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The Healer and Other Stories

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Carol Dorothy Meier

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Thesis Committee:
Professor Rob Roberge, Co-Chairperson
Professor Andrew Winer, Co-Chairperson
Professor Elizabeth Crane Brandt
The Thesis of Carol Dorothy Meier is approved:


Committee Co-Chairperson


Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
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Dedication

This collection is dedicated to the little girl who found her way back into the sunlight.
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SOMETHING TO TAKE YOUR MIND OFF OF IT

Leo was hungry. He'd been hungry all day. Yesterday, too. He'd be hungry tomorrow.

He was on a diet. He had to live with hunger, carry it around with him. It followed him to bed and greeted him in the morning. He brought it to the office and considered it all day. The insistent scratching on his insides made him unable to focus on words and concepts in meetings and he spoke to people with a diluted, dissatisfied voice. He'd never been on a diet before, had never been denied food. He had no idea what to fill himself with in its place.

His wife, Marilyn, scoffed at his preoccupation with his hunger. "You just need something to take your mind off of it," she said.
She was eating bread with their dinner of chicken and broccoli with brown rice. Leo's portion of rice might easily fit in his cupped palm. No bread for him. Bread was too many carbohydrates, and empty ones at that. Especially white bread, Marilyn reminded him. The broccoli dominated his plate. Your vegetable portion should take up at least half of your plate, that's what they said at the Shape Tracker meetings. He'd never noticed the word "portion" before, but now it confronted him constantly. His portions were too big, he was told. Years of amply gratifying himself with marbled meats and silken sauces had glutted his arteries and swollen his glands and liver. Fat swelled under his skin, steadily stretching it over the years, tearing and toughening it until the skin was strained tautly over the fat even as it sagged under its weight. Now he had to watch his portions. He had to measure them and count them and sometimes even weigh them. Portion. It was a hostile word and he hated it.

"I used a smaller plate," Marilyn said as Leo sawed at his broiled chicken breast. "A smaller plate makes it look like more food," she said. "It tricks the brain."

It sounded familiar, the small plate trick. He remembered hearing them talk about it at the meeting but at the time he was reading the ingredient list on a package of diet gummy candies. Fake sugar, fake flavor and a couple of other ingredients he'd never heard of. One of the Shape Tracker ladies was selling them for two dollars a package.

Marilyn insisted he go to the meetings. She'd bought him something to sprinkle on his food and it was supposed to make him eat less, but she caught him shaking it onto a pastry. He wasn't taking it seriously, she said. The next day she gave
him a list of the meetings in the area, including the ones near his office. Shape Tracker meetings were for people who needed to lose weight but couldn't make the right choices on their own, couldn't stay focused on their goals.

"Leo, you were fat when we married. You've always been fat. But now, it's ghastly." She'd said this as he undressed for bed. His belly hung down over the waistband of his shorts, exposing a belly button that had popped out as a pregnant woman's would. The fat had migrated everywhere. Even his groin was puffy. He had hairy breasts and chubby kneecaps. He was pale from restricted blood flow everywhere except his underarms, which had developed dark patches - the characteristic herald that Type 2 diabetes was on its way. She wasn't going to let him do this to himself any longer, she'd told him. She offered to drive him to the meetings, to make sure he really went in, he supposed.

"No, Marilyn. I said I'd go and I'll go." He couldn't imagine the shame of having his wife wait in the car while he discussed food prohibitions with strangers. It might be different if she offered to go in to the meeting with him. Marilyn had put on a little weight over the years, too, though nothing like Leo. But he knew better than to suggest she was in any way undesirable because of a little flab. The women's magazines she left lying around the house, the ones with the plus-sized models on the covers, encouraged her to embrace herself. Anyway, the truth was that he did still desire her. Their sex life had always been conservative, never anything to write Penthouse Forum about, but for Leo it was enough. Marilyn was comfortable and
familiar. She still had the creamy skin of her youth and massaged raspberry scented lotion into it every night.

Leo ate his chicken and the handful of rice. He was so hungry he even ate the broccoli, though he thought a little butter would improve it. Some cheese would be even better, but that was probably going too far. He considered salting it but Marilyn hadn’t put the salt shaker on the table. She felt he ate too much salt.

After dinner Marilyn went to the bedroom to change while Leo finished drying the dishes. She came out wearing pajamas, her breasts bouncing under the jersey fabric. She sat in front of the television and clicked through the channels. Leo stood behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. He massaged in a gentle rhythm, watching her breasts rock. He might get food off his mind if he filled his hands with Marilyn's breasts. When he moved his hands down her arms, she leaned forward to pick up the TV guide and rearranged herself on the sofa, out of his reach.

"No," she said. Leo couldn't remember the last time she'd said, "Yes."

He told her he was going for a walk to help his digestion.

"Sure," she said. "You need your exercise."

As he opened the door, she called out, "Don't – "

"I won't," he said. "The walking will take my mind off of it. Anyway, I'm not taking my wallet." He pulled on a windbreaker and headed up the street. His feelings were hurt that she thought he might sneak food. Of course he wanted to lose weight and be healthy. He couldn't help it if he thought about food all day, if he was always
hungry. He'd grown up eating well and often. He missed its comforting presence. But that didn't mean he'd go off his diet. He'd stick to it just like he promised.

Hunger was rarely present in Leo's childhood. His father was a well paid bank executive and his mother was a house wife. She didn't know a thing about cooking when they got married so she took classes. By the time Leo was old enough to eat solid foods, she was an expert. Leo soon had his father's stout frame. Both of them were steeped in his mother's culinary love. But that wasn't enough to keep his father from wandering. When Leo was nine, his father left them for a woman with straight black hair.

Before the divorce, they lived in a house near the country club. His mother threw parties for his father's friends, who raved about her food. During a late summer banquet, he'd sat at the top of the stairs, peering around the banister at the guests mingling with effervescent glasses in their hands. A figure appeared at the bottom of the stairs, beckoning Leo. It was one of the men from his father's bank. The man moved in a languid, unhurried way, reaching up with a long toothpick speared with something dark and long. He was drunk and also seemed disturbed, but not in a way that had frightened Leo. Many years later, Leo learned the man had killed himself a few weeks after that party, unable to get over the loss of his teenage son, who had drowned earlier that summer.

Leo had come slowly down the stairs to him, unsure if his parents would scold him for getting out of bed. He took the toothpick and smelled it. Bacon. "Do you know what that is?" the man asked. "A devil on horseback. Try it."
Leo bit into one end. Wrapped inside the bacon was something dark, soft and sweet.

"It's a fancy name for dates in bacon," the man said. "Like it?"

Leo nodded. It was delightfully sweet and salty. The man was impressed and looked pleased with himself for introducing Leo to a party snack with such a dramatic name. Leo felt as if he'd discovered a secret he was too young to know. He ate the other half and smiled.

"You'll never be as happy as that, my boy," the man said. He sent Leo upstairs and drifted back into the party.

After the divorce, Leo and his mother moved to a small apartment over a drug store. His mother was eternally worried that Leo thought he wouldn't be taken care of. She constantly assured him she would make sure they had enough food. Leo was mainly concerned about having the correct brand of jeans, but for his mother, it was always about food.

One day she took him out of school and brought him along to her lawyer's office. Leo could tell that his presence was a surprise to everyone. They looked at him as if he were concealing a snake. His mother insisted he sit across from his father at a long table. An average height for his age, Leo's feet barely touched the ground, but his thighs pressed against the sides of the chair. A secretary brought him a glazed doughnut as his parents argued over numbers. He was half finished when his mother said to his father, "Do you want your son to go hungry?" Leo wiped the glaze from
his mouth as everyone at the table examined at him. Leo believed hunger must be the worst thing that could happen to him.

At ten he had the stomach flu for several days and couldn't hold down any food. Once the symptoms subsided he slept for a long time. When he woke up he felt an immense hunger, the most intense sensation he'd ever experienced in his young life. His mother was so pleased he had his appetite back, she brought him anything he asked for. A scrambled egg, cheese toast, rice pudding. Each time he finished eating, his mother would go back to the kitchen and return with more food. Mashed potatoes. A buttermilk biscuit. Glorious cheesecake. She insisted he eat until he was suffused.

Leo walked in a straight line until the sidewalk ended and then turned north as the sun set. He wasn't used to walking. His lower back strained to hold his frame erect. He needed shoes with better support if he was going to take up walking, or at least some inserts. His left sole slapped the pavement more than the right as his foot landed, which always happened when he was tired, but he didn't want to turn back just yet. He was still trying to digest that broccoli. And yet, he was hungry again. At the meetings, they talked about how people like him mistook boredom for hunger. But he wasn't bored. He was almost certain it wasn't boredom.

He stood at a corner and thought maybe he'd go west and circle around back to home when he spotted something glowing to his right. It was a blue neon sign:
"Reggie's." Below it was a faded awning with the scalloped edge starting to peel away. A few strips of masking tape were failing to hold the fringe in place. In the window was a sign that read, "Fresh Pie."

Leo took a deep breath, hoping he'd be able to smell pie. He could only smell the dank storm drain beneath him. He was disappointed, but knew it was just as well. There was no point in smelling pie you can't have.

Leo turned away from Reggie's and took a few steps. He stopped to adjust his belt and scratch at the red indentation the buckle had made on his belly. He considered loosening it, but he was already on the belt's last hole. He could punch another one, but that would be admitting defeat, he supposed. If he stayed on his diet he'd drop some weight and wouldn't need another hole on his belt. After a glance over his shoulder at the beaming sign, he started off again.

Half way down the block he stopped. His stomach ached. His head felt like a bingo drum with dozens of balls bouncing ear to ear and buffeting the back of his eyeballs, making his jaw clench and his tongue press to the roof of his mouth. Each ball was stamped with the words, "Fresh Pie."

