Who are you going with?" asked Matty's dad.

"Erin."

"Have we met Erin? Does he live in the neighborhood?" pressed his dad.

"No, Roger, Erin is a girl, with an E. But yes, I've met her and she lives in the neighborhood."

"Oh, so you're going somewhere with a girl? Do you like her?"

"We breakdance together, duh."

Matty's dad took a big last bite of his second chili-dog and brushed his hands on his pants.

"Let's go for a walk."

"Can we get ice cream? I want Rocky Road."

On Sunday afternoon, Erin's family showed up in a wood-paneled station wagon and honked in the driveway. When Matty ran out, Erin's dad smiled and jerked his thumb toward the back of the car. Erin pushed down the handle from inside and the rear door swung open. Matty hopped in. He quickly noticed their ironed clothes and non-velcro shoes, and glanced down, suddenly ashamed of his He-Man t-shirt.

Erin tapped his knee.

"Don't worry. It doesn't matter what you wear. My mom always makes us dress up."

As they turned into the parking lot, a stream of more floral print dresses and pleated khaki pants filed through the school's main entrance.

Matty's anticipation wiped out any embarrassment he had over his Reeboks. Leaning into the side window, he knew this thing was going to be awesome.

With Erin, her brother, sister and parents, Matty entered into the high-pitched hum of the auditorium. They sat in a middle row, and Matty swiveled around onto his knees, taking it all in. He didn't see anyone from school. Sinking down onto the dark red cushion, he brainstormed the possibilities. Maybe it was a rock band or a breakdancing

demo. He saw the bright purple banners, the microphone stand, the lights slowly changing on the stage, and couldn't stop his grin.

Just as his smile started to hurt, Matty noticed a man with his head hanging down and a microphone in his hand swaying toward the center of the stage. Matty grabbed Erin's arm, shaking it furiously, and pointed. Her eyes followed his and she nodded. She put her finger to her lips.

The crowd honed in on the lumbering man, too. Everyone hushed to silence. Then, set off by some heavy drumbeats, the man raised his head and his arms up to the audience. The clapping and the yelling exploded.

The man jumped up and shoved the mic practically into his mouth. The speakers vibrated and squawked with his forceful voice.

“Give! It! Up! Give it up to the Lord! People!”

Erin yanked Matty's hand and pulled him to his feet.

“Giveitup! Giveitup! Giveitup!”

“Come on!” she yelled.

The next night after a dinner of fettuccine alfredo, the phone rang. Matty's dad answered. A deep, fatherly chuckle followed.

“Well, thank you? Is this a prank?”

Matty put down his spelling workbook, intrigued.

“No, I don't think that's possible,” his dad said.

He started mouthing words, and giving Matty and his mother the scrunched-shoulder-scrunched-face look of amused confusion.

“Oh really? Just a minute.”

He pushed the phone into his belly, and glanced over to Matty.

Matty’s mother closed *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* without marking her page and folded her hands over it.

“Matty, did you give yourself up to the Lord?” his father asked.

“I don’t know, maybe,” he replied. “I walked up to the front with Erin.”

His dad returned to the phone.

“He’s decided to take himself back.” He hung up.

Matty quickly looked back at his homework assignment.

“Mom, what’s this word?”

She didn’t answer. He felt the eyes.

“The word can wait. What’s this about you giving yourself up to the Lord?” she asked.

“I don’t know. The guy took me behind a purple curtain and I told him I knew what he meant. That was it.”

His dad was pacing. “Did you sign anything? Did he touch you? Where the hell were you? The Vo- Tech? Linda, can you explain this?”

Matty answered, “I wrote my name and address, and said yes a few times, that’s it. What’s the big deal?”

“Who are these people, this Erin the girl’s parents? Who takes someone else’s kid to this crap? We should have them over for dinner,” his father decided.

“I think you’re right,” answered Matty’s mother. “What is Erin’s last name?” she asked as she put down her book and walked to the cabinet that held the phone book.

“Peters. Can she come, too?”

“Then we’ll have to invite all the kids. How many of them are there?” pressed his dad.

“A bunch, maybe five.”

“Typical. I say no kids. I want real face time with these schmucks. Get them on the horn, would you dear? You can make the ham loaf. And son, no play dates with Erin until further notice.”

When Erin’s parents claimed they wouldn’t be able to make dinner for a few months, Matty’s father was floored and so forced into another plan. After staking out the green rundown house just past the junior high school, Mr. Muhleman decided what needed to be done.

The next Saturday when Matty and his mother left to shop for new cleats, his dad set the oven knob to 350 before the garage door hit the concrete. Faced with two boxes of Fudge ‘n Nut brownie mix on the counter in front of him, he greased two pans. He’d made a cake for Linda’s 30th birthday a few years earlier, so he had baking experience. With the sliding door to the deck open so the sweet smell won’t linger, he dumped the powder, eggs, oil and the little nut packets into one giant bowl and stirred until smooth. Satisfied with the consistency, he raised his eyebrows and washed his hands.

He walked back to the bedroom and opened the closet, practically dancing. Tucked into his briefcase between the textbook load of pages he lugged around everyday, he found the final touch for his secret dessert. Still ducked down into the closet, he tapped the small box on his fingertips and nodded just thinking of the care packages he

organized for freshman pledges when he was Phi Delt president. Old-fashioned chocolate Ex-Lax.

Matty's dad chopped all 24 pieces into tiny bits, his large muscular arms contracting furiously under the free-with-subscription Sports Illustrated shirt, and added them to the mix. After a few good whips of the spatula, he filled the pans and put them in the oven.

It took five drafts, and almost the full 35 minutes of bake time, but he finally reached an appropriate version. (deleted lines: *What's next, the gun show? If that priest touched my son, I will slaughter you. Would Erin like to join us at our next Satanic cult meeting? She doesn't have to drink blood, but it's encouraged. May you burn in hell.*)

When the brownies cooled, he cut them and put them into a paisley gift box with maroon tissue paper. On one of Linda's nature scene note cards, he penned in careful script:

Dear Doug and Susan Peters,

The next time you invite our son Matty somewhere we would love to chaperone.

Please enjoy these treats with a pitcher of your own Kool-Aid!

Warm regards,

Roger and Linda Muhleman

He delivered, with a running Ford Escort engine and a ding-dong ditch, the brownies to the Peters' front step before Matty and Linda returned. He hoped the family didn't have a dog. Or maybe he prayed they did.

Step Out

I should have lit up on the porch. If my old man taught me anything, it's that I should always think. And to him that meant light your cigarette before. Before anything.

I could see the rain was falling, even felt a few drops hit my hand as I pushed open the screen door. But I stepped out anyway. I knew it was coming, had checked in with the local weatherman. Instead of lighting my cigarette like I was taught to do every morning, I got distracted first by the rain, and then by the jukebox playlist that's been running through my head for the last six months.

No one understands the heartache.

No one feels the pain.

Cause no one ever sees the tears.

When you're crying in the rain.

Since my old man died, the house has been quiet. My mom's not a crier or a talker or a dreamer. She's Slavic. Cold and hard and practical, but her soup will warm you up to anything. So let's just say we've been eating a lot of mushroom barley and lentil. She never says anything about him. Even if I say the old man used to love this movie, more than likely a crappy blockbuster or something with Bruce Willis or a western, she just nods and keeps on reading her book. She's pretty, but square. Caring, but pragmatic. Rough, but soft. Me, for one, I've liked the stream of quiet nights and the lack of questions or pressure. I know she likes me there under the family roof with her. It's not a family roof if you live under it alone.

The rain is a good place to cry. I mean, if you have to do it, if you have to cry. Just adding drops to more drops, I guess. And you don't need an umbrella. The lack of an umbrella probably helps to hide your tears. If you have to cry, which I don't, but I do need a smoke. And the rain is not the place for that.

Ooh too many tears, too many tears

oh they drown just like rain

oh too many tears

Wet tobacco is worse than wet sand. You can't build a castle with a mote or a turtle or a makeshift pillow for your sunburned head. There's nothing you can do with it, and this single-wind-gust umbrella is not going to protect my last cigarette. So after a

block of not smoking, I dip under the awning of a place that's for rent, a former stationary store. Low risk, my angle. The security gate has been pulled for years at this point. I can't say exactly. It's been tagged and re-tagged by some of Tower Hill's more persistent derelicts. The loose metal bangs as I slump against it, feeling a little shady, but happy to be out of the cold drizzle. I have my own street-side smoking room, and a view. Of course, I'm still looking at a street that's been around the corner from me my whole life.

I close the umbrella and lean it against a security gate that has nothing to protect, and finally light the last one in my pack, today's morning cigarette. The only one of the day that actually tastes like a cigarette, the way it tasted the first time I tried one. Relief.

I inhale hard and slow. Menthol. You smoke menthols? Yes. I was raised on these cigarettes, I always say in defense. The mint, deceptively clean. My lungs absorb the smoke. I feel them crackle, but not break. Contract, release, all over again. My old man smoked these, so I smoke them. Today, the short walk from my mom's house to here, almost a full block, felt very long.

How your heart it breaks

And you can only take so much

Walk on, walk on

Resting my brown leather shoe on the lip of the gate, I lean back and look down at the cigarette between my index and middle fingers. I point the cherry to my face and

watch the paper and tobacco leaves burn. A sense of lapsed camaraderie comes over me. It's not as clear as loneliness.

The old man and I stood under our porch awning and outside the back door to the bar he owned for the last twenty years, The Palace, many times, talking while we smoked. We'd just look around and talk about what whatever was passing, whatever happened to be around. It was what we did together.

An old school lazy smoker, he'd let the ash build and build until it finally lopped off on its own. Sometimes he seemed to forget he was smoking, going minutes between drags. Cigarettes, at least for as long as I've been smoking them, have never been cheap. So where my old man was carefree, I continue to be careful. Although if I had to pick now, I'd die the way he did. Hard and fast. Not totally carefree, but certainly not careful.

I decide I'm going in late for my job selling office supplies to medium-size companies. Pushing pens, paper, and toner. I'll say I got a client call on the way in. "Well, as long as you're still bringing in business," the boss will say, and without any further inquiry. Content with my excuse, I let my head relax and clang it once more against the metal.

The stationery store had been kind of a dump. Greeting cards are all the same, whether you sign them or open them. They make you smile in an embarrassing way, make you feel corny and lame and nostalgic. I stopped buying them, except for my mom. She wouldn't know how to open a gift or sit at the table on Mother's Day if she didn't have cards to open. For everyone else, like my brothers or if I have a girlfriend, I just draw a funny picture on an envelope and stick some money in it.

After my old man passed away, I told my mom that our yellow three-bedroom was a house of greeting cards. She didn't think it was funny. I wasn't surprised. On the kitchen table, and all over the whole place really, there were neat stacks of muted colored envelopes holding cards with falling leaves or flying birds or watercolor sunsets. My mom collected them and organized them, then filed them away in an intricate system of plastic grocery bags. In black permanent marker, she labeled them all "Bill, 10/18/10 – Cards." Then on each bag she specified Bill's Family, Margaret's Family, Neighborhood, or The Palace. Although, I thought she could have put the neighborhood and The Palace in the same bag. There was a lot of overlap. Most of the people who went to my old man's bar lived in Tower Hill anyway. But she said, no, she wanted to keep them separate. "Not everyone goes to The Palace, Stevie." I guess not. She put the four tightly-knotted bags in a box with some other funeral memorabilia, taped it up, and had me stick it in the closet in my brother's old room. I stuck in a copy of the funeral song list that I had put together from The Palace jukebox. Of course, we heard all the same songs over and over again later that night, after the moms and out-of-towners went home.

You're gonna cry, cry, cry and you'll cry alone,

When everyone's forgotten and you're left on your own.

You're gonna cry, cry, cry.

I take a breath before my next drag. Give the lungs a break. I never bought into my old man's philosophy on smoking. "If you get stuck on something, take a smoke break. The nicotine will get your brain right back to buzzing." He spent a lot of time

trying to get his brain to buzz, trying to figure out his inventions and shocking himself in the messy workshop he had in our basement. I can't imagine his brain activity during the three-pack-a-day days. My mom let him smoke in the basement, but that was it. So of course when I started smoking at fifteen, I started hanging out in the basement too. Not anymore. Now I smoke on the porch, always. It was fine when he was down there working. We'd sit on the worn vinyl bar stools and shoot the shit. I'd let him try to explain his latest revolution in electrical resistivity and look at the confusing contraption he'd built to prove it. Even when I was a kid, stealing a few Kool Milds from his desk or looking for his stash of weed in the ceiling tiles, I was cool with being down there. But now, I go down there and look around at all of his scribbled equations and measurements and drawings, and I turn around and run right back upstairs. It's as close as I've come to seeing a ghost.

Exhaling, I watch the smoke escape the cover of the vacant shop's awning and disappear into the rain. The card store behind me was closed way before last fall, and way before we closed down The Palace. Probably would have been a few good days of business for Suzanne, the neighborhood woman who ran the stationary shop. Even ten years after she'd taken it over from her mother, it still smelled the way I remember it as a kid. Like it smells outside now, metallic and musty, fresh rain on a dirty street. The unappetizing smell never got to the old man. He thought Suzanne was "pretty cute and worth taking a look at, even if it means I have to spend a little money on your mother."

A few years back, the last time I remember being in there, Suzanne told me the place was struggling. Sure, her rent had stayed low, but she still needed to make some money to keep it open. Her two little daughters were running around and playing in the

aisles of cards, laughing as they knocked over a display of pastel collectibles. I still see Suzanne at the laundromat, folding small tank tops and bright skirts. She's probably fifteen years older than me, but still good-looking in that motherly belly-pouch kind of way so I don't mind reminiscing with her about the old business or my old man. She was sad to lose the store, it having been in her family for so long. When my mom and I decided to close down The Palace, I thought of her a lot. She'd let down her family, her history and her neighborhood. And I felt I'd done the same.

And you know that she will trust you

For you've touched her perfect body with your mind.

Taking a deep pull, I feel the crystal shattering all over again. Refreshing and dangerous, like some cryptic magic show. It's harsh, which is why I like it, I guess. I move my foot and it rattles the gate that is held down by a serious, rusted padlock. I saw a couple from the neighborhood on the train last weekend, another pair of shop-owners trying to hang on. My old man never talked to them. Their thin retail space was a few blocks past his bar, and he hardly ever went that far. But he always made comments about their jewelry store, and how he doubted they made any money. "Must be the women going in there, cause it sure ain't the men. The men don't get past The Palace with any money left in their wallets."

I was oblivious to them until it was too late. I assume they'd counted out the cash in the register, checking the previous day's receipts, and then pulled down their own gate to close up shop, looking behind every few seconds to make sure no one was watching,

that no one was on to them. The husband gripped the shopping bag of money, it had been an okay week. Maybe people are starting to spend again, he'd probably thought.

Once they got on the train, it was basically over. So much for being ritualistic and exact in your practices. Do it the same stupid way every week, and somebody is going to catch on. And somebody did. Followed them until the perfect moment. Right before the train doors closed, at the first twitch of the bell. Stand clear.

I wanted to scream back at the pair, after they'd finished their own shrieking. Don't bring a sack of cash onto the train with only your 84-year-old, cane-wielding wife to protect you. By the time he yelled "Stop that man! He took my money!" in his heavy Russian accent, it was beyond too late. It was funny. And sad. But come on, old jewelry shop owner, wise up. I know, I know, you've been doing this for years. Running this same nerve-wracking route from your shitty little shop in Tower Hill into your downtown bank, the only bank you've ever used, ever since you came to this country, and every time with your wife, your loyal look-out. Well, loyalty let you down. And the spry guy with the big cajones ran up the stairs, after that pudgy Good Samaritan couldn't quite pin him down.

I let out a strong thread of smoke, as if to point, and shake my head. There'd been a black woman, standing even closer to the couple, her head probably still shaking too. "Bringing a whole bag of money onto the train. People is crazy. But for once it wasn't a black," she said with a laugh. "Where can I catch the blue line?" "Next stop," the train chorus instructed.

Mental wounds not healing

Life's a bitter shame

I'm going off the rails on a crazy train

I'm going off the rails on a crazy train

Another drag, an addiction calmed. Now I can think. Looking around at the awnings of the other closed shops in their various stages of fade and abandon, I switch to the cool-guy pincer grasp and take a quick pull. The nerves well up every time I pay attention to my neighborhood, my hood, my home. This ground, these stores, and these people have been stomped. Almost every storefront is a front. Nothing to store, nothing to sell. I hate to think about the old days. It makes me feel old. I'm only twenty-eight. But I remember. I remember the good old days, which weren't, apparently, as good as my old man's good old days. "Now those were the good old days," he used to say. "People had respect. They worked hard. Not like today. But thank God for your mother, she still makes a hell of meatloaf." Then he laughed and pushed back in his chair. Then everyone else laughed too, including my mom.

I would do anything for love,

Anything you've been dreaming of,

But I just won't do that...

Now that I'm well into this one, I've stopped noticing every drag. I remember the first one, the first hit, but that's it. At this point, I'm not enjoying it. I'm just smoking.

The only place still in business on this long block, the corner store, opens early, so I can see Jonny Jackson, the older brother of my ex-girlfriend. The back of his fat-fucking head, which continues to get fatter the longer he sits behind that counter making sandwiches and on rare occasions actually selling a sandwich, is taking up space in the window. Michelle, the sister, and I dated for four years. I still believe she loved me. But not as much as she loved to let her brother think we were going to get married. He threatened to leave the family, the store, the neighborhood if I proposed. I don't know where he got the idea. I was like twenty years old. What guy wants to get married when he's twenty, especially if she's not pregnant? I just let him think it might happen. We never had any major throw-down or confrontation. Plenty of tense moments, sure. But the guy was and is such a bitchy little whiner. He's still the same, but now he's a bitchy fat-ass whiner. I don't know who liked pissing him off more, me or Michelle.

But oh the time it takes

When you're all alone

Someday you'll find someone

That you can call your own

But till then ya better...

Amped up, I feel something again and inhale with some purpose, like I'm about to drop the butt to the ground and fight. The prick's been working the register since we graduated high school. Or since I graduated high school, at least. He dropped out to man the shop. I'll admit, he got lucky. Somehow, he and his pops kept his business going, but

only because they sell lottery tickets, cigarettes, and beer. The only things people spend money on around here. Myself, very included, except for the lotto tickets. Now that is a waste of money.

Since my job is downtown, my Tower Hill neighbors think I have money. While I don't have to wear a suit, I don't have to wear construction boots, either. Essentially, the locals think I'm a little fancy. Some think I'm gay. They don't even call me by my name. It's Old Man Bill Bauer's son, they say. But you know what, I could give a shit. In fact, I secretly like the fact they think I'm gay. It's like some rainbow shroud, protecting me when I walk home. I like to think the rumor keeps some people from talking to me. Right after my old man died, everyone said "Oh sorry to hear..." But then, when I decided to keep my job instead of take over his bar, well, that about sealed my fate as far as the neighborhood goes.

I didn't want to own his bar, even if he left it to me. I wasn't him. I didn't want to pour out stiff drinks to all the broken-down souls I grew up with. I didn't want to spend my life reminiscing. The decision, my decision, broke me. None of my old man's inventions ever worked. The bar, with its pinball machines, trashed bathrooms, and three-dollar cocktails had been his only viable idea. Like the corner store, The Palace was a place where people still spent their money. I just didn't want to define my neighbors by the drinks they ordered. I didn't want to become a neighbor. I'm still trying to get out, or at least get away. Of course, I still live with my mom. But I have reasons. The main one being, I can't leave my mom. She'd be alone.

I take another hit of the menthol. This time it's not my lungs but my brain that feels a certain familiar surge. Not of wisdom or thought, or anything useful, but of

energy. The nicotine has finally reached its saturation point. I feel a little pulse in my temples. I think I'm awake.

With my lightning bolts a-glowin'

I can see where I am going

With my lightning bolts a-glowin'

I can see where I am going

Another quick hit as the filter gets closer to my lips. This is the feeling my old man used to talk about. The point when you think the cigarette is helping you think. Like any drug, you start to feel the effect. As a kid, I admired his explanation, and it made me realize thinking was important. My mom never said anything made her think. And really, now that he's dead I'm starting to understand the full range of his crazy bastard-ness. He was tall and lanky and bearded and out in the neighborhood at all hours. The other kids, until they were drinking age, were scared of him. I think I was scared of him too. And well past the age of twenty-one.

Now people in the neighborhood are scared of me. And probably because I'm not like my old man. I feel bad for the neighborhood, for the people, for the stores, but I'm just not going to go down with it.

I flick my cigarette butt into the street and it lands just past the curb in the puddle forming around the sewer. Maybe that will be my last smoke, my last smoke break. I know I've got to quit, or I may just end up like my old man.

*Ah, one look in my eyes
and you can tell that's true.*

Other Stories

Dynamite Man

The son was born to an ugly mother. But he wasn't bothered by it, as they didn't accept visitors and she rarely approached the doorknob. Whatever they needed, the boy collected on trips down the mountain. She just waited, keeping her large hands warm by flipping them like steaks over the fire.

"At least she's here," he thought when he could no longer watch as she rocked in her chair, reading and eating crackers.

In recent months, the boy had developed a gag reflex when looking at his mother. He trained himself to swallow and look toward the windows. He hoped she didn't notice his sour face, but he couldn't make it stop.

The general bite, and so bile, of his existence grew sharper. Though it felt silly, especially after so many years, he still believed a father could arrive one day. The notion of this strange invisible man consumed him. He couldn't make that stop either.

Often when the son prepared his daily toast, a dark rye his mother kneaded and baked weekly, he thought of the love his father showed them. Twice a year the man slid an envelope of cash under the red front door while they slept. Inside, the typed notes were always the same. One read *winter potatoes* and the other, which arrived six months later, read *summer peaches*. The boy could see the spot where envelopes landed as he came down the stairs in his slippers, and so looked every day to see if anything had come during the night.

On cool mornings, the son chopped firewood for his mother. Later in the afternoons, she crammed the freshly cut logs into the stove and watched them burn. Over time, the trees thinned and so the shade lessened. The boy liked the space of the expanding lawn and shaped it to keep the outer edge as smooth as nature would allow him. He hoped it would keep on expanding and spiraling out around their A-frame house until all the trees were ashes in his mother's fireplace.

In good sunlight, the triangular roof now looked like it would burst from the earth. But after a storm, when the boy loved to run outside, the house looked like a sinking arrow, easily pushed down by the heavy, bending trees. The son expected to turn around and have the house gone one day.

The boy had inherited his mother's size, and the sloped walls of his attic room forced him to crouch to get into bed. But once settled under his canvas blanket, he dreamed of his wife. She would have narrow hips and thin lips. Unlike his mother, who preferred them whole and raw, his wife would eat her carrots peeled, cut into thin rounds and cooked in butter. The sheen would stick to her lips as she slept, and he would kiss her to taste what she had tasted.

On the son's birthday, which came as a surprise and on a different day each year, the mother prepared the same cake, sticky with jam. The son smiled and chocked it down in thanks.

For the boy's sixteenth year, his mother picked May 13th, a lovely day as the wildflowers were blowing in waves. After lunch and during the sweets, she presented his father's annual birthday letter.

"But Mother, why is it so small?" he asked, accustomed to a tomb of tales detailing his father's worldly adventures. He had fifteen editions lined up on a shelf over his bed, each bunch of pages tied with leather rope at the lefthand corners. This year, the letter was just one page.

Tears burned his eyes as he recognized the handwriting. The boy sipped from his water several times saying, his hands shaking.

You are no longer a child so it is time for truth. Your father is not traveling the world by sea, nor is he making peace or solving crimes. My dear son, your father is a dynamite man. He stays way up in the north, away from any people. The country is constructing a new railroad and your father is the only dynamite man they have. He receives a map every few months with instructions on where to take the dynamite and what needs to be blown up. He takes down hillsides and turns boulders to dust. He cannot travel by train himself, but only on foot because of the danger he carries in a box around his neck. You know he stops here twice a year with the money. Now you know why he can't come in. It's not because he doesn't love you. He doesn't want to hurt you, and if he came in he could. But I dream of him every night as I'm sure you do, too. For the last fifteen birthdays, I have

written out his tales as they come to me in sleep. Your father is a dynamite man.

His work is dangerous and you should be proud.

Happy Birthday My Son.

Love, Your Mother

The boy looked at her across the table. Through their matching glassy blue eyes, they stared. He managed to say, "I don't want a letter from you, Mother. He didn't send one?"

With her hands folded in her lap, she smiled in her slow way and revealed the raspberry kernels stuck in her teeth. She nodded, shaking off the moment. "Don't rush to figure everything out, my son. It takes time to build a good fire."

At the end of that sixteenth spring, the son decided to look for work. "Our winter blankets are thin, Mother. It is time for new ones," he pleaded, knowing she wouldn't spend on anything beyond food and milk. She just nodded, sensing his need for warmth, and hoped the summer sun would provide enough.

One morning with the wood already cut, the mother asked her son to drop off a letter to the newspaper. She told him where to turn left and where to descend the hill past the dairy farm like she always did when he went town. When he arrived on Main Street, he found the mountain's only newspaper had closed down some months earlier. After

pacing in the road until the envelope was wet in his hand, he ripped it open. His mother's note read:

Please run for four weeks: Seeking good girl. Should be quiet and make soup. Any size. Please send letters to 1 Mountain Lake Lane.

There was enough money for plenty of lard and bread, even if he ate like his mother. The son nodded, put the money in his pocket, and left the letter behind a flowering spicebush. The summer was just beginning, and his mother wouldn't need a fire for months. He would find someone for his nights, and before the first snow.

Caught

I try to kill it with an iron skillet. My wrist snaps under the weight and the pan slams down with a terrible clang. The little sucker, shielded by the rattling burner's grate, drops back down into the safety of my stove, my cabinets, my walls.

I open the oven door. *I will get you. Messing with me is suicide, my friend.*

I'm inhumane when it comes to mice. They're sneaky and small and hide in places I don't even know exist. This evening, I will have company for dinner. *So long mouse, the table will be set for eight. You'd best disappear.*

"Where are you?" I ask as I wedge the cell phone between my ear and my shoulder, pulling my hair up into a bun. Though I just turned forty-one, I still think I can get away with a messy up-do.

"You need to get mouse traps."