He'd promised Marilyn. She'd sat on the edge of the bed, crying, telling him he was aimed for an early grave. And then where would she be, she asked? Left alone with nothing but that paltry life insurance policy he took out years ago. No one could live on that. And with the state he was in now, he couldn't hope to get a bigger policy, she said.
Still, there wasn't any harm in just sitting down in Reggie's for a few minutes and resting his feet. He didn't have any money to buy pie even if he wanted to.

"Fresh" was probably a lie anyway. A dumpy place like that, he reasoned, surely didn't have decent pie. And he'd never go off his diet for lousy pie. Proper homemade pie, maybe, but never that institutional pie they sold in cafeterias and cheap diners.

The door stuck a little as he pushed it open. As Leo banged inside, Reggie's sole customer dropped his newspaper to the counter and looked at him. Leo couldn't tell if the man was surprised by the banging or by Leo. Maybe both. The old timer had the paper spread out in front of him. Leo squeezed into a seat at the counter.

"Quiet in here tonight," Leo said.

"Yep," said the old man.

"Is it always this quiet?" he said.

"Mostly, at this hour."

"You come here a lot?" said Leo.

"Since Reggie first opened the doors." The old man picked up the paper again. "Seen a lot of changes."

Leo looked around the diner. It was relatively clean but in disrepair. The tabletops were scratched and the stuffing in a few seats was held in by clear tape. The décor was from a few decades ago. A dump.

A man appeared from the back wearing an apron. "Get you something?" he said to Leo.

"No, I'd like to just sit for a minute. Is that all right?"
"Whatever." He disappeared into the back.

"Unbelievable," the old man said.

"What is?" said Leo.

The old man pointed to the paper. "The stupidity of some people."

"I'm ashamed to say I don't really follow politics."

"Not that. The 'Dear Abby' column. Take this girl here. 'Dear Abby, my boyfriend and I have been living together for two months. He told me he was divorced, but yesterday he came home and told me he wasn't divorced after all. He's still married. On top of that, he says his wife is in financial trouble and needs a place to live. He wants her to move in with us! I don't want her to move in with us, but I'm afraid if I make him choose, he'll choose her. I love him and I don't want to lose him. What should I do?' She doesn't know what to do. I swear, I wonder how some of these people find their way to the bathroom in the morning." He picked up his cup and drained it. "More coffee!"

The man appeared from the back again and filled his cup.

"Give my friend here some coffee, too," the old man said.

"No, I'm fine," said Leo. "Anyway I didn't bring my wallet with me. I was just out for a walk."

"Why don't you give him some free coffee? He's keeping me company."

The man in the apron shook his head at the old man, but got a cup from under the counter and set it in front of Leo. As he poured he asked, "Want sugar?"

"Yes, please. It's very kind of you."
He fumbled under the counter and set two packets of sugar in front of Leo. "I don't put the sugar out anymore. They steal it."

"Who?"

"Junkies. They steal the sugar. So I only put it out if people ask for it, and only if they buy something."

Leo looked down at the sugar packets. He thought it over for a moment but knew he had to say it. "I'm so sorry, but can I have a sugar substitute?" He had never before asked for fake sugar in his life.

The man in the apron fumbled under the counter again and dropped a packet of sugar substitute next to Leo's cup.

"Thanks," said Leo. "So, you're Reggie?"

The old man said, "Reggie died in '92. That's Earl."

As Earl returned to the back, he said, "Too expensive to change the name."

The old man reached over and offered his hand. "Harry. I'm in here almost every night. You live around here?"

"Leo. No, I walked quite a long way tonight."

Leo was snugly tucked between the stool and the counter, his girth strained against the seat back. He shifted and tried to find a little more space but the stool's bolts were firm. He considered moving to the seat between him and Harry, which he could tell had a little more leeway because the bolt was loose. But the thought of breaking the stool off the bolt altogether kept him where he was, safe from the
humiliation of property destruction. He opened the packet of sugar substitute and stirred it into his coffee.

"Are you diabetic?" Harry said.

"No, it's nothing like that."

Leo drank some of his coffee and then set it down. It had a peculiar, artificial flavor. He stared into the cup. **Goddamn it... even my beverages.**

He looked away from the cup and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his windbreaker. He felt a wad of paper scratching his right hand. He pulled it out and flattened it. A twenty dollar bill.

Harry saw him gaping at it.

"Wow," said Leo. "Twenty dollars. I don't even know how that got there. I haven't worn this jacket in months. I can buy my coffee after all."

"You should get some pie, too," Harry said.

Leo felt that time had paused to let the word waft in the air between them.

"Pie," he said, lingering over the word. He could already taste buttery pie crust crumbling in his mouth. He leaned toward the old man and whispered, "Is it any good? It's not any good, is it? Honestly, a place like this. The pie must be lousy."

"It's the only decent thing they have," Harry said. "Homemade. Earl's mother bakes them."

Leo looked up and down the diner. No pie in sight. Harry motioned under the counter. Leo knew he shouldn't look, but he had to see if it was true, if there really was homemade pie in this crappy place. He leaned onto the counter as far as his gut
would allow. Fat shoved into his rib cage and forced him to hold his breath. Peering over the edge, he could see an arc of golden, unmistakably hand-crimped crust. A few crumbs had flaked off and fallen onto the floor. He wanted to cry. It was as if his hunger were an independent entity that had sniffed out the only homemade pie around, maybe for miles, and dragged him here to beg for it and torment him.

"Get the apple," said Harry. "That's her best."

Leo's stomach groaned. In desperation, he swallowed the rest of the coffee to shut it up. The back of his throat felt scalded. He folded the twenty and put it back in his pocket.

"You don't like apple pie?" said Harry.

"Yes, I do. It's just that I'm on a diet."

"And you can't even have some pie once in a while? Not even a sliver of pie?"

"Well, the thing is, I really shouldn't. I promised I'd watch it. My wife's very worried about me, about my health. I only went out to take my mind off of it."

"Say no more. I was married once myself. You're on all kinds of diets. Am I right?"

Leo tucked his hands into his lap. "I've got to take it seriously. I'm on my way to an early grave. I just need to find ways to take my mind off of it."

Leo heard Earl shuffling around in the back.

"That's the hardest part, really," Leo said. "If I could just find something else, anything else to occupy my mind. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad."
"You know what you need?" said Harry. "Lady pie. But not from home. Buy some. Much easier that way. Now that'll take your mind off your troubles. For a little while, anyway."

"Lady pie?" said Leo.

"A woman. You're in the right neighborhood for it. There's tons of gals for hire right around the corner."

Leo's mouth dropped open. "I'm a married man."

"So what? It's not like you're going off with a girlfriend. It's just for the duration."

"Still," said Leo.

"Course twenty dollars won't get you much," Harry said. "Surely not from the younger ones. But maybe one of the older ones, who've seen better days, one of them might give something. Maybe not a full ride, but something."

Leo examined Harry's face. The geezer was serious.

"Just wait around a while. It's a little early yet, but they'll be along. They stop in here to take a rest, have some coffee. Maybe steal some sugar. Ha!" He slapped his thigh as he laughed.

Earl came out. "What's so funny?"

"Me and my friend here are discussing sweet things," Harry said. "Some sweeter than others." He winked at Leo. "Hey, you know you're a terrible waiter? Can't you see Leo's coffee is empty?"
Earl refilled Leo's cup. "I'm not a waiter," he said to Leo. "But I got talked into giving my waitress some time off tonight."

Leo picked up one of the sugar packets next to his coffee cup and tapped it with his finger. It was more than a craving for something sweet. He felt despondent and unfulfilled without the sugar. Marilyn would never know if he cheated this little bit, with one packet of sugar, enough to put something real in his belly. Was it so bad to have a teaspoon, maybe two, of sugar in his coffee? Maybe it was. Maybe he was killing himself with the very things he thought were giving him life. He remembered a Shape Tracker mantra from the meetings: "I am getting healthier every day." Just as Earl was turning to leave, he put the packet down. "I'm sorry to trouble you again. May I have a sugar substitute?"

Earl took the two packets back and set down a packet of fake sugar. Leo heard the door bang open. He recognized the sound of high heels. She stood at the counter beside him.

"Large coffee to go," she said. She set one hand on the counter and with firm defiance leaned toward Earl. "And I want SIX sugars."

Earl turned around to get a tall paper cup and lid and poured the coffee. When he gave her the sugars she said, "Thank. You."

As she looked into her bag, Harry flashed Leo a thumbs up sign and pointed at her, nodding. She paid in change and stirred the sugars and some creamers into her coffee with a long spoon.
"Hi, Tricia," said Harry. "Why don't you stay for a minute and chat with me and my friend here?"

"Yeah, okay," she said. She stood behind the stool between the two men.

Harry waited for Earl to step in the back. "He'll make an issue out of it if he hears," he whispered to Leo. "He won't let the girls talk business in here. Tricia, my friend Leo here has a lot on his mind. He needs to clear his head. He'd like some company."

"Oh yeah?" Tricia licked the back of the spoon. She had a couple of small scabs around her mouth and though her jawline looked crooked, her teeth were straight and peculiarly even. Her eyes seemed too deep in their sockets. Leo tried to estimate her age. From the neck down, she looked about forty. But her face was twenty years older.

"Trouble is, Tricia, Leo went out without his wallet and all he's got is a twenty. But I told him you're a good sort and you'll work something out for him."

Leo was both mortified and fascinated to hear the old man haggle on his behalf.

Tricia ran her fingers through her hair, revealing dark roots below the bleached blonde. "Twenty?" she said.

"Leo's a real good guy. He'll start your night."