"Now? I'm almost home with the wine and liquor."

“Please, the hardware store is on your way. And get the snappers.”

I can't deal with the squealing that comes with the glue. If there's a lull in conversation or a pause in the music, I don't want to hear the poor little bastard squeaking and thrashing about in his pest-y way. If he catches only a corner, he could very well drag the sticky sheet out into the middle of the floor in an attempt to get away.

I have caught other mice. Most have been clean kills, with little mess. Of course, one got stuck in a hole in the wall with the trap clamped down on its tail. The sound of the thin piece of wood flopping against the back of the cupboard was desperate and violent. When I finally conjured up the nerve to pull him out, he wriggled like a mad man as I dropped him into a plastic bag, tied it up and threw it into a garbage can on the street.

I hurry over to help Jeremy. Parties give him license to buy whatever he wants.

We carry the bags into the kitchen. Cabernet, Sauvignon Blanc, Dewar's, Ketel One, seltzer, tonic. Mentally, I'm past the party and the clean-up. The mouse is dead. I'm thinking about tomorrow morning, my walk, drinking tea in the quiet.

“Where are the traps?”

Jeremy looks at me, runs his hand through his graying hair and glances at the tan coat and navy scarf he has just put on the back of the chair.

I look back at him, and let my thoughts stay thoughts.

“I'll go. Just get the bar ready,” I say.

I release my hair, throw on my denim jacket, and grab my big purse so I can stow the goods safely, not in a flimsy hardware store bag. It's an elevator conversation I want to avoid. People assume you're dirty or lazy. I'm neither. If I see a mouse, I catch it.

Stepping into the carpeted elevator, I look in the gold-rimmed mirror and inspect my face in the new light. While not as honest as a dressing room fluorescent, this elevator's large bulbs have never done my skin any favors. Some mornings I stand facing the doors, ready to pop out into the lobby as they slide open. Other days, when I feel the pull to walk my Manhattan streets, I close in on the mirror and find the imperfections.

When we first moved into our apartment eleven years ago, I put on my makeup in the elevator as I attempted to get to work on time. It was simple and quick, mascara and lip balm, easily accomplished and put away in under a minute. Back then, I felt so Holly Golightly-ish about New York City. A girl about town, but married, employed and secure. My assistant editor position at a women's magazine helped me stay in the social loop, even on a pretty low salary. Jeremy and I were young and out late most nights. We held hands, we teased, we kissed, on the streets, in cabs, and in the elevator. Now, most of the spaces we live and travel in have become staid and cold, alive with memory, but bogged down by life.

In the span of nine floors, I do a full-body scan. Head-to-toe, the way I hope a dirty old man or pretty young thing would still look at me. Our guests will arrive in a few hours. There is not much I can do.

Thank God, the hardware store is empty. I scour the "pest control" section. I want the classic, the neck breaker. I buy the nine pack and take an extra six blocks to get home.

In the middle of the elevator I stand, thankful to be alone for a minute before my hostess duties begin, and smile into the mirror. You bring me up, you bring me down. My cheeks are flushed from the unnecessary steps and the cool April air. I feel inviting.

Walking in, I half-expect a kiss from Jeremy. He's in serious work mode, which wouldn't have stopped him a few years ago. These parties used to be great events for us – we'd plan, make lists, divide responsibilities, work together. It felt healthy and right. Nonetheless, he's pulled the bar together, cut garnishes, and put out cocktail napkins.

Now I'm starting to feel the pressure of incoming company. Trying to ignore the feeling that always turned my mother into a monster before any family gathering and every holiday meal, I stay quiet and assess what needs to get done.

Our six-person guest list is t-shirt, button-down, downtown, uptown. The raclette grill dictates the head count, so there are eight of us all together. Kara and Ted, married architects who work at Jeremy's firm. Maura, an interior designer, and her girlfriend Camille. Letia and Mike, an art director at my publishing company and her painter husband. And us, Jeremy and Adrienne.

Jeremy and I are on auto-host with these Saturday night raclette parties. We have two or three of them every year, so at this point duties are clear. We stay out of each other's way for the common good. Sick of raclette indeed, but the parties are simple and keep us on the lists for many other gatherings. I buy the foodstuffs - pickled pearl onions, cornichons, some mushrooms, a few kinds of jambon and salami, new potatoes, a wheel of raclette - on the way home from work on Friday night. I spent the morning, as I do most Saturdays, at the farmers market, walking through the plants and the flowers that are beginning to appear. Spring is starting to push through the sidewalk, and in its honor I overdo on the floral arrangements for tonight. Blue lilacs and white peonies for the table, orange tulips for the bathroom, and yellow hyacinth for the entry.

I don't remember when Jeremy started calling raclette "the thinking man's fondue." His go-to joke. It still gets people, occasionally even me, to laugh.

Our first party was almost seven years ago. After a ski trip to Switzerland and still high from our vacation buzz, it seemed like a good reason for a February gathering. We tracked down a raclette grill at a chef's supply shop and invited my sister and a couple of friends. Comfortable and casual, it locked us in to a social requisite and a rite of passage among our friends. "So when are we going to get invited to one of your raclette parties?"

Jeremy puts on his Dean Martin playlist, a departure from the morning's U2 fixation, and sashays around the bar table in a stiff, rhythmic middle-aged way, arranging glasses to make room for the ice bucket. I watch him as I circle and set the table with the blue and yellow placemats my sister got us in Provence. His strange playfulness makes me shake my head and even shrug my shoulders when his back is turned. I almost tell him he should cease and desist with the Dino retrospective once our guests arrive, but I see he's in the midst of something. Not sure if it's in the music or in his head.

In the years since our first raclette party, Jeremy started his own architectural firm and I was named editorial director. So naturally, without kids or a car or a weekend getaway, we've upgraded our furniture and renovated the apartment. The kitchen, now open and warm as instructed by the shelter magazines, allows guests to watch as I prep, wash, and put away. I miss the old kitchen, small and closed off. Built for maids, not for the modern woman. I used to drink and smoke and take my time. Now nobody smokes anymore, and so neither do I, but we all still get away with the drink.

After I get the napkins from my grandmother's highboy, one of the few family hand-me-downs we decided to keep, I turn to take the silverware from the drawer. The

mouse runs across the counter and dips back into the stove. I slam the drawer to scare the pest, and interrupt Jeremy's flow. They both glance in my direction. I point.

We set all nine of the traps, putting a drop of peanut butter on each. I put two right on the counter and one on top of the stove. I read that they tend to jump over the traps, so it's good to double up in high traffic areas.

When I was growing up in Connecticut, we always had a cat. Charlene, our first, killed and delivered mice, chipmunks and baby squirrels. On one particularly homicidal afternoon, she killed five infant bunnies and laid them neatly in a cardboard box after we'd given away all of her kittens. I felt so sad for the bunnies and their mother, and of course for Charlene. I still do.

Jeremy and I promised never to have children before we got married. At the time, I didn't want kids or maybe I couldn't see how they would fit into our life. But I was always open to the idea of parenthood and honestly believed Jeremy would change his mind. Since our wedding, Jeremy has refused to discuss it. Growing up, he was the seventh of nine children. I've heard him say, many more times than necessary, that he "can't imagine choosing to have kids." The few times I brought it up, he treated it like a contractual agreement with no place for amendment. "That's not what we discussed" or "I thought we agreed, did we not?" Without consulting with him, I decided to have some eggs harvested and frozen. I like knowing that they exist.

When you're a little girl, you play with dolls and rock them in your arms and pretend to be a mom. You don't pretend to have frozen eggs at a long-term storage facility. I never planned on asking Jeremy to freeze any sperm. It never occurred to me, actually, until the nurse at the clinic asked if he would be interested. Briefly, I thought it

might be an option for us. A clinical way to have children, perhaps even architectural. You put things together and build something.

I was wrong, very wrong. When I asked Jeremy if he'd consider it, he lost it. "I don't want *you* to have my kids. I don't want *anyone* to have my kids." I let him know that frozen sperm remain capable of producing healthy pregnancies for decades, so maybe in a few years, maybe even ten years. "Ever," he reminded me. My eggs may last for a few years. It's very much a back-up and a long shot and unreasonable. But it's still possible.

I take the wheel of raclette to the dining table, clearing away one of the settings. I want to keep things quiet for the mouse so he feels safe, willing to come out and die.

Cutting off the dark beige rind, I watch Jeremy as he takes extreme care in his party preparation duties. He likes structure, clean lines, and ninety-degree angles. His bar looks untouchable.

"It's perfect already, Jer. Can you get the grill out? Make sure we have all eight pans and all eight spatulas."

"Yeah, Babe, hold on. I'm almost done here."

He finishes with a quick shuffle of his feet and a little shoulder shake, then stops suddenly to look at his work.

"Not bad. I'd make myself a drink here. Should be a good one tonight," he continues with a few on-beat head nods.

I'm dying to ask him why the hell he's so enthusiastic.

"I agree, nice mix. Can you start the fire, too?"

"Next on my list. Already have it planned out. A decent-sized fire for a chilly spring night. Not quite a winter fire, but a nice raclette, wine-drinking fire."

I look at him again, my eyelids stretched and tight.

"Go for it," I say, though it comes out sounding like a question.

I keep cutting, all equal slices to fit perfectly into each individual pan.

As eight o'clock arrives, the place has come together. I do a quick sweep of the traps, putting the visible ones in the cabinets and under the sink. On the ninth one, I realize our rodent friend is hiding out. I pray he stays scared until midnight.

I open the oven one last time to look for him before the doorman starts sending people up.

Listen, I know you're in here, maybe just hanging out, maybe taking a nap, maybe just waiting for a good time to come out. But let me remind you, my mouse, I will get you.

I close the oven as quietly as possible. It's party time.

The eight of us gather around Jeremy's bar as he shakes and pours strong dirty vodka martinis. Introductions and connections are made, conversations provoked.

Letia looks around at what used to be three small rooms - living, dining, and kitchen - and is now our "great room."

"The apartment looks wonderful. So much bigger. Mike, we need to do something like this to our place. When's the last time we were here, anyway?" asks Letia.

"I don't know. Three, four years ago. It's been a while," says Jeremy.

Maura rubs Camille's back and looks at Jeremy. "It is a wonderful apartment. The fireplace feels so organic, so important, so central. Did you design the renovation?"

"No, actually. I consulted with a friend on the construction, but we let him run with it. I must say, he probably did a much better job than I ever could have. Designing your own place is difficult. Every project becomes your baby. When your home is your baby, there is no escape."

"Who needs a drink? Ted? You guys okay?"

As everyone mingles I take the hostess gifts into the kitchen. Kara and Ted replenish our stock with a few bottles of red. Mike and Letia give us his and hers flasks "for our concerts in the park." Intrigued by the shape of the gift from Maura and Camille, I open it not knowing what to expect. A long, thin, black leather-covered lighter, ideal for candles and fires.

I return to the crowd and try to make my way around. Jeremy has replaced Dean Martin with Annie Lennox. I'm going according to a schedule, from the hellos to the drinks to the dinner to sitting with the lingerers by the fire. Jeremy, I'm afraid to say, couldn't be any happier.

The meal awaits, so after an hour of chatter I gather the crowd and show them to the table. The layers of the table -- the lilacs and the peonies, the placemats, the raclette grill -- look comforting and warm. I pull two chilled bottles of crisp Sauvignon Blanc. Perfect for cutting the hot, bubbly cheese that is to come.

"Anyone need anything else?"

Maura looks at me. "I'm just going to run to the ladies room."

In awe of her smooth black hair, I watch the straight line across the middle of her back, unmoving as she walks away.

"Oh here, let me show you."

As I point down the hallway, Maura nods, “I remember.”

“Last time?”

I’ve only met her once and I’m sure she’s never been here.

She nods and smiles. Her Adam’s apple shifts inside her delicate throat.

I want to ask, “When were you here?”

Without pause, she pushes down the handle of the guest bathroom door and looks back at me. My stare meets her twinkle, and I quickly turn around.

It’s only been two years since the renovation. I can remember that far. I’m hoping the mouse is still alive and has moved into bathroom. I smooth my skirt and return to the kitchen and the party in all of its exposed glory. Volumes have risen - the voices, the laughter, the music. It’s all getting faster and easier and fluid.

Looking at Jeremy, I can see he is waiting for someone to appear. He folds himself back into to conversation with Ted and Mike about the upcoming roof installation at the Met when we make eye contact.

I open the refrigerator to escape, searching for a condiment or chocolate or maybe for nothing. As I shuffle things around, my breathing gets slower, and then races as I start to think. Could this really be true? My mind traces through parties and events, and my memory stalls, sputtering as it reveals the details of how we met Maura. A holiday party. In our building. My eyes close as the moment comes through. Maura, who had just gutted a brownstone much further uptown, chatted with Jeremy about landmark codes and salvaging hardwood floors. They’d exchanged cards. She must have called him, right?

“Babe, come sit. We’re all here.”

Inhaling a last breath of cold air, I tune into Jeremy's voice and face a party that is already watching me. Jeremy, at his place at the head, sits next to Camille. Camille's arm is wrapped around Maura's chair. Kara and Ted are straining, their backs to me, to see. Everyone stares at me except Maura, who is sliding her fork below the lip of her plate.