Tricia looked Leo up and down. He couldn't imagine what she thought of him. Did he appear to be a good guy, or was he just another fat loser? Tricia had
apparently already made up her mind. "Sure," she said. "Twenty's okay." She took a long drink of coffee. "Where's your car, honey?"

"No car," said Harry. "He walked."

Tricia paused as Leo stammered.

"It's okay," she said. "My room's paid up till tomorrow."

Earl came back to the counter and glared at Leo. He must know it was Harry doing the brokering, Leo thought, but guessed Harry's long patronage made Earl focus his discontent at Leo. Leo wondered what kind of issue Earl would make out of it, as Harry had said. Even with Leo's heft, Earl seemed like he could toss him out if he wanted to.

"I think I'll finish my coffee and head on home," Leo said.

Harry snapped for Earl's attention. "Earl, now that I've got it on my mind, I'll have a piece of pie. Apple."

Earl studied Leo a moment longer, but seemed to forget about whatever issue he was going to make after all. He set the pie on the counter in front of Leo and cut a slice. As the crust yielded under the knife, flakes were carried along the blade's length and scattered onto the counter. Leo watched a bit of filling roll back into the pie tin as Earl lifted the slice out. When the smell of apple and cinnamon reached Leo, his stomach moaned.

Tricia laughed. "Was that your stomach?"

Leo put his damp palms across the straining buttons of his shirt. "Excuse me," he said.
"Ice cream?" Earl asked Harry.

"Of course," Harry said.

Earl set a scoop of vanilla ice cream atop the pie and slid the plate to Harry. Leo stared at the pie as the ice cream settled into the crust. A gentle river began melting over one side. Leo snapped his eyes away and stood up. He had to get away from that beautiful pie. "I've got to go. It was nice to meet you all. Thank you for the coffee."

Tricia hurried out after him. "Hey, wait, honey, you're not leaving?"

"I've got to get home," he said. The cool air calmed him but the truth was that even out on the street, his nostrils were still full of the aroma of apple pie. Leo knew it was an illusion, the smell couldn't have followed him. Even so, he was propelled to put distance between himself and the pie.

Tricia bobbed next to him, charged with caffeine. "You've got a little time. Look, twenty's okay. Whatever's on your mind, I'll make you forget it."

Leo stopped.

"I could really use the twenty bucks," she said. "I'm tapped out. And I need a little something to start the night."

In the street light Tricia's eyes receded even further into her skull. Leo now guessed her age might be more like fifty. He'd never been with a prostitute, never cheated on Marilyn. Not sexually. He wasn't counting the times he'd sneaked food since she started monitoring what he ate. But he didn't want to go home. Sitting next to Marilyn as she watched her programs was excruciating. Each break brought
another commercial for burgers, tacos or pasta. Earlier in their marriage he'd hoped Marilyn would become the kind of ally that food was, but when she decided there would be no children, Leo was left with his old friend. Now he didn't even have that.

Tricia tugged on his sleeve.

"I'm right over there," she said, pointing to the Regal Inn.

"You don't have any food there, do you?"

"No."

"I'd rather not be around food," he said.

"Maybe some Life Savers, but that's it." She started to walk.

Leo followed a few steps behind, reluctant. Even though he couldn't imagine seeing anyone he knew here, he looked around, just in case. Being spotted with a prostitute would be almost as embarrassing as breaking a diner stool. Could he really go back to her room? He felt ashamed to follow a prostitute just to get away from pie.

Tricia saw that he was falling back. She took his hand in hers and raised one finger to her mouth. "Look, honey, I got a secret weapon." She reached into her mouth and shifted her teeth. Amazed, Leo looked closer. The reason for Tricia's unusually even teeth in her crooked jaw was because they were false. She could remove her upper and lower teeth entirely. "You'll like that. Trust me."

Leo didn't know how her teeth, or lack thereof, would be helpful, but he was intrigued and allowed her to lead him across the street.

The Regal Inn wasn't regal. A filthy, shoeless man was sleeping in the empty planter in front. The walkway smelled like sour milk. Tricia's room was near the
back. A hole was worn into the greasy orange carpet and the bed sheets were messy. There was no television, only a fragment of cable jutting out of the wall. The bed springs creaked under his weight as he sat.

She took off her thin jacket and dropped it on the floor next to her bag. She had sores on her arms, some large and irregular like mutant pimples with bulbous milky nodules rising in the centers, others were like splotches of red and purple ink, as if someone had poked her with a marker. A few of the sores looked like craters hollowed out by a jagged fingernail in a fury.

"How often do you stay here?" he said.
"Just sometimes."
"You don't have any children?"
"You think I can't have children? Think there's something wrong with me?"
"I didn't mean that. I don't have kids, either," he said.
"I got a kid. She's grown now, got a kid of her own."
"Do you see her much?"
"Who? My grandbaby or my kid? What are you bringing that up for? Jeez."
"I'm sorry," he said.
"It's okay. Never mind." She put her hand out. "So...twenty?"

Leo hesitated. "What exactly will we do?" Even in this dismal room, Leo felt a slight pop of electricity, a mixture of his imagination and the unknown. His diet had made him realize how little physical contact he experienced. His tongue was his
main conduit for pleasure in the world. The rest of his body had fallen asleep like a hibernating bear. The thought of waking it up was intimidating and mesmerizing.

Tricia fidgeted as he looked at her. "What, think you'll get around the world for only twenty bucks?"

"I've never done this before," he said. He didn't know what "around the world" meant, but guessed it was a sexual position. He could now only think of the syrup caddy at the International House of Pancakes.

Tricia put her hands on his shoulders. "Look, trust me, you won't be disappointed." Her voice was like honey now, smoothly soothing. The caffeine jitters from the street were gone. She was relaxed, eager. "It'll be nice."

Leo could see how Tricia still managed to attract customers despite her haggard appearance. Behind the wrinkles and blisters was a faint youthfulness. He knew it was probably a skill honed from years of hustling, but she made him feel less preposterous sitting there, an aging, fat man so desperate to get his mind off food that he found himself in a dreary motel room with grimy lighting and a hint of solace. He handed the twenty dollar bill to her.

"Do I have to take my clothes off?" he asked, fingering that tight belt buckle making a red welt in his flesh. Marilyn was the only woman he'd been naked with in twenty-two years.

"Not if you don't want to." She saw him eying her sores. "I've got trouble with my skin." She appeared briefly self-conscious. She put the jacket back on before he could offer a weak protest and he was relieved. The sores were revolting.
She knelt in front of him and put her hands on his thighs. He didn't know if he was supposed to do something first. She reached into her mouth and pulled out her top denture plate, then the bottom. She smiled to show him her gums as she put her teeth in her jacket pocket and pulled out a condom. She moved his hand away from his belt buckle and undid it for him. "Ever had a gum job?" she said.

He hadn't. Early in their relationship, Marilyn had made a few halting attempts at fellatio but she suffered a gag reflex and general distaste for the penis. He'd had a Catholic girlfriend in college who would only agree to oral sex. She was reasonably good at it and her teeth had never been a problem. He was unsure how Tricia's toothlessness was an advantage.

He lifted himself up a bit to help slide his pants down. She nudged him backward to recline on the bed because his belly was in her way. The ceiling had a network of cracks across it that reminded Leo of the maps he and Marilyn had used a few years ago for a cross country road trip. He worried that his weight had strangled the possibility of an erection. They'd become infrequent, which was just as well because it was difficult for Leo to reach himself and Marilyn's disinterest was inconducive. But Tricia coaxed an immediate response by nibbling on the head with her gums.

"Relax, honey," she said.

Leo closed his eyes and tried to forget the motel room and Tricia's sores. He imagined there was nothing with him except freedom from his oppressive belt and the sensation of Tricia's mouth on him. She was really quite good. Teeth, it seemed,
were indeed better out than in. Though it had been a while, he did remember a faint grating of teeth the last time he was in a woman's mouth. Tricia's was soft and warm as her tongue and gums massaged him. She took him deep into her mouth and pressed him to the roof of it, letting her gums slide against him. She used just enough pressure to create a mild chewing sensation without mangling him.

As Tricia worked, Leo allowed himself to focus on it, pausing only for a moment to recall that Harry was right. It was easy to clear his mind here with her.

For Leo it was over too soon. His penis was so shocked at the attention it couldn't hang on very long. Tricia didn't seem surprised. Grateful, in fact. She didn't hurry him to leave but he sensed that she was anxious to spend the twenty dollars on whatever drug it was she needed it for. He felt a little sorry for her, but as he strained his belt on, he thought she maybe felt a little sorry for him, too, with his penis buried in a pillow of fat.

He passed Reggie's without looking in. The pie no longer dominated his thoughts, and he did feel more relaxed, but truthfully, he was still hungry. He'd go home and sit with Marilyn, keep a magazine on his lap to look at during the commercials. Harry had said there were lots of girls like Tricia in that neighborhood. Maybe he should take a walk more often. He didn't want to cheat on Marilyn, but maybe once in a while he could visit Tricia or one of the others. It was harmless and brief, not like getting a girlfriend. It was just to take his mind off of food. He felt he'd stumbled on a secret with this plan, like the revelation of the devil on horseback at his
parents' party. A secret pleasure he wouldn't have discovered if he hadn't ventured out.

The man at the party had said, "You'll never be as happy as that." At the time, Leo thought he meant sneaking a new food, one that hadn't been meant for him. Maybe he did mean that. Later, when he was old enough to understand the man's grief, he thought he might not have been talking to Leo at all. Just talking to himself out loud as his mind wandered.

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Bo Davenport came from a long line of healers. None had been men. He might prove to be the exception, but only because his twin sister, who should have been the one to learn Aunt Petra's herbal remedies, had died at birth. Aunt Petra said women were more elemental and healing came natural. Still, she'd been teaching him her skills on and off over the years, and more earnestly after he turned thirteen, but he was a poor student and had learned little in the last two years. He resented taking a dead girl's place in the family line.

"It's my aunt you want," he said to Comfort Lee, who had come to his door after supper when she found no one at Aunt Petra's shack. Comfort's younger sister, Cherry, was sick. "She's wildcrafting up mountain," he said. "Back by morning."

"I need you now," said Comfort. "The fever won't come down and her throat's on fire. I tried elderberries and rubbing her with spirits. Nothing helps."

THE HEALER
Country cures were prevalent in Pitfall. Many of its residents couldn't afford a
docto except for emergencies, sometimes not even then. And they were suspicious of
doctors and their treatments, which had been learned outside the county, in far off
universities, and were therefore foreign. But folks trusted Aunt Petra. She was one of them,
born in Pitfall and never left. Nearly everybody lived on the same land their grandparents
had lived and died on. Aunt Petra's cures came from this same land, grew in soil fed by the
souls of their loved ones, and had proved their efficacy on folks as far back as any could
remember.

Bo had learned enough from Aunt Petra to guess that ordinary aspirin might help
Cherry's condition. He could offer her some from the bottle over the sink. His father often
needed it in the morning after a night of strong drinking. But he could see that Comfort
wanted more. If she had come to him after not finding Aunt Petra, she wouldn't be placated
with a simple remedy Bo produced from his own kitchen.

He hadn't seen Comfort since last summer when he and Aunt Petra visited the Lee
house for Mrs. Lee's wake after she had died trying to deliver her eighth child. Comfort was
a year younger than Bo, but she had left school to keep house for the family, as her older
brothers had done to work the farm. Graduating from high school was rare in Pitfall. Bo
still went to school, but mostly to avoid Aunt Petra's lessons on how tell one herb from
another and whether to boil or crush the leaves. Yet high school had revealed no aptitude
for any subject that might carry him away forever, and certainly not to a university.

Though Comfort looked fatigued, Bo was amazed by her efflorescence. She wore a
new maturity under her plain muslin blouse, a small stain of cooking fat splashed on the
left shoulder. Her skin was moist from worry and the damp evening air. She ran her hands through her hair and appeared embarrassed that it was not combed, which flattered him. Girls never made an effort to impress him. The fabric of her blouse held to her small breasts, promising Bo that she wore no brassiere.

"Cherry's stretching the walls with her crying," said Comfort. "Can't you give her something to settle her for the night? So we can all sleep?"

Few people asked Bo for help. His father had him do basic chores or ask his uncles for liquor. Aunt Petra sometimes asked him to help her with remedies, but only to do the simplest labors. He'd sit at the wide table next to the kiln and pull slim shoots from horsetail stalks, setting the cleaned stalks into neat rows on a drying rack or tying them into small bundles to be hung inside the shack. If she was using the kiln, Bo would keep check on the temperature and the progress of whatever was inside, carefully leaning in as the heat assailed his face and neck. The basin set on the ground just outside the shack's back door held an endless supply of roots that needed to be washed, some gently so as not to tear through the thin outer skin, some with a stiff brush until all trace of dirt was gone.

The previous day, he'd helped her gather armfuls of Marsh Mallow near the river's low point and carry them back, where he separated the leaves, flowers and roots into tidy piles for her as she met with folks. Aunt Petra never called them patients, she called everyone folks. Folks would come to the door of the shack and tap lightly, removing their hats if they had them. She talked with them there on the narrow porch, the sun dripping between cracks in the slats of the overhang, as they described their trouble. Bo half-listened
to these conversations. He never prepared or administered the remedies. Aunt Petra said he hadn't learned enough yet and probably wouldn't any time soon.

He knew that Aunt Petra was right, that he'd been lazy about learning the remedies. But he was moved by Comfort, amazed that she would think to appeal to him, and he wanted to help her. He felt sorry for her and a little guilty that her distressed, tousled appearance, and especially her supplication, was so lovely to him.

Comfort looked over Bo's shoulder. "Can your Daddy spare you?"

Comfort had asked after Bo's father to be polite, but Bo was ashamed to be reminded that his father was slumped in a chair in front of the dark fireplace, his chin hanging. His head rolled backward, sliding off one side of the headrest until he lifted it upright with a groggy jerk, only for it to slide backward again. A slide of hair grease had soiled the spot over time. Bo had already moved the whiskey bottle off the armrest to the floor.

Bo stepped outside and swung the door closed. The awning, already pulling away from the frame, vibrated from the slam. "He can always spare me for folks." This was mostly true. His father had never interfered in Bo's education with Aunt Petra, though like her he had no grand expectations for Bo's success as a healer.

Bo started off toward Aunt Petra's shack on a path he'd worn between the wild blueberry bushes, wide enough for only one. The full moon offered them plenty of light. Comfort followed.
"Folks are lucky to have you when Aunt Petra's away," said Comfort. Everyone called Bo's aunt "Aunt Petra," even those who never used her services or had any idea if she really was an aunt.

The crickets were loud in the bushes but fell silent as Comfort and Bo came near, starting up again after they passed. The bubble of quiet that surrounded them was filled only with the soft sound of their footfalls where the damp had begun to loosen the dirt.

"I thought you lived with Aunt Petra now?" Comfort asked.

"Daddy needs someone near," said Bo.

Comfort nodded. Bo knew that Comfort's father, Wyatt Lee, was a dependable man who spent his days working his farm and his nights sitting at home, planning his next day. But she had enough uncles that she knew how much care a drinking man, like Bo's father, needed.

"Anyhow," Bo said. "Aunt Petra likes to be alone."

They continued on the path to Aunt Petra's until they reached a small clearing where the blueberries gave way to lower brush, eventually leading down to the Lee farm. Comfort stopped. "You want to see Cherry first?" she asked.

Bo turned to her. Comfort was fully illuminated in the moonlight. Her hair, made opaline by the moon, was light in color, the kind children usually outgrow. He could see the shadow of her legs beneath her skirt. She shifted her weight onto one foot so she could rub the heel of the other against her instep, the foot moving easily inside the boot that had already been stretched and worn out by one of her growing brothers. With her knee jutting out to the side, away from her other leg, the shadow left a long triangle in the space
between them. Bo wished he could see if the months of hard work had made her thighs curved and strong or merely flat and thick. As he was considering this, Comfort switched position to rub her other heel. She believed he was Aunt Petra's apprentice and expected him to see Cherry, to diagnose her condition. He should have suggested it himself. He agreed that he should see her and they started down.

"How's she doing without your Ma?" said Bo.

"Doing all right, I guess. Gives me plenty of sass."

Now that he was walking beside her, he could smell her scent, a mix of sweat and fat and burgeoning musk.

"I'm more worried about Daddy," she said. "He's slowed down."

Bo had heard stories about Wyatt Lee. When Bo's uncles gathered for a barbecue, always a rowdy and dirty affair, they'd rest around the fire pit at the end of the day to digest their meal and wash their feet in a small galvanized tub. They'd take lazy turns washing as they talked about their youth. "Remember how fast Wyatt was?" said one. "Could have gone to the Olympics."

"Should have done," his uncles agreed.

Wyatt Lee's legs had been ruined under years of crops. He now walked with a limp, almost as if his legs were uneven. But Bo knew that Comfort meant her father's days had slowed down, not that he had. Heartbreak could do that. His own father slowed a little more every day, and had done since his mother took her life when Bo was five. It may have started before then, when his sister died. His uncles said that Bo's mother had a nervous condition and had had several miscarriages before having the twins. She was elated when a
girl was born and shocked when the second infant was a boy. The girl died within eight hours. His mother had held the dead baby to her chest, kneeling on the wood floor and rocking her for another eight hours, inconsolable, begging God to return her blessing. That was the name they put on the tombstone, "Blessing." When it was time to fill in the name on her surviving son's birth certificate, she wrote, "Burden." His father insisted everyone call him "Bo," which his uncles did, but his mother refused. Five years later, while separating fat from some meat scraps, his mother set down her knife and called Bo over from the table where he was eating around the stale end of a biscuit. "Hold this, Burden," she said as she heaped both fat and meat onto a plate and set it into his small hands. She left him there, his arms wavering under the weight of it, to go outside and hang herself from a sugarberry tree.

Bo and Comfort arrived at the Lee house, a square structure that was, like many homes in the area, too small for such a large family. The interior was stuffy with the breath of five sons. One boy was sitting near the hearth, fascinated with a beetle he'd speared on a sewing needle. Two others, large like their father with the same reddened skin and coarse hair, were wrestling in the middle of the room. They stopped as Bo followed Comfort inside. Wyatt Lee sat at a blond wood table filling a pipe, another son beside him. Bo could see Lee's exasperation. Cherry was across the room in an alcove. Her wails had softened from exhaustion but she still beat her feet against the planks at the end of her bed. Another inch of growth and the bed would be too small for her. Lee's hand paused over his pipe as a silent question passed between him and Comfort.
"Aunt Petra's up mountain," Comfort said. "Bo'll take a look and get something to settle her till tomorrow."

Lee looked Bo over and nodded. It was the closest Bo had ever been to a conversation with Wyatt Lee, and the first time an adult had given Bo approval based only on his status as a healer. Bo felt a quick rush of exhilaration. He expected questions about his apprenticeship with Aunt Petra, but Lee returned his attention to his pipe without a word.