Jeremy suddenly claps. "Let's raclette and roll! Does anyone need instructions?"

Everyone laughs, and I seat myself opposite my husband at the table. The pickles and viande sechee are passed. We help our guests as they broil their slices of cheese and scrap them off with their little spatulas onto the boiled potatoes. Kara keeps hers under the heat too long and smokes out half of the table. Camille and Maura laugh and help one another. Their open affection is enviable, natural. I can't help but want a bit of it myself.

Mike raises his glass. "Please join me in a toast to our hosts, Jeremy and Adrienne. May we all be so lucky to be invited again."

Sipping hard, I look around the table, but focus on Maura. I see her glance at Jeremy and back at me. Regretting that I didn't buy more, I reach into the center of the table and pull the peonies up by their stems, trying to fill out the arrangement.

"Ade?"

"Yes?"

"Are you okay? Kara asked you a question."

"Sorry, what?"

"Oh my God!" Letia cups one hand over her mouth with a pop and points a pale pink dagger of a finger straight toward the stove.

"Where'd he go?" I press.

"Into the burner. I saw his tail. Oh God, sorry I screamed."

“I’m so sorry. I was hoping I’d catch him before you all got here.”

Maura pushes some cheese off her mini-skillet. “You’ll catch him later, after we leave.

But he’s a pretty ballsy sucker, making a move like that.”

I stand to clear anything away.

The “we should get going” comes earlier than usual. Not sure if the mouse or my lack of conversation is to blame. The hugs and kisses always linger longer and sweeter on this side of a party.

Maura and Camille each grab a shoulder, and I become the middle of their hug. They would love to get together again, and soon. It was a wonderful evening. I watch as they bid Jeremy goodbye, one by one. Camille pecks him on the cheek and thanks him for the advice on their house. Maura grips his forearm and her palm slides down slowly until she reaches his hand, holds it quickly and says good night.

Good night? Is that the same as goodbye? I don’t want to let Maura or Jeremy get to me, but right now in my apartment, at my front door, by my yellow hyacinth, I’m floored. Our guests take their flushed cheeks and tired eyes to the elevator. As I shut the door, I pray they never come back.

Jeremy is already in the kitchen when I stop leaning on the door.

“Babe, you want to save any of this stuff? What the hell is going on with you?”

“Sorry, what?”

“That’s what I mean. What is wrong? Where are you?”

“I’m fine. Just want to catch that mouse. Can’t believe he came out like that.”

“That’s it? The mouse?”

“I guess so.”

Jeremy scowls and replays his pre-party soundtrack of Dean Martin as he does the dishes. He hasn't lost his step or his footwork, even as he scrubs and rinses.

Zoned out and quiet, I stack the dirty plates and silverware on my arm. I neatly put everything where it belongs. Dirty dishes in the sink, placemats in the laundry basket.

"Any more dishes? Almost done in here," Jeremy says.

"Just the wine glasses."

One by one, I hand him the glasses, but hold on to Maura's. I inspect the dark bruise of lipstick that lines the rim and recall the moments I watched her, taking bites, drinking wine and laughing at my table.

Tapping Jeremy on the shoulder, I hand it to him and smile. "That's it."

He looks at her glass, runs it under the faucet and lets it fill up completely before wiping away the deep red color and putting it on the rack.

With the chores done, the mouse traps go back to their original spots. I send one last warning through the oven. *Listen little mouse. You're still here. And in case you forgot, you are mine.*

Jeremy lets out an exhausted groan as he lies down on the big gray couch. His feet stick out beyond the arm. As he puts his nightcap down on the slated coffee table, he sings and snaps lazily along to his music.

The room was completely black

I hugged her and she hugged back

Like the sailor said, quote

"Ain't that a hole in the boat."

I feel like vomiting.

"Good night," I say.

"Good night, Babe. Be there in a minute."

Sleep, which is surprisingly deep and takes me through until the morning, doesn't break me out of the cloud. I look at Jeremy, still asleep, and think about all the mornings I used to read in bed until he woke up. This morning, I don't have time to indulge in sections and styles. After putting on my long robe and slippers, I fill the teakettle with water and start to check the traps.

As I open the oven, I see him, snapped. I smile again. Putting on a set of rubber gloves, a surgical confidence guides my moves. I pull the trap straight back, not letting the mouse fall to either side. He's a perfect, neat little mouse.

Stuck but still twisting, I place the mouse in the center of the counter and stare at it. He continues to flinch as I speak to him again and leave him there. After I get dressed and ready, I center the trap with the corners of the counter. I turn the gas on to boil the tea water, walk to the door and head out to walk the longest blocks I can find. Jeremy will have to get up to off the kettle's whistle.

Sound Judgment

Virginia stared at the offices across the street and watched the flow of meetings, emptied offices, and cups of coffee. On one floor, fit men in dark suits ambled slowly from corner offices to conference tables, while plumpish women in bright tops and black bottoms stayed close behind, tapping on shoulders and knocking on doors. One floor below, younger men in khakis and blue button-downs hovered in clusters and made frequent visits to one another, casually leaning back in guest chairs and putting up their feet. From her own 34th floor office, she conjured up their lunch menus and happy hour plans, noting them carefully in two separate notebooks. Having spent an embarrassing number of hours trying to figure it out, she had pegged these primary floors of interest, a law firm and an office equipment sales office. Some nights she stayed late, waiting for the sun to set so she could get a clearer view. After dark, the building across Third

Avenue looked like southern California from the sky, each window a uniform lot complete with its own small turquoise rectangle and the occasional speck of human life.

On her commute back to Queens, Virginia stuffed the unattached plug of her headphones into her coat pocket. Never one to drown out the sound of anything, she tuned into the rhythms of people through her veiled ears.

She wasn't graced with views at her apartment, but she managed to continue a different type of low-tech voyeurism through the plaster and brick. The stairwell and hallways split the building into two matching sides, two apartments on each floor for a total of six residents, all living alone. Virginia, twenty-seven and the youngest tenant, was 5-29 11th Street's only woman.

Her immediate neighbor Christian, his 1R the reverse railroad layout of her own 1L, maintained unusually vocal ritualistic behaviors. Though his outbursts of life commentary would make anyone feel unsafe, she believed it was an even trade. He lived out loud and she listened in. On the kitchen table her diary of his life sat open, well into its third volume.

David of 2R was more restrained, but equally routine. A seasoned basketball player and coach, he played in several leagues and any pick-up game. He often dribbled down the block and occasionally into the building. The spiral she dedicated to his habits was kept on her desk and more like a log, a neatly written list of comings and goings, deliveries from the diner and asterisks indicating any female company.

Virginia made small efforts to ignore her obsession with the rest of the world. She'd tried running for a couple weeks, but hated the speed at which she passed people walking and talking. It wasn't natural for her not to pay attention. Her heightened breath

and heavy footsteps didn't help, either. It wasn't that she cared or sympathized or spurned, she just had to know. And she couldn't turn it off. She forced the television on herself a few times a week and downloaded music she heard discussed in the office, but her attempts at escape never held. She couldn't bear the thought of missing something real or close. Her environment was an ever-changing rotation of voices, beats, and breaks. Even asleep, any change registered on her mother-like radar.

After a night of transcribing Christian's pitching calls and substitutions during a Mets game playing on the radio, Virginia finally warmed up a bowl of lentil soup and went to bed. She thought about his words, so demanding and clear. Yet no one heard, except her. Because of that, Virginia had found it difficult to pull herself away. He was terrifying, and addicting. She pushed her hands in between her thighs and squeezed. She would not allow herself to grab a pen, even as he chanted with Metallica. *Sleep with one eye open, Gripping your pillow tight, Exit light, Enter night, Take My Hand, We're off to never-neverland* Torturous, the performance was hers.

A few hours later, Virginia awoke to subdued, persistent thuds. After breaking the fog of night and the inertia of sleep, it was clear. Someone was knocking. Quietly, it was an unmistakable set of knuckles banging on a door. She rationalized ignoring it, but dismissed the push to lie back down and glanced at the alarm clock. 3:34. This was no Jehovah's Witness. The knocker attempted a soft tap, but with time – just a few minutes, 3:38 to be exact – the steady pounding became increasingly difficult to ignore. She didn't know whose notebook to grab. Normally she reveled in this type of strange neighborly activity in the hallway, paying close attention to any and all slamming doors or fast footsteps. This pointed knocking was something else.

Drawing her to look through the peephole, the sound pulled her to the door. The knocking was certainly intended for another tenant, but its consistency had cornered her interest. She listened for any other movement from within the building. There was nothing.

She pushed the covers back and placed her feet, warm from the wool blanket, onto the floor. Pausing to pick up a pen, she pushed herself from the bed, and stepped softly to the door. She wasn't spying, just noting who was there. That's what peepholes are for, she rationalized.

Through the round glass, she saw a large number 12 in a varsity jacket font, pulled tightly in mesh across a broad back. Big shoulders were hunched over, a tall man was looking straight into the peephole across the hall. David from 2R. He carried on with the calm knocking. Christian in 1R wasn't answering.

David didn't know she was watching. As she recorded the time and circumstances, she assumed he was drunk because of his past sloppy late night entrances. Those big basketball-playing feet, confident and loud, usually carried him through the door and up the flight of stairs heavily and slowly. Tonight, the size 14s had passed right by the staircase and landed in front of the door across the hall. Did he know it was almost four in the morning?

Taking off her glasses to get closer, she settled in. Her eyes were fixed and the grip on her pen and notebook was firm. The noise became calming, almost reassuring. But still no one answered.

As intoxicating as the sound was, it didn't rub out the obvious question. What was David doing? This type of possessed knocking isn't normal at any time of day. Virginia

stayed at attention. She was physically close to David, less than three feet away. She could hear him faintly, inhaling and exhaling on the other side of the dense wood door. For a few moments, they were breathing in sync.

Christian was tall, but not basketball size. Just football big. Broad shoulders. Thick neck. Bad jeans. Hair bleached with Clorox. He looked like he needed a background check. He ate lots of protein. Mostly egg whites and skinless, boneless chicken. He normally put the packages in plastic grocery bags and hung them on his doorknob in the hallway. Virginia couldn't help but peek in. The egg cartons, stripped of their whites, were neatly filled with shells and yolks, one set for each compartment. Virginia took them to the building's garbage cans outside on her way to work. She couldn't stand the sight or the smell of them. They had both grown used to this arrangement.

David's garbage wasn't any less obvious. Aside from his diner grub and sweet tea, he consumed lots of Seagram's 7. His business cards, which Virginia had spotted a box of in the trash out front, read "Basketball Coach." His wardrobe consisted of free t-shirts from various sports camps and gyms, along with the requisite warm-up pants. One time he walked with Virginia to the subway. He told her that he worked as a DJ at a few bars and often came home very late. She remembered the interaction well and replayed it many times. He'd said, "You should be happy I don't have turntables. Then I'd really give you something to listen to." She'd replied, "Oh, I wouldn't mind. I love music." Relieved when they got to the station, she waved good-bye after several stilted minutes together. She noticed the third button was missing from his navy velvet blazer.

The knocking kept on without interruption or change. Steady like a good dribble, David was vigilant. She could see it. Not in his eyes, but in his stiff, arched back.

Christian was notorious in the building, and on the block. He lifted weights and threw them against the wall and on the floor. When the nighttime carting workers got too loud, he used his 18-inch biceps to knock over the two-yard dumpster from the garage next door. Even the mechanics were scared of him. They had seen the surveillance footage of Christian in the middle of the night.

Virginia knew it was possible to sense a presence at the peephole. Christian watched her some mornings as she left for work, and sometimes offered advice. If she had trouble with the lock, which happened a lot, he would let her know that the door was out of alignment. "Door's not straight! Door's not straight!" he'd yell at her. She could hear him breathing deep, steroid-enhanced breaths.

In the months they had shared the building hallway, aside from the peephole, they made eye contact twice, once on the street as he ran to his car and another time on the subway platform. In both cases, Christian had taken off, sprinting in the other direction. He went grocery shopping in the middle of the night. He didn't want to see anyone, anytime, ever.

David kept at it. Like the plumbers and handymen before him, he waited for Christian to answer the door. After several years of living above him, he knew Christian's habits.

Christian had stopped going to work. She supposed that he worked in a bar or a nightclub and, based on his physique, that he was a bouncer. He looked and sounded like

the kind of guy who liked to throw people through emergency exit doors and against brick walls.

Giving the situation a little consideration, Virginia tensed up. She'd heard Christian earlier in the week, through the kitchen wall, screaming at a Con Edison representative for 45 minutes. During that terrifying stretch, he'd promised to kill the representative, the landlord and the meter reader. Virginia recalled the shaky transcription she'd taken of his side of the conversation. He seemed to have moved beyond his typical daily rage.

Virginia started to tire. It had been thirty minutes and nothing had changed. David was still hunched over and knocking. Virginia was still trying to breathe quietly and focus on David's back. She decided to sit. She slid slowly down the door and landed on the tile kitchen floor, keeping the pen and notebook in her lap.

After crawling over to the small rug near the stove, Virginia tried to come up with any probable reason for David's knocking. Living above Christian, he gathered his knowledge through the floor. As she mulled the possibilities, her eyes struggled to stay open. She was too tired to stand up and go back to bed. She gave up and let the knocking hush her to sleep.

When she woke up, it wasn't to more pounding or the front buzzer or police sirens as she had anticipated. Instead it was booming laughter. She pulled her numb arms out from under her torso and looked at the imprint of the cotton rug running from her wrists to her elbows. The laugh came again, rough and guttural, followed by a blast of what sounded like a foghorn. It could only be Christian.

Getting herself off the floor she hurried to the door, stopping short as he burst out once again. She gently put her ear to the wall and listened to him grow into a hysterical fit. She could tell he was standing close to his own door. He wasn't watching one of his *All in the Family* reruns, which was the only other time she'd heard him laugh in the past. Remembering the knocking and the night's events, she lunged toward the peephole to check the hall. Her mouth fell open as she saw sneakers and the bright white 12 in a varsity font. David from 2R was sprawled facedown on the hallway floor, breathing, between her apartment and Christian's place.

Assessing the scene, she couldn't see any blood or obvious injury. Aside from the frightening laughter and the foghorn, she hadn't heard anything either. No evidence of violence, no commotion, no words exchanged, nothing. David had simply fallen asleep on the floor like she had.

Virginia paced and checked the peephole. For once she tried to block out Christian's asylum symphony. His chorus of foghorn, foot stomping, and laughter sped up and was overloading Virginia's senses. Energized, she felt a rush to act, to join. She approached the door, dropped the pen, and braced herself. Leaning forward, she flattened her left hand on the left-side door panel. She raised up her right hand in a protest fist and started pounding.

Samsara

Tenzin uses a razor blade to cut into the fabric of her favorite shirt, a black and hot pink plaid. After making a small tear, she rips across the back and leaves a two-inch strip hanging from the seam. The long-sleeve chain-store top is flimsy, and the material is transparent in the bright light of the vanity.

After laying the long cotton piece across the bathroom counter, Tenzin places her left forearm, palm-up, in its center. Carefully she wraps the fuchsia print around the fattiest section and ties it as tightly as she can, holding one end with her teeth to get the knot tied.

The arm wrap covers the neat rows of hash marks on the inside of her arm. It almost hits her elbow and the cuff of the loose black t-shirt she put on when she got home. The heat had become intense, almost ninety degrees, in the early afternoon. Off the train and only a block from the community college and her surgical nursing class, the temperature was enough to turn her back toward home. Tenzin hated the heat and the

short sleeves it demanded. More importantly, she found any reason to go home if she knew she'd be there alone.

Both of her parents were at work. Her father spent long hours as an engineer for the transit authority and her mother clocked even more as a nanny for a Manhattan family with two kids.

As Tenzin walks into her apartment in a building full of other Tibetan families, she turns on a fan in each of the five rooms. She paces from wind tunnel to wind tunnel, and lifts up her shirt to feel the breeze at each. She can handle bright sun or frigid cold, but she must escape the brutal urban humidity.

The kitchen, where her mother makes butter tea every morning and night, runs along one well-organized wall. Hungry, Tenzin opens the cabinets and refrigerator, and considers eating. She doesn't know what to have at home when her Ah-ma isn't there. When she's out, she gets bagels and pizza and Chinese food like the rest of her friends, even the Tibetan ones. She looks at her mother's spices and longs for their cooking smells, the cardamom, the cinnamon, the saffron. Tenzin decides to wait. She's cooled down some, but it's still too hot to eat.

The smallest room used to belong to her brother Sonam. When he left for the University of Nebraska two years earlier, her parents were convinced he would return to his windowless little room in Elmhurst. Tenzin knew he'd never come back. He was out in the world and living in a dorm room bigger than their whole apartment.

Recently during one of Sonam's weekly Sunday night calls, he announced he was taking an internship in Silicon Valley for the summer. "California!" her pa-pha had yelled across the kitchen table. Tenzin and her mother had hugged and jumped and then called

everyone else in their extended, transplanted family. Within moments, all three of them were on their phones chattering away like a bunch of excited aunties in any country.

Sonam wasn't expected back now. Pa-pha knew Sonam had moved on, past the family and definitely past the apartment. Within weeks, her parents were cleaning out his room. Tenzin spent one Saturday afternoon lying on her bed listening to them go through Sonam's stuff. The makeshift shelves held Old PlayStation games interspersed with books from his old reading lists and a few about the Dalai Lama. After her parents took down the Tibetan flag that ran the length of his bed, they asked Tenzin if she wanted it. She laughed, but took it anyway.

He wasn't normal, Tenzin had tried to explain to them. He didn't do the regular American teenage stuff. Of course, he got into a little trouble for staying out with his friends or not respecting the family dinner hour. But really he didn't do much wrong. Tenzin supposed her parents hadn't really understood him either. At the time, they thought he was bad, too. He would cut school, but only to attend rallies at the United Nations, which seemed to happen every other week, but he would never hang out with friends or smoke cigarettes or drink beer. And certainly would never just hang out at home.

As her parents sifted through his stuff, she began to assess her own room and what she would take with her when she left for good. She had plenty to hide, but more she wanted to take with her. Not that she had anywhere to go. She'd have to take all her books, her favorites and the ones from school. She's been randomly tucking movie tickets and receipts into them for years. Her memories lined her small set of shelves in frames without any pictures. She wouldn't let her parents just throw them all into a box and tape

it up for donation to some "Free Tibet" fundraiser. And she'd take her prayer beads with her, too. She didn't want her parents to know she still held on to those in the middle of night.

"I've never seen this picture before. Who is this girl?"

Tenzin knew the picture, the girl, and the story. She wanted to answer Ah-ma's question. She's the girl who took his virginity. Yes, and he loved her. And yes, she was Tibetan. He managed to find the only pretty Tibetan girl whom none of us knew.

In her head, they answered back, shocked. But with more questions. What do you mean he loved her? How could we not know? How did he meet her? Who are her parents?

Tenzin defended her older brother, protecting him in her mind. Just leave him alone! He had his own life! Just throw out his stuff and move on! He's not here, but he's not dead either! You should talk about him like he still exists!

Tenzin was tempted to call her brother and rat out her parents. You should see what they're doing and hear what they're saying. They're going through all your pictures and inspecting your stuff like it's evidence. You're so lucky you're not here. I will be angry for you. But I have learned my lesson! Oh my pun-kya-bu! Sometimes I even miss you!

When they finally cleared everything out - the bed, the flag, the books - Ah-ma took over. Sonam's milk crate bookshelves were covered with a red and gold silk fabric, and became the stand for a Buddha, the tsa tsa, that had been nested under the window in their living room for years.

Ah-ma started coming home late from her nanny job, stopping in Jackson Heights or Flushing to pick up things, just the right things. She'd become obsessed, spending money on her shrine room like it was some secret lover she could never manage to satisfy.

When Ah-ma brought home a new set of prayer flags, Tenzin rolled her eyes and made fun. The pot smokers at school hung these in their rooms.

"Did you find these at Target? They have these at every yoga studio in Manhattan. You're getting too American, Ah-ma."

Tenzin laughed and adjusted her black jelly bracelets.

"I, I am getting too American?"

"If you're going to do this, build this shrine of yours, do it the real way, don't do it the American way."

While she looked hurt and didn't respond to Tenzin's suggestion, Ah-ma arrived home the next night with two shopping bags for her altar and a new short-sleeve shirt for Tenzin. By ten o'clock that night, the room was transformed. Copper offering bowls, singing bowls, incense stand, and a beautiful embroidered meditation pillow. When it was complete, Ah-ma spent an hour meditating and praying like she'd just discovered how to do it and how it made her feel.

"Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum..."

Ah-ma had always meditated, every day, no matter what, so the sight of her entranced and on the floor wasn't new. But the enthusiasm, the energy, the focus, these were changes. Tenzin suspected her mother's motivations had something to do with her brother. She had converted his room into the family temple. And maybe she felt her

prayers were working. But Tenzin knew Ah-ma wasn't just praying for Sonam to find success or a good wife; she was praying for her, too. Ah-ma had noticed her fabric-covered arm, and had even tried to touch it when Tenzin let her get close.

At home and alone on this hot June day, Tenzin takes her shoes off and leaves them outside what is now the shrine room. She steps in and lights the incense coil, standing still and taking several inhalations before moving on. Then she gently spins the mantra wheel, following the routine she's seen her mother repeat thousands of times. Tenzin knows every step, every sequence of her Ah-ma's ritual. As she works her way methodically in front of the tsa tsa, she stays in tune to the heat of her body and slowly unwraps the thin cotton around her arm.

"Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum..."

Tenzin looks at her arm, the layers of vertical cuts like coats of pink paint healing in different stages and shades. She breathes in the jasmine incense and opens her arms to the meditation pose. Inhaling and exhaling deeply, she gets lost in the rhythm of her breath. Finding it hard to stop, she fills and empties her lungs over and over. The mantras, so ingrained, come naturally from her lips.

"Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum..."

Tenzin isn't thinking about her family or her friends or her classes or her life. She's on the edge of a familiar feeling, an escape from her confusion and discontent. By herself, she can meditate, find her breath and her pain. She can't explain it to her parents. She wants her past but she also wants her future.

Her parents think she's too American to pray, but she's too scared to let them know she needs to do it. So she's found her own way, her way, a way they could never

comprehend. Girls don't do this in the old country, they'd say. But how would you know? You were hardly ever there. Again arguing back in her mind, but I was there. I was there.

The feeling breaks as Tenzin hears the front door open and close. Ah-ma is home, unexplained and early. Tenzin quickly grabs her arm wrap, knocking over the singing bowls. She runs into her bedroom and slams the door. The incense in the shrine room is still burning.

"Hello? Hello? Tenzin? Ta-shi de-lek? I see your shoes."

Tenzin lays out the strip of fabric on her bed and quickly re-wraps her arms, ignoring her mother.

"Why are you home? Are you sick?"

"I'm okay, Ah-ma."

Tenzin hears her mother take off her own shoes and walk into the shrine room. She hears her, whispering, as she rearranges the bowls to their proper position. The strength of the jasmine scent begins to lighten.

"Tenzin, you were in my prayer room? What were you doing? Please don't destroy it for me. It is the only place I can find my peace. Please tell me why, please."

Tenzin wants to answer aloud, but she continues on in her head. Because, Ah-ma, I was praying. I, too, need my peace.

She can't. Even through the door, she doesn't tell her. She listens as her mother, mumbling and upset, begins her mantra. Tenzin feels a tortured pull at the sound of her Ah-ma's voice.

"Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum. Om mani padme hum..."

The rhythm hits too hard, and Tenzin turns on some Bollywood music and plays it through her little speakers, wrapping herself in an entirely different noise cocoon. She sits on her bed and fiddles with her armband. Too embarrassed to remove it, she tightens it a little more.

”Not too loose, not too tight,” Ah-ma used to say when talking about meditation. She believes that somewhere in the balance is the balance.

Tenzin realizes she left the remnants of her shirt in the bathroom. And a razor blade. The secret meditation is one thing. Ah-ma must be surprised that Tenzin was in her sacred room. She may embrace it, but she’ll probably assume Tenzin was making trouble by trying to desecrate her shrine.

Tenzin knows Ah-ma will be devastated to find the razor blade. She’ll think beyond the worse. She’ll blame it on her friends, or even America. In her mind and maybe in her heart, she’ll punish Tenzin for life. Tenzin opens her bedroom door and runs to the bathroom. It’s closed, and she stops just before reaching toward the doorknob.

Ah-ma pushes the bathroom door open.

“What are you doing? Are you that unhappy here?”

"No."

"You can go, you know. Go live with your brother or one of your aunties. You don't have to stay here."

“I was just cutting a shirt.”

“You weren't cutting yourself?”

“No. Just the shirt.”

“Why do you do this? Wear the shirt like this wrapped around your arm? Why can’t you wear the shirt whole, like everyone else?”

“I like it like that. I like to wrap the fabric tight around my arm.”

“Let me see it then.”

Ah-ma gently grabs hold of her daughter’s arm. Tenzin resists and pulls back, but limply. Ah-ma holds up Tenzin’s left forearm, and squeezes her hand around the fabric. Tenzin winces.

“You don’t want your mother to touch you? It hurts you?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“What is the matter, my bu-mo?”

“It just hurts.”

“Take off the fabric. Show me your arm. Stop hiding it.”

“No, my arm is fine.”

“Show me your arm. I want to see my baby’s arm.”

Tenzin stretches her arm out and watches as her mother unravels the pink plaid.

“I won’t tell pa-pha.”

They both stare at the rows of shallow cuts, then Tenzin closes her eyes. In her head, she hears the mantra and tries to follow her breathing.

She feels her mother’s kisses and tears fall up and down her arm.

Her mother says, “You have to go. Your pa-pha and I, we will give you money but you have to go.”

Tenzin folds her arm into her waist and leans forward into Ah-ma.

“I know.”

“You must let your candle burn, my bu-mo. But let it burn steady and clear. Go deep into the world.”

Tapping her head slowly on Ah-ma’s chest, Tenzin starts to hum.

Power Forward

“I don’t think we can fit another mattress down here,” Megan yelled up the basement stairs.

She raised both arms up in a long stretch and pulled her hands tightly back down the sides of her thin face. She let her arms drop. She felt the frustration, and the blend of basement dust and dirt in the sweat all over her body. She was ready to go. Her father’s never-ending supply list for the end of the world was exhausting.