Looking at the whole family together, Bo wondered if Wyatt was truly Comfort's father. Comfort was so unlike him and her brothers. Where they were broad, Comfort was delicate. Her eyes weren't closed in a perpetual squint. Maybe Mrs. Lee had had a tryst with a Fuller Brush man. His uncles had helped run off more than one of them for similar reasons. Mrs. Lee wasn't pretty, but plenty of men were indiscriminate.

Outside the alcove stood the youngest Lee boy, Luke, the only one who showed more worry than annoyance. Because of the boy's size, Bo thought perhaps he was the same age or younger than Cherry, who was four. But as Comfort led Bo closer, he saw that the boy was simply smaller than average and unnaturally thin. He wore only short pants held up by makeshift suspenders -- strips of cloth slung over his shoulders and tied to the belt loops. His bones had a collapsed look about them. The boy stood firm, glaring at Bo and blocking the alcove, until Comfort brushed him aside. The two older boys resumed wrestling. Comfort moved the thin curtain aside. Cherry was sunken into a single sweaty groove down the center of her bedding. Her eyes were recessed from dehydration and she looked as if she could barely focus on Bo.
"She's got this heat rash on her neck, too," said Comfort. She smoothed Cherry's wet hair off her face.

Bo sometimes accompanied his aunt when she visited folks who couldn't walk to the shack, either from illness or because they were bedridden or crippled. He often waited outside, but once in a while, if she felt optimistic about Bo's prospects of taking over for her one day, she would tell him to come in and stand near the wall, to pay attention and learn. Now Bo stood over Cherry and scratched the back of his head as he'd seen grown men do when they were considering someone else's problem. He was nervous, unsure where to begin. Aunt Petra had said many times that just as important as the remedies was the trust. "Folks trust a healer to know," she'd said. "They give us their trust, we take away their worry." He remembered this because it was the only time she'd used the word "we" when discussing healing. He tried to recall what questions Aunt Petra had asked.

"She take any liquids?" he said.

"Nothing stays down," said Comfort.

"Pain?"

"The throat," she said.

Bo guessed the next step would be to narrow down the pain. "Just the throat or the neck, too?"

Comfort tapped Cherry. "Your neck hurt?" Cherry nodded and grumbled. "Both hurt. What's that mean?"

"Ever been like this before?" said Bo. Aunt Petra said folks tended to get the same ailments over and over.
"She's never sick," said Comfort.

"Lees are all healthy," said Wyatt Lee. "'Cept Luke."

Luke condensed into a squat and gripped his knees as he looked steadily at a spot on the ground near Bo's feet. Bo leaned over Cherry to get a better look, his confidence lifted by Comfort's trust. The rash covered most of the neck and part of the lower jaw. "Open your mouth," said Bo. Though Cherry was looking at him, her face showed no sign she understood him, as if she'd lost her hearing. He considered that a fever might be the cause. Bo raised his voice. "Let me see your throat and tongue."

"Open, Cherry," said Comfort, pulling down on the girl's chin. Cherry opened and Bo looked in. She snapped shut within a few seconds, but Bo believed he had seen white splotches covering the back of the throat.

Bo turned back to the room and saw that Lee had stopped to watch him, so the boys had halted their activities as well. The boy at the table looked at Bo with doubt, but the others seemed to have reserved judgment. More important to Bo was Lee, who was staid as he waited for Bo's diagnosis, and Comfort, whose anxiety was evident. Bo had never experienced Aunt Petra's work from this side before. Everyone in the house was waiting for Bo to speak. He held the power of the diagnosis. What would happen next depended entirely on him. A desire to impress Comfort and honor her trust propelled him.

"Scarlet Fever," said Bo.

The attitude of the room drew back, like a sheet on a clothesline pulled in a new direction by a changing wind. They hadn't expected him to deliver such a swift diagnosis with authority.
"You sure?" asked Lee. His tone indicated he was pressing for more information, not that he necessarily doubted Bo.

"Definitely a bacteria," said Bo, trying not to waver. "The blood needs to be cleansed."

Lee set his pipe down and stood, which caused a faint recoil in the boys. "You mean let?" he said. He was now serious, his eyes pulled out of their squint to scrutinize Bo, who had to fight the urge to shrink as the sons had done. If Bo withdrew from Lee as a boy might do, he'd lose his esteem. Lee was speaking to him as he might speak to a man, asking questions and waiting for Bo to answer.

Blood-letting was only rarely performed, it was dangerous. A patient could die from blood loss or infection. Bo realized that he may have extended himself too far. He couldn't be certain it was Scarlet Fever. Aunt Petra had said there was more than one type of illness that caused the white splotch, but hadn't yet explained how to tell the difference. Or had he forgotten? And though he'd heard Aunt Petra discuss cleansing the blood, he had no idea which method to use for which ailment, and he certainly didn't know how to properly perform a blood-letting. He'd never even seen one, only heard stories.

"No, not let," said Bo. "Not yet, anyway. There's a tincture Aunt Petra uses in cases like this."

Lee relaxed and his squint returned as he leaned from one bad leg to the other.

"How long's it take?"

Bo was afraid to answer with a specific time for the tincture to work. He didn't know. He wasn't yet sure which one to use. The unsettling feeling of the family's eyes on
him was beginning to make him feel as if he had a rash of his own. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll go to Aunt Petra's and bring it right back. You can come, if you like," he said to Comfort.

Bo, afraid to be challenged, rushed out before anyone could say another word. He didn't hear Comfort close the door or hear her steps until she came up beside him. He now regretted the full moon and assumed his thoughts must be easily deciphered on his face. But Comfort didn't seem aware of Bo's tension. Instead she looked relieved. Aunt Petra was right, Bo thought. This was a healer's true gift to folks, easing their worry. Comfort's attitude had already changed to gratitude and her stride was more relaxed. She walked closer to him, matching the cadence of his steps. Over the years, Bo had developed a habit of watching a person on his periphery, a useful skill for a boy with a name as unfortunate as Burden and often bullied. He was pleased to have the bright moonlight after all. It allowed him to see Comfort's breasts bouncing and swaying beneath the muslin. Wyatt Lee's squint must be affecting his vision, Bo thought, if he doesn't insist that Comfort hide herself under more layers.

Bo decided he would mix a tincture of Valerian root, a small amount of grain alcohol and a headache powder. The aspirin in the powder would ease Cherry's discomfort and the alcohol would immediately relax her. The root should help her stay asleep. It would suffice until Aunt Petra returned. Bo felt she wouldn't be angry with him for offering such an innocuous cure in her place.

They arrived at the shack and Bo opened the unlocked door and reached for one of the hand lanterns kept on a hook just inside. The windows were covered to keep out light,
which damaged the herbs, Aunt Petra said. Inside was black. Comfort strained against him to look inside, her breasts pressing on his back.

"Be careful where you step," he said, holding the lantern up as he lit it. "Stay close to me."

The aroma of a hundred different herbs, flowers, leaves, and roots filled the shack. Florals and citrus mixed with wet earth. Bundles of stalks and stems with flowers still attached hung from wires set between the beams. Aunt Petra had vats of preparations in various stages releasing scents into the air. Comfort was fascinated and leaned over a few of them to smell the contents, one of which was a strong mint, another one was acrid and foul. A row of clear jars held the Mallow roots Bo had cleaned earlier, steeping in water that was slowing turning thick and golden. Aunt Petra had marked a symbol on the jars to indicate the roots came from a clean spot at the river. Other spots were tainted by outhouses that emptied into the water nearby. Bo had become immune to the smells of the shack, he only noticed Comfort's scent, which he was sure had grown in intensity after their walk.

He set the lantern on the work table and raised the wick to its brightest. Unlike the table next to the kiln, which was too low and gave him an aching back, this was a high table Aunt Petra stood at as she made her remedies. He took a small bottle off one shelf and set it down near the lantern. Next he added an ounce of the grain alcohol used to keep the preparations stable. He reached into a cardboard box to get the headache powder. It was folded into a piece of unmarked wax paper. He held the paper open and funneled it into the bottle, using a thin wooden stick to stir it. Comfort watched him as if he were doing a magic trick. Please with himself, he winked at her and removed the bottle of Valerian root from
the shelf. Aunt Petra had distilled it into a dark colored liquid base. He measured what he thought might be a reasonable amount and stirred it in, replacing the bottle on the shelf. He topped the small bottle with a cork and held it up for Comfort to see, alternately shaking and swirling it in a deliberate action. He didn't know if it mattered how it was mixed, though he remembered Aunt Petra had said that for some things it did. The display was for Comfort's benefit, even if she didn't look like she needed to be convinced of Bo's skills.

"You make medicine from these leaves and things?" said Comfort.

"Not just medicine," said Bo. He set the bottle down and took a wide-mouthed pot from a shelf and twisted it open to release its spicy scent. "Neroli relaxes the head."

"What's neroli?" said Comfort.

"This," he said as he held the pot close to her face so she could smell it.

She wrinkled her nose. "Not sure I like it."

"Neroli is a goddess perfume. Aunt Petra says the goddess doesn't speak to everyone. Maybe you're too young." He withdrew the pot and began to reclose the lid. Comfort reached for his hands and guided them back to her to sniff the pot again. Her palms were becoming rough from the manual labor she'd done over the last few months.

"How's it work?" she asked.

Bo set the pot down and dipped his fingers inside to glide them along the pomade, lifting out a small amount. He rubbed it between his palms to warm and soften it and slid his hands into Comfort's hair, swirling his fingers on her scalp from front to back. She sighed and closed her eyes. Bo guessed that no one had touched Comfort's head or hair since her mother had stopped brushing it for her on Sundays. He lifted her hair in sections
and methodically worked the pomade along the shaft. As he did so, Comfort leaned into him more and more until he had enveloped her and could feel her breath on his chin. Her hair was shiny from the pomade and the scent billowed around her, mixing with the tang of her sweat. He pulled on her hair backward to tilt her face up to him. Bo had seen many pretty girls, usually from a distance, but holding Comfort by the hair and feeling her press against him with relief and ease made her more alluring than any other. As far as he knew, Wyatt Lee hadn't forbidden boys from courting Comfort, but Bo supposed she was expected to keep her focus on the family now that she'd taken her mother's place. He felt as if he'd stolen Comfort away for a while, had taken possession of her attention as she relied on him for Cherry's cure.