“All right, I’ll see if I can rearrange some things and make more room tomorrow,” her father bellowed loudly from the kitchen.

Her father had lived alone for years. Since the divorce twenty years ago, he had upgraded from the fatalistic responsibilities of a clock shop owner to those of a casket salesman. It was part-time and he liked the schedule, he defended when pried. It left him with plenty of time to think about the possibilities and organize for the inevitable. He was

no hobby man. He wasn't interested in movies or art or even sitcoms. And he certainly wasn't a gardener.

Dan Donnelly had instincts for training. Run drills. Be ready. He kept a supply of water, and lots of it. In a cool basement room, he stored 250 gallons of spring or distilled.

Lined up next to the bottled water sat the rations. He believed that variety was the spice of looming death and stocked up on canned goods of all varieties. Bought the sale items. Clipped the coupons. Always remembered the club card.

As the world ends, Dan Donnelly believed sleep would also be essential. Everyone will want a comfortable place to rest his head. Similar to a casket, but for the living. He anticipated the neighbors would finally show him a little respect. Old Dan Donnelly, he's got mattresses, and cans, and water. He's not crazy after all. He is prepared.

Megan had to get going. She sympathized with her father's paranoia to a point. She believed in God, sports, and yearbooks, just like he did.

"Ok, ok. It's time to get out of here," Megan told herself as she pulled out of the small driveway. She looked at the carport for a brief moment and stopped. Sometimes when she left her father's unnoticeable ranch house, nestled in his depressed rust belt town, her body would seize up and then shiver. This was one of those times.

Her father lived a simple day-to-day life. He drank coffee and beer. He ate from the freezer and the cupboard. Every Sunday, he went to his mother's house in an older suburb north of town. When either of his daughters came to town, they would go out for

omelets in the morning and hamburgers at night. It seemed so normal, so basic, and so okay. But every once in a while, it made Megan tap the brake and shiver.

She gently pushed on the gas, backed out of the driveway, and headed down the narrow street lined with heavy cars. Much like the shiver, the same stream of thoughts swept over hit her as she sneaked down the street. Does anyone live here? Where are the kids? Where is the yelling? Where the hell did everyone go?

She always let her dad get to her. She believed in some of what he said. But she preferred the present tense. The future was daunting. It wasn't going to be fun or pretty or cheap or delicious. She was going to cry and be scared and make decisions she never wanted to make.

That's why planning was important, her father always said. You never know. The worst thing you can be is surprised.

Megan thought about her father a lot. He lived alone in almost every way possible. No real friends, just old fans. No real conversations, just plenty of preparation.

Somehow, he was a convincing casket salesman. At 6'8", his large fairytale stature and big spongy hands transmitted a protective energy instead of an intimidating one. People trusted him with their lives, and their deaths. He had made more money selling caskets over the last six years than in the previous twenty at Dan Donnelly's Clock Shop. He believed wholeheartedly that "preplanning your memorial service" would make living easier and life better.

"You can relax during your final days, knowing that the lining has been chosen and the wood matches. It's comforting to stand on your little plot of land. You can enjoy the view and meet your neighbors," he explained to people on a regular basis.

After hearing his spiel, Megan always asked him the same question. She would wait until they got back into the car or the person had left the store or the couple was out of earshot.

“Why do you say ‘final days’? You make it sound like everyone is dying,” she would say.

And he would reply, “Well, Megan, I guess it depends on how you look at it. I see these as my final days. Other people feel the same way.”

While she didn’t buy into his sales pitch, Dan Donnelly sold his daughter a comprehensive, yet thrifty plan.

Megan was 34 and had picked out a soft, cream lining and a pretty walnut to match.

Too many things in life surprised Dan Donnelly. His life didn’t turn out as he planned, or for the better, or even for the worse. It just dulled.

His caterpillar story began as a stereotypically uncomfortable youth. His above-average height overshadowed his about-average looks. By seventh grade, this wide-faced, brown-haired boy could wrap his arms around the biggest tree on his junior high school’s property. He had yet to figure out what else he could do with them. Around fifteen, he started to embrace the gangly-ness and discovered its usefulness on the basketball court. Dan Donnelly developed into a very serious player with plenty of newspaper photos and clippings to preserve. But high school was nothing compared to what happened when he entered the big arena in college. His decision to play college ball in his hometown cemented his status as local sports hero. While he attracted college scouts nationwide, he

stayed in Toledo and played at UT. People knew him here. They whispered when he walked through the grocery store or into a restaurant.

His college days were his fondest memories. The uniforms, the travel, the hoopla, the points. He scored a record-breaking number of points for his championship team. Even now, he remains second on UT's all-time scoring list. A real heartthrob, he could have easily been the inspiration for a sappy movie about a talented hometown boy who meets a pretty hometown girl. They fall in love and she waits and supports him. He heads for the big time under brighter lights in a real city and things get hard. Living room loneliness replaces hometown glamour. He's no longer a star. But they stick together for each other as trades continue and apartments get smaller. Then the knee expires, followed quickly by the contract.

And that was it. After six years as a professional basketball player, his knee gave out. He had surgery, but neither his leg nor his game was ever the same. His final days began.

Patti, Megan's mom, had moved on ages ago. After suffering through their marriage for years after Dan's basketball career ended, she finally left him. She didn't have a boyfriend or even an interest in other men. She just needed to leave Dan Donnelly and basketball and the college points record behind her. During their marriage, the house brimmed with basketball memorabilia that eventually gave way to tokens of his new life. Antique wall clocks, one-of-a-kind desk clocks, and a collection of stopwatches were slowly substituted for the trophies, the plaques, and the framed jerseys.

“Dribble, dribble, tick, tock, tick,” Patti used to say when felt, and was, alone. For such a long time, she craved some hearty plants and a little Bobby Darin.

She enjoyed moving around the country when Dan was still playing. While he never became a big star or had any real friends in the pros, Patti still liked being a player’s wife. She went to games and sat in great seats. They went to dinners and parties with the other players and their wives. Patti’s soft blonde hair and petite frame seemed to solve her husband’s common looks and general awkwardness. She used to grab his hand in elevators and in doorways as they were heading into events. She would squeeze his hand tightly and comb his hair with her fingers to let him know that they were in the right place. She never, not once, believed that he felt it.

Dan’s years as a pro didn’t serve him well. While he played on some good teams, he couldn’t adjust to the constant flow of new strangers. All those years of recognition and admiration by his hometown fans had spoiled him. People in Toledo knew all about him. They knew where he went to high school, where his dad worked, that his brother was going to be a doctor, and that his jersey number was 41. Though he played on five teams in the pros, he never got to wear his number. He was number 39 for one season in Atlanta and that was as close as he got.

After the knee surgery, a few months of rehab in Kansas City, and a handful of failed attempts to play, Dan retired from basketball. Patti and Dan returned to Toledo. The drive was quiet and long. They had returned home.

Dan and Patti knew they were settling down for good. She finally used her nursing degree to get a job in a hospital. She wanted to get pregnant soon. Dan decided to take a few months to mull his options. His knee really ached, but a harsh stiffness

encompassed everything else. Maybe he should have never played ball. How could he apply for a real job in this town? Everyone thought he was off playing basketball somewhere fantastic. No one knew he was sitting at a kitchen table on Maumee Avenue.

Dan used to imagine that Toledo had a professional team, the Toledo Torpedoes. He was proud of the name. He knew he could play in Toledo. He had the fans. People loved him. He often thought about starting a team. Maybe he could coach. Patti encouraged him to try at his old high school or even at UT.

But Dan knew he wouldn't play again. And he knew he wouldn't coach either. He considered a lot of different jobs. His parents' friends offered him jobs at their various offices and companies. He didn't want to sell office furniture at the Barcleys' showroom. He couldn't imagine sitting at a desk and sharing an office with Glenn Kovaleski either. They played basketball together during their freshman year in high school. Glenn rode the bench. Dan couldn't share an office with him now.

Dan thought about leaving Toledo. The town that loved him for so long had nothing to offer him now. He wanted to turn back. He should have finished college. He should have stuck to books, like his brother. He should have done anything other than what he did.

Megan always wondered what sparked the idea for Dan Donnelly's Clock Shop. It seemed like such an odd jump from basketball. Of course, basketball did have its elements of time: watching the clock, the shot clock, and the time out. Megan assumed that her father found security within the unflinching, tightly restrained existence of time.

You can blow out a knee or have an accident or get lost, and time will still tick away, with or without you.

She loved her father, but he was a strange creature. He was nice, but not friendly, and soft-spoken, but impossible to talk to.

She left his decrepit neighborhood thinking, “His life isn’t so bad.” And that annoyed her. “Not so bad?” she asked herself in the car. “That’s all I can say?”

As she drove the three hours back to Indianapolis, she called her husband Nick who was at home in their small Victorian house in the Old Northside historic district.

“Oh, he’s fine. You know how he is. We moved some mattresses. Checked the water. I see where he’s coming from to a point, but it just bothers me. It’s so excessive. He doesn’t do anything. He’s fixated on the end of the world. He sells caskets by day and stocks water and canned goods by night. It’s disingenuous. Should he really be selling people caskets if he thinks we’re all going down in a blaze of glory?” she yelled over the phone.

Nick, a patient listener and a trial lawyer, was very accustomed to this line of post-paternal visit conversation. He replied, “He’s just covering his bases. Either way, he’ll be ready. And, actually, you’ll be ready too. You did pick out a lovely cream velvet.”

“Oh, stop it!” Megan sighed. “I hope you like pine!”

Megan arrived home and had dinner with Nick. He made a pasta with broccoli and they shared a bottle of sauvignon blanc. She was starting to feel normal again. The haunted, twisted feeling she always had upon her return from her dad’s place was beginning to trickle away.

“Is it okay that I help him prepare for whatever it is he’s preparing for?” she asked, slightly frantic. “I mean, I don’t agree with it. I start to feel insane when I’m over there. He only sees the end. It’s basically over for him already. I just don’t get it.”

“I don’t know. I know you want to be a good daughter, but he’s not exactly the easiest guy to hang out with. Besides the caskets and the sauerkraut for impending doom, he isn’t really interested in much. Your going over there every few months to help him arrange for ‘the attack’ isn’t the worst thing in the world. If nothing else, he appreciates it,” suggested Nick.

“I guess you’re right. I can’t make him go to the movies or buy new clothes. Unless they’re non-flammable of course. But seriously, am I feeding his paranoia by agreeing to help him?” Megan wondered aloud as she put down her glass.

Nick started to clear the table. He looked at her and said, “Don’t take it so seriously. It’s his issue. He believes what he believes. If your mother asked you to drive her to a church you didn’t support or to a restaurant you didn’t like, you’d still drive her. It’s the same thing. You’re enabling, yes. But promoting? Not quite.”

Megan shrugged her narrow shoulders, twirled her short brown ponytail, and smirked in her usual way. She was just relieved to be home.

“All right, all right. I feel a little better, but that is probably because I’m drinking wine and not distilled water.”

On Monday, Megan and Nick got up and got ready for work. As Megan slid into her black pants and started to pull on a light gray sweater, she stopped and looked at

Nick. “Do you think I need to visit more? I mean, could that be part of the problem? He just needs more family close to him. People he trusts, people who know him.”

Megan pulled the sweater over her head and checked herself in the full-length mirror. The pants hung well and the small knit sweater held snugly to her waist. She recognized her mom’s clear blue eyes and her dad’s long build. She looked the same as she always did, which was halfway between pretty and plain, somewhere between Mom and Dad. She put on a bracelet and waited for a response.

Nick looked up from his shoes and stood up to straighten out his suit. Megan supposed this was a courtroom habit, something he did as he prepared to cross-examine or speak to a judge. He rubbed his hand over his slicked, dark hair, and cleared his morning throat. He hadn’t spoken yet today, only hummed in the shower.

“I think it’s too late. He’s not going to change his mind about the future. As he sees it, there are only two possible outcomes at this point. He is going to ride out some apocalyptic storm in his bomb shelter basement in the company of neighbors he doesn’t recognize, and come out into the sun after weeks underground to find that he and his new neighborly devotees have all survived. Or he will pass along before said attack and retire to his lovely parcel of soil just close enough to the big maple tree that he’ll have a bit of shade when the marble starts to get hot.”

“Nice, so I take it that’s a no? Spending more time with his daughter won’t help with those things?” Megan asked aggressively, but with a smile. “I know. I know I do this every time I come back from that place. I can’t help it. It’s just such a goddamn freak show over there.”

Nick cleared his throat again. “Let him do what he wants to do. We’ll tell our kids about their crazy grandpa and how they’ve grown up sleeping on mattresses from his basement. They’ll thank him for all of their sweet dreams. They’ll laugh and we’ll laugh. And later, you’ll probably cry. But, in the end, you can’t force him to do anything.”

“All right, all right. I guess as long as he’s happy, which he really isn’t, I have to let it go. I just have to let it go. Realistically, I can’t be there any more than I am. He takes care of himself. He has his mother to visit. They can co-exist in their imaginary worlds.”

Nick walked around the bed and kissed Megan on the head. “As long as you don’t start hoarding cans, everything should be fine. I’ve got to go. I have a meeting with a client from Chicago at 9. See you tonight.”