Comfort opened her eyes and reached up to feel her hair. "It's slick."

"Don't you feel more relaxed?" said Bo, squeezing and smoothing a lock between his fingers.

Comfort looked into his eyes and nodded. With one hand still in her hair, he held her head steady to kiss her. When she didn't resist him, he let his tongue skim her lips, which were warm and salty. She pulled her face away.

"I have to get back to Cherry," she said, though she still allowed Bo to hold her.
"Maybe later. When Cherry's asleep."

"Your Daddy won't let you go back out." Bo knew this might be his only chance to have her to himself for a long time.

"I go out to the cistern at all hours," she said.
"Promise?" He knew she was worried about Cherry, despite this brief flirtation with him, and he hadn't yet given her the tincture. She was inclined to agree to anything.

Comfort twirled her hair and smelled the ends, smiling at him. She twisted from side to side, just enough to allow her breasts to skim against him. She already knows how to tease, he thought. He reached out one hand to her breast, lifting it and rolling his palm against the nipple. She was flush, but not nearly as much as he was becoming. He felt as he had earlier when he imagined he had a rash, but now it encompassed his torso and urged him to lay his other palm on Comfort's belly and slide it lower.

She set her hands over each of his, steadying them. "I promise," she said. Comfort's face displayed none of the urgency and heat that Bo could feel in his own. Her jaw was set firm. He'd get nothing more from Comfort tonight.

Bo released her and stepped back as she returned to playing in her hair. He looked away to cool his thoughts. His eyes fell on the line of jars on the wall, each row and each cubby marked with Aunt Petra's shorthand, according to the properties of the preparations. Carminatives, purgatives, analgesics, digestives. Sedatives and stimulants. One of the cubbies was marked in dark purple: Nightshades. Aunt Petra had drawn her own symbol on the label to indicate poison. He could make out the contents of one large jar of root pieces and a corresponding bottle of tincture next to it. It was Mandrake. It looked very similar to the jar and bottle of Valerian root, which sat directly beneath it on the shelf below. He picked up the small bottle for Cherry and held it up to the lantern light. The dark liquid emulsion spun inside it, half mixed. He was almost certain he had pulled the bottle of Valerian from the shelf to fill the smaller bottle he held in his hand now, though he'd been
distracted by his performance for Comfort. He would have realized if he'd grabbed Mandrake by mistake, he told himself. But if he'd used Mandrake instead of Valerian, it might not be safe to give it to Cherry. Some nightshades could be fatal. Bo's adrenaline surged as he tried to recall the various effects of Mandrake, or any nightshade, but he wasn't certain. Mandrake was the one that looked like a screaming baby, he was almost sure. Or was that just the fable about it? Was Mandrake the one you could take in any dosage or the one you must take no more than a drop? And how strong was Aunt Petra's tincture? He'd diluted it, so perhaps it was safe either way. He felt Comfort's eyes on him, studying him. He mustn't let her see that he had any misgivings about the mixture. She trusted him. If he lost her trust now, he'd never get it back.

Before he could pull it back, Comfort took the bottle from him and held it close to her chest. "So we can go now," she said.

As they walked back to the Lee farm, Bo considered what might happen because of the mixture in either case. He was still struggling to remember the intricate properties of Mandrake. Could it cause someone to fall into a sleep so deep they never woke up? Or would Cherry's body reject it and spew it out? One thing he knew for sure was that Aunt Petra's symbol was a dangerous one. She'd warned him not to touch any herbs marked with it. But if he took the tincture back now, Comfort would think he'd been careless and was untrustworthy. She'd never come out to meet him.

He weighed the risks of allowing Cherry to drink it. The amount in the bottle was so small and he couldn't imagine that Aunt Petra would leave the bottle in an open cubby if it was that dangerous. Still, he'd suggest to Comfort that she give Cherry only half. If it was
the Mandrake, the effects might be mild enough to have little effect in that amount. If it was
the Valerian and the dosage was too low, it would be harmless and he could blame its poor
performance on the illness itself.

He imagined Aunt Petra might scold him for naming Scarlet Fever as Cherry's
illness and trying to treat it himself. But if it truly was Scarlet Fever, his error would be
irrelevant. It wasn't uncommon for children to die from it, whether he'd given her a cure or
a poison. He had no idea if Aunt Petra would be able to tell the difference.

They returned to the house to find Wyatt Lee still sitting at the table, working some
figures by pencil on a piece of grey paper. He seemed disturbed by the results at the bottom
of the page. The boys who had been wrestling earlier were now stretched out on the floor,
sleeping. The beetle was set over a candle flame. Luke was still waiting by Cherry's alcove.
He stood as Comfort and Bo approached.

"Half should do it," said Bo. He folded his arms and affected a placid demeanor,
hoping he had not sounded alarmed. "Save the rest for tomorrow."

Bo stood beside Luke as Comfort leaned into the alcove and roused Cherry.
Comfort popped off the cork and dribbled a little into Cherry's mouth. Cherry resisted the
tincture, saying it was too bitter, but Comfort promised her a sugar cube. Bo expected her
to spit it out anyway, but when Comfort tipped the whole bottle into her mouth, Cherry
swallowed it down.

"I said to save it!" said Bo, stunned.

Comfort straightened as she replaced the cork. "Why? Is it dear?"
"No, it's not that," said Bo, searching for an excuse. "It's just that I made you two doses."

"Mama always said to start a cure right, you have to double the first dose," said Comfort. Luke nodded.

Bo's left hand wandered up to his mouth and he tugged on the thumb nail with his teeth. Comfort stood beside him as they watched Cherry and waited. He tried to look relaxed and confident. The gnawing on his nail would give him away, so he pulled his hand down. After a few minutes, he found that his hand had returned and that he'd been chewing at it again without realizing it. Cherry's breath quickened for a few minutes, then slowed. For a while she looked at Comfort for assurance, then her gaze wandered to the splash of fat on her shoulder, as if she were mesmerized by it.

Lee's pencil scratched small, delicate strokes of precise calculations. The beetle crackled in the flame. Bo's teeth continued to pull at the nail, straining it away from the quick. One of the boys snored. Bo couldn't tell if a great deal of time had passed and he hadn't noticed or if only a small amount of time had passed and he'd stretched it with his mind.

Cherry sighed and relaxed further into her groove. Her face was calm, the dampness upon it shimmered in the light. She soon drifted off, her breathing barely perceptible. Comfort smiled at Bo and tapped the bottle, satisfied. She believed Cherry, her symptoms relieved, had simply fallen asleep and Bo felt his only choice was to assume the same. For now, Bo had settled Cherry and the family would rest tonight. Bo would leave
with Wyatt Lee's gratitude and wait outside behind the cistern. It was Comfort's gratitude he wanted to savor.

Bo's teeth chipped off a splinter of fingernail, which rode a drop of blood toward his palm. He licked it and let it sit on his tongue to taste it. The iron of the blood was barely perceptible behind the Neroli pomade and the buttery scent Comfort's golden, slicked hair.

<<<>>>
BETCHY

Betchy was a shipping clerk at Timmon's Diet Science. Her first and only job since graduating high school, she'd stood in a bay at the back of the warehouse for two years affixing labels to shipments of nutritional supplements. The work didn't excite her and she gave it only perfunctory attention. She stared off into space for long periods as if she were waiting for something, anything, to enter her field of vision.

If her step-sister, Jennifer, had been able to enunciate properly, Betchy would likely have spent her life known as "Rebecca" or "Becky," as she was called up until Jennifer began to speak. But when Jennifer tried to say, "Becky," it came out, "Betchy." Becky's father and step-mother thought everything their love child did or said must be supported, so they took to saying "Betchy," too. Then it spread outside the house, across the lawns and up the street, into her school and under her yearbook photo: Rebecca
"Betchy" Bloomgren. Despite her protests at the start, and every three years or so since, she couldn't shed the name. "Becky" died and a wretch replaced her.

Timmon's wasn't a big company, just forty-two employees and a part-time file clerk in Receiving. If anyone mistakenly called the products "vitamins" they had to watch a thirty minute video on how the supplements scientifically counteracted the effects of an improper diet. Betchy was often encouraged to take the supplements, which she could buy at a discount, because her diet was very poor, mostly junk food, and her skin showed it. She was pale and lethargic. The only continual activity she seemed to enjoy was chewing gum.

Marlin, her supervisor, would turn to her every once in a while and say, "Betchy, your attitude could use some improvement."

Betchy suspected that Marlin didn't really expect her to change her attitude, but it was his job to suggest it. Then if one of his superiors said, "Betchy has a poor attitude," he could reply, "Yes, I've talked to her about that."

For the most part, Marlin was happy if Betchy did her job and didn't chew gum at her station. He hated gum, but she was allowed to chew on her breaks if she sat in the outdoor break area and put it in the trash afterward. Marlin liked to sit there, too, and since there was only one concrete table on the side of the building, they had to share. They were usually joined by Kent, the other shipping clerk. No one else ever joined them. The area was bordered by a chain link fence topped with intermittent coils of barbed wire and looked onto the rear lot of the business next door. Marlin had warned her that if he ever found gum on the cement, or under the table, or anywhere, he'd know it was her because they were the
only ones who went out there. If Marlin was annoying her, she'd chew two pieces at once and put a lot of jaw into it. But if he wasn't, she was more discreet.

Today she was jawing.

"See, Betchy, you don't smile enough," Marlin said. "That's why none of them girls inside invite you to lunch or to one of them parties where they buy baking pans and shit." Marlin called the shipping area "outside" and the entire rest of the company "inside," as if he, Betchy and Kent were dogs who might piss on the carpet if they were allowed indoors.

"Do you bake?" asked Kent, mayonnaise settling in the corner of his mouth. He ate at every opportunity, yet remained bony.

"No." Betchy tried to remember the last time she baked something. It must have been a year ago. Microwave cake.

"See, women got to smile," Marlin said. She didn't look directly at him when he talked most of the time because it made her queasy. Marlin tended to leave his mouth open between phrases and his tongue rolled back and forth in an endless pink tide. He also had a lazy eye that wandered off to the side in a slow arc. "It's different for men. Society don't expect men to be friendly and inviting. We can be bastards and still get invited to shit. But women need to be pleasing. That's just the way it is."

At certain times of the year there was enough wind to blow scraps of paper across the lonely parking lot beyond the chain link fence. Betchy would set a scrap on the ground and watch it travel. On a good day, it took her full break for the paper to make the journey from one end to the other. But today the air was hot and still and the lot was simply vacant.
Kent scooped the last of his sloppy sandwich into his mouth. "Guess what I watched last night?"

Betchy didn't find this game entertaining, but she didn't stop Kent from trying to play it. He liked to tell her about various porn he'd watched and try to provoke a reaction from her, which he never got to his satisfaction. He didn't know for sure that she was virgin but she supposed he guessed it. She kept her eyes on the idle lot. "Amputees?"

"No."

"Monster cocks," she said.

"No."

"Was there food?" Marlin asked.

Kent thought it over. "Sort of."

"Aw, it's shit, ain't it?" said Marlin. "How the hell do you find so much feces on the internet?"

"Two words, Mar. Search terms. So, I found this outtake clip of this chick sitting on this dude, and she's got him almost completely inside her butt, you almost can't even hardly see his dick anymore, it's up there so far. All of a sudden she panics and has diarrhea all over this dude. He just looks down at it like he's not even sure he's really seeing it. She flips out and runs off, but it's still coming out, she can't stop it."

Kent laughed in Betchy's direction, a bit of mayonnaise-slathered white bread stuck in his teeth. Her gum had been worked enough so she took it out and rolled it in her fingers into a ball. She was both fascinated and baffled by Kent's perverse sexual interests, but would never reveal it.
"How does that get you excited?" she said.

"It doesn't. It's just for fun. After that I clear away the weirdies with big titties."

Had Kent told this story to one of the inside girls, he'd be reported for sexual harassment. But Betchy considered it just another one of his many unappealing qualities, like eating too much mayonnaise or having such messy handwriting his sevens looked like ones. She was neither disgusted or interested in Kent's porn talk. If Marlin could get clearance to operate the forklift, Kent probably wouldn't have a job at Timmon's Diet Science. But with a wonky eye screwing up his depth perception, Marlin wasn't allowed to operate any company vehicles. Betchy didn't drive. She'd failed her driver's test three times.

Marlin stood and adjusted his belt. "Break's over."

Betchy crossed in front of Marlin as they headed inside so he could see her drop her gum into the trash.

Two hours later, Marlin and Kent went to the taco cart outside the Home Depot for lunch and Betchy walked to the corner 7-Eleven for her usual snacks of corn nuts and jerky. Usually she wandered around while she ate, watched cars and tried to guess which ones would pull into the Walgreen's drive-up pharmacy. Today she sat at the concrete table to enjoy the men's absence and do nothing. Her food could settle a little before she'd have to confront Marlin's creepy eye.

A door creaked open on the other side of the unused lot and a tall man with wavy blond hair came out of the building. He headed down the street with a purposeful stride in
the opposite direction from the 7-Eleven. She'd worked at Timmon's for almost two years and she'd never gone for lunch that way. There was nothing to eat that way.

About twenty minutes later, the man returned. There was no place to sit, so he walked slowly around the parking lot as he ate mango slices from a small plastic bag. His shiny blond hair kept falling forward, dangling in a soft wave over his forehead. It was too long on top. He licked his fingers and smoothed the strands back into place only for them to drift forward again. She'd never seen a man with such high cheekbones. It was almost feminine except that his jaw was square like a man's and his eyebrows were thick and unstructured.

It was a bright day and the sun had heated the lot's asphalt and made the concrete table nearly too hot to touch. Betchy was so immersed in watching him that she didn't notice her hand was getting red from resting on the table's surface. It reminded her of watching the exotic fish in the aquarium at Ho Sing's restaurant, beautifully odd and relaxing.

For a while she thought he must be preoccupied with his thoughts to not notice her there, but finally she realized he did see her. He'd been walking in a spiral pattern, getting closer to her. He arrived at the fence and leaned against it, slurping his mango.

"Where'd you get that?" she asked.

He nodded up the street.

"There's a store down there?" she said.
"Sort of." He held out some mango to her. Its pale juice dripped down his hand. He wasn't just showing it to her, he wanted her to eat it. Betchy hadn't eaten food someone else had handled since she was a child.

"I don't eat fruit," she said.

"It's all I eat. Well, not all. But mostly." He wiped some juice from his lips.

Betchy thought he seemed too heartily built to eat only fruit. "I've never seen you out here before," she said.

"I just started yesterday."

"Sunday?" she said. "That's a weird day to start."

"Today's Tuesday."

He crumpled his bag into a ball and tossed it over the fence. It landed a few inches away from Betchy's right foot.

"Stick that in the trash for me, will you?" he said.

He took a pack of Marlboro Lights out of his breast shirt pocket and lit one. "What's your name? I'm Cameron." He blew smoke in a long stream several times, arching his neck. Most men she'd seen coming and going from that company wore ties, but Cameron's collar was open, exposing the fair skin of his clavicle. The sun bounced off his cheekbones. He was the kind of handsome that should be experienced in person. A photograph would never do him justice. He laced his fingers through the links.

"My name is Rebecca," she said.

"Stick that in the trash for me, will you, Rebecca?"

"Don't you have a trash can inside?"
He threw his head back and laughed, baring a row of even, white teeth. Dropping the cigarette to the ground, he winked at her as he stamped it out. "Fine. Throw it back."

Her remark had been a bit rude but still he smiled at her. She was surprised by a sudden urge to pick up his trash and throw it away for him. Pleasing others had never been a goal for her, but she decided she wanted to be his friend. She hadn't met a new person in a long time and he was attractive. It was more than just being handsome, he had a casual confidence, as if he knew she would do what he asked before she'd decided. Everyone in Betchy's life expected her to be unsociable, uncooperative, because that's how she usually was. She liked this opportunity to be different, to be new to someone and friendly. She rose and picked up the crumpled bag. He watched her throw it away with that same confident expression, nodding.

"Can I have one?" he asked as she took out a piece of gum.

She stood before him and handed one over. Now that she was closer, she could see that his eyes were a light greenish blue, an oasis in the dust of the parking lot.

"Back to the salt mines," he said. "Meet me here tomorrow at this time and I'll show you where I get the mango." He crossed the lot back to the door, and though he didn't look over his shoulder once, Betchy thought that as he turned to wave before disappearing inside, he looked as if already knew she hadn't taken her eyes off him.
On the bus ride home Betchy thought about her twenty-fourth birthday coming up in three weeks. When her step-mother asked her what kind of cake she'd like, she'd say she didn't want a cake, she'd like a fruit tart.

When she got to the house she peered in the kitchen window. They were having spaghetti for dinner. She hated her step-mother's spaghetti, the sauce was always too sweet. Betchy lived in the room over the garage and didn't have to eat dinner with the family anymore. She could sit on her sofa bed and eat crackers for dinner. She went to the bathroom mirror and looked at herself from several angles. Her skin was mottled and her chin sagged a little. Her grandmother had once told her, "It's not that you're ugly, Betchy. You're just not pretty."

The following day she met Cameron and they headed down the street together.

"How tall are you?" she asked.

"Six-two. How tall are you?"

"Five feet seven."

"That'll do," he said.

"Do for what?"

He shrugged. "For whatever."

He used his hand to measure where the top of her head would reach on his body, at about his shoulder. She wanted to reach up and smooth back his hair, which was toppling down his forehead again, but he did it. A few weeks earlier in 7-Eleven, she'd overheard some girls giggling about some boy's hair and one of them said she wanted to write a
sonnet about a single curl that drooped down one side of his face. At the time she thought the girls were stupid, but now she understood why they were giddy. There was something about the way Cameron's hair insisted on falling forward, as if it needed to touch his skin, to get his attention, to force him to touch it, that she felt aligned with.

"Hey, why did you say your name is Rebecca?"

"Because my name is Rebecca."

"Kent said everyone calls you Betchy."

She hissed at the sound of Kent's name. "I don't like the name Betchy," she said.

At the corner, Cameron led her across the street and along a path behind an industrial complex. On the other side were rows of bungalows that were splattered with mud. The windows were too high and the roofs seemed too low. A few sun-beaten children's toys were strewn about the dry grass. They walked to the narrow street ahead, where Cameron stopped. It was a cul-de-sac surrounded on three sides with the same muddy, silent bungalows.

"I thought you said this is where you got the mango," she said.

"Just wait."

A plain, gray catering truck slowly made its way up the street, gently rocking from side to side. It parked in the middle of the cul-de-sac and honked twice. Cameron walked to the back of the truck as the rear doors swung open. A man inside greeted Cameron by name. The truck's interior was lined on both sides with shelves and cubbies filled with cans, dry goods, candy, vegetables and fruit. Bungalow doors opened one by one and
women poured out, some carrying small children. They converged on the truck in a noisy horde, jostling past her. Cameron squeezed out of the crush holding a paper bag.