Megan had some coffee and made a sandwich for lunch. She had a hard time looking in the cupboard. All those nonperishables. She tried to shake it off, but she felt nauseated, like she was looking at a drug addict’s stash.

Megan got into her leased blue Toyota and drove to work. Though it wasn’t exactly what she had in mind when she got her masters in social work, she worked at a nursing home in a wealthy suburb as a marketing manager. As much as she tried to ignore it, she realized the obvious parallel and occasionally ran with it. She even persuaded a few of the residents at Friends Village to pre-arrange their funerals. During moments of enraged clarity, it made her skin crawl. She was absolutely ashamed. She wanted out of the nursing home job. She wanted no association to her father’s neuroses. She wanted something more optimistic, maybe a pre-school marketing job. “Kids have

bright futures,” she thought. “They’ll probably live to be 115 at this point. Enough, enough,” she stopped herself. “Can’t they just live? Why do they have to live until something?”

She spent her day confirming some upcoming advertisements, arranging a meeting with a group of hospital nurses and aides, and answering emailed questions for a senior section article in the Indianapolis Star. None of these tasks was morbid, she told herself. She didn’t buy ad space on the obituaries page. Her job was a decent, regular job that focused on improving lives. She wasn’t helping people die. She dealt in sunrises, not sunsets.

When she got home from work, Megan noticed the light on the answering machine. Only a handful of people still called their home number. One was her father. She pretended to ignore it. Let Nick push the play button when he gets home, she thought.

Megan put away her things and changed clothes to go on a walk. She relished her nightly walks. More anxious than usual, she wanted to get going before Nick returned. Otherwise, she would stand around in her sneakers and catch up on the happenings of the day for twenty minutes. Besides, if she left now, Nick would get home, start dinner, and listen to the message before she got back. He would let her know who called.

Megan grabbed her headphones, locked the front door, and strung the key through her right shoelace. She didn’t feel safe leaving a key under the monogrammed doormat. During the few times she had left the key under the mat, she spent her entire walk consumed by it. What will I do if the key is gone when I get back? Will someone be in

the house? Or will the key thief come back when we're asleep and kill us in our beds? Will Nick have confronted the guy when he got home from work? Will Nick be dead on the kitchen floor when I open the door?

Double-checking the double knot, Megan headed straight for the corner and turned right. She didn't want to talk to any neighbors. She wasn't in the mood for chatter about landscaping, paint selection, or patio stones. Megan stormed past several landmark homes and flew around the corner with her athletic arms practically flailing. No one would have stopped her to ask about anything.

Old Dan Donnelly returned to his basement after a long meeting at the funeral home on Monday. He worked hard to convince new retirees Rich and Linda Bowdin that they needed to get things arranged. He loved using that phrase. He felt ownership of it. The other guys used "make the necessary arrangements," but Dan felt it was too formal. He liked to sit across the desk from straight-backed, straight-laced, hard-working people and say, "Let's get things arranged." He was confident they liked it too. It was practical, but it wasn't official.

Rich and Linda wanted to look out for their three kids as they anticipated the future. They decided before visiting with Dan that pre-planning was the responsible, thoughtful thing to do. Nonetheless, they hesitated in the parking lot and at the front desk of Parker's Funeral Home. As they entered Dan's office, Rich quickly turned away when he saw Linda place two fingers on the inside of her wrist. She still felt something.

"Hello Rich. Hello Linda. How are you both?" asked Dan gently, yet cheerfully.

"Oh, we're just fine," answered Rich.

“Great. Have you had a chance to look things over and talk things over?” pressed Dan subtly.

“I think so, yes. We have,” answered Linda.

“So we’ll run through the basics here first and I can answer any questions about our options as we get to them. How does that sound?” continued Dan in his calm tone.

“Sure, that’ll be fine,” answered Rich.

“Great. Well, let’s get things arranged,” recited Dan.

In just under three hours, Rich and Linda selected two polished poplar caskets stained red mahogany – one with white crepe and one with champagne velvet – and a shared headstone near Linda’s parents’ graves in Washington Park Cemetery. Both wanted a service at Christ Church Cathedral and a viewing with visitation. They would leave it up to the kids to plan the receptions. Things were arranged.

Dan felt satisfied with the progress he and Megan made over the weekend. The bottled water was organized by expiration date and the mattresses were bunched by size. The collection of sheets was starting to build, too. He had forgotten about sheets for all of the beds. He credited Megan with the idea. He nodded his head as he looked around, agreeing with himself, and smiling when he thought of his daughter. Sometimes he did need an outside perspective, and even an occasional touch of feminine input.

Happy with himself and his state of preparedness, old Dan Donnelly cooked himself a ribeye in the pan. He enjoyed it with a beer, and even had another beer when he moved over to the couch. His knees towered over the coffee table and he had to reach around them to grab his can. As he sat back on the worn, tan fabric, he decided to call Megan and Nick. He wanted to say thanks. After leaving a long-winded and unusually

carefree message on their machine, he fell asleep in front of the blue twinkle of World News Tonight. It guided him into a messy tangle of dreams. He was chased. He was burning. People were screaming. Normally this kind of dream would startle him so much that he would wake himself bracing the cover with a heaving chest, his breathing loud and dense. During this evening's spell of dreams, the horror wasn't enough to wake him. Instead, it killed him. He just never woke up.

As Megan returned from her walk and approached the house, she saw Nick's car parked on the street and smoke coming from the chimney. She bent over and took the key from her shoelace. She unlocked the front door and it creaked slowly open. She could see Nick standing in the kitchen over a steaming pot. She walked into the kitchen. The light on the answering machine was still blinking.

Nick turned around. "Hot soup for a cold night," he said with the wave of a wooden spoon.

"Ummm. Sounds good. Did you listen to the answering machine?" asked Megan.

"No. Do we have a message? I always forget to check that antique piece," he answered.

"Yes, it's blinking. I'll check it," she muttered, clearly annoyed, as she made her way over to the flashing light.

"You have one new message," the machine sounded.

Megan held onto the counter and looked at the floor. "Beeep."

"Hi Megan, it's Dad. Hi Nick, it's Dan. Are you there? (Pause.) Didn't think so. Well, I just wanted to say thanks for your help on Sunday, Megan. I think we made some

good progress. The basement is really coming together. You never know what tomorrow will bring. So thanks. Anyway, anytime you want to come back out, you're welcome. You could even stay over. You know I have places for you to sleep, and sheets now too. (Laughs.) And you too, Nick. We could use some young muscle on the inside. (Laughs.) Call when you can."

Megan squeezed her eyes together and pulled in a deep breath through her nose. She slowly let it out and looked at Nick.

"Well, what a relief. We made some good progress," responded Megan dryly.

"It sure sounds like it. You going back this weekend?" he grinned.

"That's not funny. Why, are you interested? It sure sounds like he wants us to come out. I'm not ready for another round of 'Do you think we need more starches? We have a lot of fruits and vegetables. I have a little grill and matches. We can always boil water and make noodles. Do you think I should get more? They're on sale at such and such.' Are you ready for that?"

"I wouldn't say that I'm ready, exactly. Willing? Maybe. Interested? Not at all."

"I'll call him back and tell him we may be able to come out in a few weeks. Both of us. What do you think?"

"Sure. Though, I don't know. Why don't you have him come here? The last time he visited us we still lived in the apartment. Besides, he can handle the drive. Maybe a drive through the country will do him some good."

"Not a chance. I mean, I'll ask him. But, not a chance. That's not a bad idea, though. Maybe I can use some of my daughterly charms to trick him into it. We can take him to the farmers' market in the neighborhood and make him a decent dinner. Is there a

Pacers game? Do you think he would go? He hasn't been to a pro game since he played. Do you think he knows there is still life out there? Outside of UT basketball and clipping coupons from Toledo supermarket fliers?"

"Well, I see you've taken to the idea. Want to set the table? The soup's on."

As Megan took the placemats out of the drawer, she felt surprised. The possibility that her dad would visit was a good one.

Megan cleared the table and separated the remaining soup into two containers. She knew Nick wouldn't take his portion to work in the morning, but she did it anyway. She started to put the dishes into the dishwasher and tidy up the kitchen when Nick asked, "You going to call him now? If you don't, you won't pay any attention to the movie."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll call him now. Do you want a drink?"

"No thanks, but I'll make you one."

"Just a little more wine would be perfect. In case I need it."

With that Megan stepped over to the little built-in desk that housed the phone, answering machine, and mail. She reached for a pen and some paper. She knew she'd doodle her way through this chat. She'd draw her usual small windowless houses, big trees, and spiky grass.

As she dialed the phone, Nick delivered her glass and left her with a kiss on the head. "Tell him any weekend is fine, I guess."

Megan smiled and rolled her eyes. The ringing started. Old Dan Donnelly didn't believe in answering machines. "People will know you're not home if the answering machine picks up," he always said.

And as it was, no one or no thing picked up. Dan Donnelly may or may not have been home. The movie was still ignored and the glass was still emptied.

Megan decided not to call again that evening. "It may be too late for him," she said. "He tends to go to bed early." On a stomach full of soup and wine, she slept all night, but couldn't remember her dreams.

In the morning, Megan struggled to get out of bed. She granted herself ten extra minutes under the down comforter. Finally, after fifteen, Nick sat on the edge of the bed and nudged her.

"Come on, Meg, you'd better get up. You still have a job, don't you?" he prodded.

She flopped her arm over the top of the comforter. "I think so."

Nick grabbed one of her legs and rocked it back and forth.

"All right, all right. I'm up," she moaned. "Can you turn on the shower? Please, please, please?"

Following Nick into the bathroom, Megan took off her nightgown and stepped behind the crisp, white shower curtain. She knew she needed to rush. But she just couldn't do it.

Leaving her soup in the fridge, Megan made it to Friendly Village a few minutes late. Nothing that couldn't be chalked up to an accident on I-65. She stepped into her

office, sat sternly in her chair, and looked at the phone. Picking up the lightweight office phone, she pounded the buttons of her dad's number. And again, it rang and rang and rang.

"Dribble, dribble, tick, tock..." She stopped herself from completing her mother's old phrase.

Megan hated when she caught herself mimicking her father's tendencies. But, at this moment, there was nothing she could do to control it. She couldn't stop the manic pulse of thoughts. Could this be it? Did he have a heart attack? Did he fall down the stairs? He's probably at work already. She finally calmed down enough to shut her eyes and say out loud, "I'll wait and call him back this afternoon."

The afternoon seemed miles away. The open slots on her Tuesday morning schedule stared back at her with blank eyes. She normally loved a meeting-free morning. Instead, Megan worked hard to stay busy. She organized folders on her computer and papers on her desk. She sent follow-up emails. She called the reporter at the Star to verify a publication date that she already knew. At 1:15, she broke down and asked herself, "Can I call him again?" The answer was yes. But the response was the same. No answer.

Shit. Fuck. Now what was a daughter to do?

Megan called Nick on the office line at his law firm, something she never did. "What do I do? Am I overreacting?" she asked.

"Yes, but call the funeral home. To see if he's there. To see if he's working, of course. Sorry. Call him at work!" replied Nick. "Let me know what he says. I can't imagine where he's been, unless Toledo is under fire."

“You’re funny, but you’re not funny now. I’ll call you back,” Megan said as she hung up.

“Yes, hello. This is Megan Bartlett, um, Megan Donnelly. Is my father there? Is Dan Donnelly in today?” she asked in an urgent tone, still trying not to sound scared.

“No dear, I’m afraid he’s not. I’ve heard a lot about you. Your dad is ready to be a grandpa, you know. I didn’t see him come in this morning, now that I think of it. Should I leave him a note? I imagine he’ll be in tomorrow,” answered the relaxed and chipper female voice on the other end.

“No, it’s ok. I mean, yes, leave him a note. Have him call me. Thanks,” rushed Megan.

Megan felt sick. Her mind continued to thumb through the possibilities. Heart attack. Fall. Misunderstanding. Unexpected travel. Doctor’s appointment. Something with his mother. A dry run for the end of the world. Burglary gone wrong. Murder. No way, no way.

She wished for a neighbor to call. He didn’t have a friendly Mrs. Quintana who lived next door, or even a nasty Mr. Williams who refused to mow his lawn. There was no one she could call. The fact-finding questions would only confuse her grandmother. Did she have to call the police?

Megan rested her arms on desk and bowed her head. She felt the shiver run over her body. She pictured herself creeping down his miserable little street. There was no sound, and no movement either. Just Megan and Nick pulling into the driveway and seeing his Oldsmobile parked neatly under the carport. Megan saw herself gasp and cover

her mouth with both hands. She was terrified. He was right. The worst thing you can be is surprised.

Megan called Nick right away. “We need to drive there. I don’t see any other way.” She spoke quickly and assertively.

“Ok, let’s calm down. So, he’s not at work and he’s not answering his phone. Maybe he’s at your grandmother’s or took a little vacation? Is there anyone we can call to check on him?” he asked kindly.

“No! There is no one to call except the police. Do you think I should call the police?”

“Are we really at that point? If we are and that is what you want to do, then yes, call them. But you’re sure there is no one we can call? Someone from work? Someone on his block? No one?”

“There’s no one. No one has a key. Nothing. Trust me.”

“Ok. I know you’re upset and worried and somewhat predisposed for extreme paranoia, but I just want to make sure you really want to do this. If you say the word, I’ll do it. I just hope your father, and you, can laugh about this one later.”

Megan started crying. She managed a broken, “Ok.”

“So we’re calling the police? And then driving to Toledo?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Ok, then. Just remember that this was your idea. I’ll call the police. You call your sister. I’ll meet you at home in thirty minutes and we’ll go. Does that work?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ll call Rebecca. Oh god, what do I tell her? What do I say? Have you talked to Dad since yesterday? No? Me either. I think he’s dead. What do you think? We’ve called the police. We’re driving over there.”

“Something like that, yes. There’s nothing else you can say. I mean we really don’t know anything. So let’s try to remain reasonable. We don’t need to get worked up for no reason. Do you agree?”

“Yes, yes. All right, I’ll meet you at home. Please call me after you call the police. I guess it would be the Toledo Police. Should be easy enough to find. Thanks for doing this. I hope I’m just being unnecessarily maniacal. Like father, like daughter.”

Megan gave her boss a quick explanation and ran to the parking lot. She would call her sister once she was on her way home.

As she drove, she had trouble staying in the moment. She was too focused on the possible outcomes. When will I know what is going to happen? At what point will this surprise end? Her father’s obscene level of vigilance suddenly struck her. No wonder he wanted to be ready. This was awful.

Megan called her sister who lived in Detroit. In the rush and blur, she somehow detailed the situation sanely and carefully. She was just taking precautions, she explained. In case something had happened, someone needed to be in Toledo. “I’m not ready for this, whatever this ends up being. I just saw him this weekend. He was fine, or as fine as he’s ever been. Working and preparing. Working and preparing. I’ll let you know what this is all about as soon as I get there. If it’s about anything at all.”

Megan continued driving and thinking. Most people couldn’t live in such regimented isolation, yet her father found an odd comfort in living alone and on high

alert. Working and preparing. What had she been doing? Could her life be so simply subdivided too? Working and enjoying? Working and thinking? Working and living? It wasn't as clear-cut. At least, she didn't think it was, and she certainly didn't want it to be. For the most part, she was happy. Of course, she had struggles and demons and nightmares, but she never experienced the depth of regret he did. He never spoke of it, but Dan Donnelly couldn't hide his somewhat-warranted sense of disappointment. Tall and proud, he spent a decent number of years on basketball courts surrounded by thousands of screams and twice as many clapping hands. He climbed ladders and clipped nets. He married a beautiful girl and lived in big cities. At the time, it felt like it was his story and like it would last forever. But he just couldn't keep it going. At some point, he accepted his downward slope, threw his long arms into the air, and slid right down the next forty years.

Megan arrived at home and Nick pulled up right behind her. He got out of his car, walked over to Megan, and held her tentatively. "I've been following you for a few minutes. Didn't you see me? I'll drive from here. I canceled my meetings for later this afternoon and tomorrow morning. Just grab a few things and let's get going."

They walked into the house, packed a bag, and returned to the car in ten minutes. Nick looked at Megan as he started the car and said, "We still don't know anything, you know. I know you have a feeling, maybe even a premonition, but really we don't have any facts. I called the police. They are sending someone over. They'll call me if anything is out of the ordinary. They're going to look in the windows and check the doors. Do you want them to force entry if they need to? I asked them to call before they make any drastic moves."

“Ok, thanks. I guess if his car is there, and nobody answers they should break down the door. Right?” Megan looked tired already.

“I don’t know. Oh shit, where’s my phone? It’s ringing. Here. Do you want me to answer or do you want to talk?”

“You answer. No, I’ll answer. Here, here. Give it to me,” she ordered.

“This is Officer Vittman of the Toledo PD. This Nick Bartlett?” the man questioned.

“No, this is his wife, Megan Bartlett. Dan Donnelly is my father. Are you at his house? What’s going on? Is he there?”

“Yes, m’am. He’s here. We can see his head through the window. He’s a tall fellow, isn’t he? Looks like a giant sitting on that little old couch. Did your old man used to play ball at UT? The name is familiar.”

“Yes, he played at UT. Dan Donnelly. That’s my father. So, he’s there?”
Eyebrows raised, she glanced over at Nick.

“Yeah, he’s here. Just not answering the door. Not budging when we knock. The television is on. Maybe just too loud. He looks fine to me. Just watching TV and having a beer like any man wants to.”

She glanced at Nick. “Does he look alive?”

“How do you mean, alive? He’s sitting there with a beer watching the tube. Don’t sound bad to me. He’s just living, living easy. Do you want us to break down the door to check his pulse now, miss? We’ll do it. But we can’t pay for a new door. I say you let the man be. Have you tried calling him?”

“Yes, I tried calling him! Don’t you think I’d call him before I’d call you? He’s not picking up the phone! He didn’t show up for work! I’m at least two and a half hours away! I need to know if he is alive or dead!” she yelled.

Nick raised and lowered his hand with a stop, slow down, take a deep breath motion.

“Just tell him to go in. That’s what he’s waiting for.”

Megan pinched her eyes together and bit her lips from the inside. She unlocked her mouth, swallowed, and said, “Officer, please use whatever means necessary to check on my father’s condition. I would like to know if he is alive or if he is dead. Thank you. I’ll wait on the line.”

She looked back at Nick and the tears dropped slowly and heavily out of her eyes. She handed him the phone and whispered, “I can’t listen to this.”

After a minute or two of normal knocking, Nick heard yelling and banging. “Toledo PD! Open up! Open up!” More banging. “Last chance, buddy! Either you open it or we open it!”

Megan pictured her father rubbing his large, flat forehead with the palms of his hands. “Is this it?” he would think, confused by the commotion. He would look around at the television and the beers and see the police cruisers outside. He would jump up and run to the door, just in time to stop them. He would grab the phone and apologize and explain and apologize again. He would feel bad about getting so many people involved and causing such uproar.

Megan briefly smiled as she thought of the scenario. She shook her head and quickly returned to a reality that became increasingly gray and silent. She heard Nick's voice talking into the phone.

"Yes, I understand... Yes, then please call the paramedics. Yes, we'll get there as soon as we can. Yes, I understand. Just please don't leave him there alone... And please have someone there when we arrive... Yes, yes. I appreciate it. Thank you."

Nick pulled over on the highway. Megan jumped out of the car. She ran a few yards, and then folded onto some grass near a farm fence.

Nick gave her a minute and then walked over to the slim strip of green. Cars were flying past on the highway. Megan looked up from her cross-legged position. She wiped her cheeks and flicked her hands. The tears sprayed onto her legs and left small spots on her pants. "So I guess that's the end of Dan Donnelly's sad story. He died alone watching TV, drinking a beer. He would have been so disappointed. And to think he sat there all night with his big head in the window. I wonder what the neighbors thought. Old Man Donnelly has finally gone over the deep end. Well, now they'll know. He wasn't crazy. He was dead."

A Hungry Artist

(ein hungriger Künstler)

(#ahungryartist)

A modern take on the classic story by Franz Kafka

During the last decade the interest in artistic feeding has markedly diminished. In the early days of caloric performance, bingers attracted quite a crowd. They used to be able to cover their food bills and even pay down some of their student loan debts.

We live in a different world now. At one time all of Brooklyn took a lively interest in the hungry artist; from the opening reception for her site-specific feeding pod to the gallery's closing party, the excitement mounted; everybody wanted to see her at least once a day; there were creative types who stared through the gallery windows and into her plexiglass pod after nights of artisan rye cocktails, heightened by the light of the video art installation sharing the former manufacturing space; on fine days the feeding

pod was set out onto the sidewalk and then it was the children's special treat to bring organic, gluten-free, wheat-free food to the hungry artist; for their elders she was often just a joke that happened to be current, but the children stood open-mouthed, holding each other's sanitized hands for greater security, marveling at her as she sat there swollen in black leggings, with her muffin top sticking out so prominently, not even on a seat but down among the energy bar wrappers and take-out containers on the ground, sometimes giving a careful nod, answering questions with a tight smile so as not to let any morsel escape, or perhaps squeezing an arm through the pod's custom drive-thru window so that one might feel how plump it was, and then again withdrawing deep into herself, paying no attention to anyone or anything, not even to the all-important ringing of her smartphone that was the only non-edible in her pod, but merely staring into vacancy with half open eyes, now and then using her ever-meaty forearms to wipe crumbs or grease from her lips.

Beside Europeans there were also relays of permanent watchers selected by the artist collective, usually vegans, strangely enough, and it was their task to watch the hungry artist day and night, three of them at a time, in case she should have some secret recourse to full-sugar soda. This was nothing but a formality, instituted to reassure the masses, for the initiates knew well enough that during her feed the artist would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, reject the smallest bite of food, even processed products from box stores; the honor of her artist statement as posted on the gallery wall forbade it. Not every watcher, of course, was capable of understanding this; there were often groups of night watchers who were very lax in carrying out their duties and deliberately huddled together on the deserted street corner to smoke cigarettes,

obviously intending to give the hungry artist the chance of a little respite from chewing. Much more to her taste were the watchers who sat close up to the pod, who were not content with the dim night lighting of the gallery but focused her in the full glare of the white walls, freshly painted by the gallery's fall semester interns. The harsh track lighting did not trouble her at all; in any case she would never sleep properly, and she could always drowse a little under the spell of her food coma, whatever the light, at any hour, even when the gallery space and its floor-to-ceiling window was thronged with noisy onlookers. But her happiest moment was when the morning came and an enormous breakfast was brought to the watchers, at the gallery owner's expense. Of course there were people who argued that this breakfast was an unfair attempt to get the watchers to eat dairy and animal products, but that was going too far, and when they were invited to take on a night's vigil without a breakfast, merely for the sake of the cause, they made themselves scarce, although they stuck stubbornly to their suspicions.

Such suspicions, anyhow, were a necessary accompaniment to the profession of feeding. No one could possibly watch the hungry artist continuously, day and night, and so no one could produce first-hand evidence that the feed had really been rigorous and continuous; only the artist herself could know that, and so she was therefore bound to be the sole completely satisfied spectator of her own feed. Yet for other reasons she was never satisfied; it was not perhaps mere feeding that had brought her to such obscene obesity that many people had regretfully to keep away from her exhibitions, because the sight of her was too much for them; perhaps it was dissatisfaction with herself that had worn her down. For she alone knew, what no other initiate knew, how easy it was to eat. It was the easiest thing in the world.

The longest period of continuous feeding was fixed by her agent and the gallery owner at four days. Beyond that term she was not allowed to eat in public, even in great cities, and there was good reason for it, too. Experience had proved that for about four days the interest of her online followers could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of banner and pop up advertisements, but after that even her online newsletter recipients would begin to lose interest. As a general rule, four days marked the limit. So on the fourth day the plexiglass was cleaned of fingerprints, a reusable stainless steel bottle of New York City tap water was placed on a pedestal in the gallery, two personal trainers carried in a scale to measure the results of the feed, which were announced through a megaphone, and finally two young ladies appeared, blissful in their vintage frocks and leather-free shoes, to help the hungry artist squeeze out of the clear pod and down to the pedestal. And at this moment the artist always turned stubborn. True, she would entrust her fleshy arms to the yoga-toned biceps of these women helping to get her through the intentionally small pod doorway, but stand up she would not. She demanded a clean muumuu and a wheelchair. Why stop feeding at this particular moment after four days of it? She had indulged for a long time, an illimitably long time; why stop now when she was in her best feeding form? Why should she be cheated of the fame she would get for feeding longer, for being not only the record hungry artist of all time, which presumably she was already, but for beating her own weight gain record by a performance beyond human imagination, since she felt there was no limits to her capacity for feeding? Why shouldn't the public endure it? Besides, she was comfortable sitting in the pile of chopsticks and delivery menus and now she was supposed to lift to her full feed weight and go down to drink plain water the very thought of which gave her a

pulsing desire to lick the salt from the bottom of a potato chip bag that only the presence of the cameras kept her from betraying. And she looked into the eyes of the ladies who were apparently so friendly and in reality so thin, and shook her head, which felt too heavy on her muscle-less neck. But then there happened yet again what always happened. The gallery owner came forward, without a word and lifted her arms in the air above the artist, as if inviting Heaven to look down upon its creature here in the foil and plastic, this suffering martyr, which indeed she was, although in quite another sense; grasped her round the thick waist, with exaggerated enjoyment, so that the artist's largesse might be appreciated; and committed her to the care of the personal trainers, not without secretly giving her a shaking so that her thighs and upper arms swung and waved. Then came the water, a sip of which the gallery owner managed to get between the artist's lips; after that, a toast was drunk to the public, clearly prompted by a moan coming from deep within the artist's gut; a self-promoted indie rock band confirmed it with an indifferent flourish, but no one had any cause to be satisfied with the proceedings, no one except the hungry artist herself, she only, as always.

So she lived for many years, with small regular intervals of therapy and dieting, in supersized glory, honored by the world, yet in spite of that, troubled in spirit and gastrointestinal discomfort, and all the more troubled because no one would take her trouble seriously.

She had not, however, actually lost her sense of the real situation and took it as a matter of course that she and her pod should be stationed, in the middle of the highest artist-per-capita county in the country, in her own walk-up studio apartment, using a web cam to stream her feeding on a web site that was, after all, easily accessible.