"Where's mine?" she said.

"We'll share."

"Why?"

"He only has so much fresh fruit. The others want some, too."

The women talked in Spanish with animated gestures. Two appeared to be arguing over a bag of dried chiles. A few looked Betchy and Cameron over. Taller than all of them, he stood out with his blond hair and fair skin. She thought she detected some disapproval from them on his choice of companion. Betchy was frumpy by comparison.

"Why don't they just go to Ralph's?" she said. "It's only a few blocks away."

"They want privacy. Immigrants have to keep a low profile. That's why they stay inside until the truck arrives. When it leaves, they'll go back in until after sunset."

He held a piece of cool mango up to her nose so she could smell it, then glided it into her mouth. As she bit down, her lips brushed his fingers. He ate the other half. "Plus, he slices it for you. Can't get that at Ralph's. He goes to lots of neighborhoods like this one. If I'm nearby, I always come by for lunch."

"You work at a lot of different places around town?"

"I like to be mobile," he said.

As they walked back, they shared each slice of mango. Cameron sucked them before chewing.

"What do you usually do for lunch?" he asked.
"Something from the 7-Eleven at the corner and then walk around. Sometimes I try to guess how many cars will go to the drive-up pharmacy. Or I play Yellow Car."

"What's that?" he said.

"You look for yellow cars on the street."

"And then what?"

"If you see one, you say, 'yellow car'."

"That's it?" he laughed.

"Yes," she said. It was a silly game she'd learned from a British program and she felt silly telling him about it, but his amusement seemed genuine.

"You any good at it?" he asked.

She shrugged. No one had ever asked about her lunch plans before.

He swallowed the last mango piece, flattened the bag onto his palm and held it out to her. "Want to lick the juice?"

"I'd like to watch you have it."

As he licked, she could tell he was performing for her, elongating the laps of his tongue and exaggerating the sounds he made as he sucked. If Kent had tried to get her attention with such a display, she'd be apathetic. But she was excited by Cameron's ploy.

They walked in silence for a while. Betchy put some gum in her mouth. She wished she'd brought sunglasses so she could see him better. It was too bright and she had to squint.

Cameron stopped and took her face in his hands. He pulled her to him and kissed her. Betchy had never been kissed out in the open before. Once, a boy had kissed her in the
high school gym supply closet on a dare, but that was it. Cameron thrust his tongue between her lips and teeth. She could feel his tongue sliding along the surfaces of her mouth, scooping up her gum. With a frown, he withdrew and spat it out. He returned to burrowing into her mouth, sucking on her. She felt giddy as if she were standing on an electric current. She didn't know if she was supposed to do something in response to his kiss, so she just tried to stay steady. She leaned into him and her jaw pressed into his palms.

He let her go and she bounced backward a little. They started walking again. She wondered if she should say something, but had no idea what that something might be. She wasn't naive enough to think he had made an overture at being her boyfriend, but maybe it was a test to see how she would respond. She thought the fact that she didn't pull away showed her interest, but she knew that girls usually said encouraging things. She wished she knew what to say.

As they approached the chain link fence, Betchy spotted Marlin and Kent standing near the table, watching them. Both of them had their hands on their hips. Marlin's mouth hung open.

Cameron smelled his hand. "I won't be here tomorrow. I have to go somewhere. Enjoy some mango for me."

"By myself?"

"Whatever you want. Easier to play Yellow Car by the 7-Eleven, though." He winked. She watched him walk to the door and noticed that Marlin and Kent did, too. Cameron seemed to enjoy this additional attention and made a point of waving in their direction as well as Betchy's before going in.
That afternoon at her label station, she could sense that both Marlin and Kent had questions, but neither asked. She kept an eye out for Cameron at the end of the day, but didn't see him.

When she got home, her father talked her into having dinner with the family. The four of them sat around the table in snug discomfort. Usually she skipped the applesauce when she ate pork chops, but tonight she piled it onto her plate.

Her step-mother regarded her closely. "Betchy, you're so pallid. I'm sure it's your diet. Snack foods are not a meal."

Betchy ignored her and rolled the applesauce around her mouth. She could still feel Cameron's wet mouth on her, his tongue pressing through her teeth.

Her step-mother pursed her lips at Betchy's father.

"Someone has a birthday coming up," he said.

"I'd like a fruit tart instead of a cake," said Betchy.

"A birthday fruit tart?" Jennifer said.

"What's wrong with that?" Betchy said.

"Tarts aren't for birthdays."

"I don't think that's a hard and fast rule," her father said.

Jennifer snorted. "She doesn't even eat fruit."

"I do," Betchy said. "A man fed me mango today."

The three of them stared at her, her step-mother's fork poised in front of her mouth.

"What kind of man?" asked Jennifer.
"There's only one kind of man, Jennifer," said Betchy. "The other kind are called transgender."

"Where did you meet this man?" her step-mother asked.

"The empty lot behind Timmon's."

"But who is he?" her step-mother asked.

"Why?" Betchy felt she'd already said too much about Cameron. She wanted to keep him for herself, a private treasure. Didn't want Jennifer to massacre his name.

Her step-mother set her fork down and gathered her napkin in her hand like she did whenever she grilled Jennifer about her school assignments or Betchy about her hair. Her father put his hand up. "Okay, let's finish our dinner. And we can hear all about Betchy's mango man later."

"Nope. That's all you get," Betchy said.

After dinner, Betchy told her step-mother she couldn't help with the dishes because she needed to shave her legs and armpits. She'd worn only khakis and long sleeved shirts, her work uniform, for two years. She had to dig the razors out from the back of a drawer. Later in bed, she lay awake thinking up possible things to say to Cameron the next time he kissed her.

At morning break the next day, Kent began to describe a bestiality video he'd seen.

"Your porn addiction is very boring," she told him.

She went to the truck for lunch, but by the time she pushed through the crowd, the driver said there was no more mango.
"I got a papaya!" he said.

"Is that like mango?"

"Yeah, sure!"

But it wasn't like mango at all. She dumped it into a storm drain.

The day was already hot by the time Thursday's morning break came around. Betchy sat across from Marlin as he droned on about flowers, but she looked past him, into the empty lot, waiting for Cameron to appear.

"The only thing that keeps florists in business," said Marlin, "is sick people and men who've fucked up."

The creaky door finally opened and Cameron emerged. A woman in a short skirt followed him. They stood facing each other just outside the door and Cameron lit two cigarettes, handing one to her. The woman, her back to Betchy, jutted her hip to support her elbow. She punctuated her speech with her cigarette, never actually taking a drag. Betchy couldn't hear what she said, but Cameron nodded periodically, about once per smoky exhale. He blew rings over the woman's shoulder. At first Betchy thought Cameron didn't see that she was there, but soon realized he did see her and was performing for her. He aimed the smoke rings in her direction, as if they were for her benefit, like a secret code.

Marlin was oblivious to Betchy's inattention. "If men didn't have to suck up with flowers to get back in there..."

Cameron finally acknowledged Betchy and waved with one quick motion. The woman glanced over her shoulder and went back to talking at him, tapping the ash off her
cigarette with a ridiculous flourish. He dropped his cigarette at his feet and the woman did the same. He stepped on both of them and slid them off the walkway with his foot. He held the door for her and they disappeared back inside.

"C'mon, Betchy," said Kent. Marlin had already headed back. "That's enough staring at the wildlife."

"Stop telling people my name is Betchy."

Kent let out a surprised grunt, as if he were clearing phlegm from his throat.

"I mean it," she said. "Knock it off. Or I'll go inside and tell them you swipe bottles of Male Booster."

Kent blanched. "I don't do that."

"I'll tell them you do."

Betchy waited on the street for Cameron at lunch time. He came out with the woman. She had on wedge heels and walked in an exaggerated strut. Her ass popped from side to side. Her eyes swept up and down Betchy as they approached, pausing at Betchy's steel toe boots.

"Hey, Betchy, this is Karen," said Cameron.

"Betchy?" said Karen. "What kind of name is that?"

"Are you coming with us to get mango?" Betchy asked.

Karen laughed. "I think it's you that's coming with us." She rolled her eyes at Cameron.

As they started down the street, Karen positioned herself in the middle, but Betchy crossed behind her to Cameron's other side. Karen looked annoyed by her presence, but
Betchy already felt an ownership of this time with Cameron and Karen was definitely the interloper.

"He ran out of mango yesterday," said Betchy.

"It's popular," he said.

"I had to get papaya."

"What did you think?" he asked.

She wrinkled her nose.

"Maybe you didn't eat it right," he said in a low voice.

"Is there a right way to eat fruit?" Karen butted in.

"Absolutely," he said.

"And you'll show me?" Karen said.

"Hmm, maybe Rebecca will show you."

"Who's Rebecca?"

"This is Rebecca right here," he said.

"I thought you said her name was Betchy?"

"Keep up, Karen." When they got to the bungalows, Karen had trouble crossing the grass in her heels so she made Cameron take her hand. Betchy strode ahead because the truck had arrived and she didn't want to be shut out of mango again. Let Karen eat papaya.

A few women got ahead of Betchy, but as soon as the driver saw Cameron, he tossed over a bag of mango. Betchy and Karen stood in front of him while he opened the bag. Karen fanned herself and undid one button.
"Watch Rebecca, Karen." He held out a piece of mango and Betchy bit off a large piece, allowing some juice to rest on her lips while she sucked and then chewed. Cameron did the same. He held out a slice of mango for Karen but after she bit off a piece, it popped out of her mouth.

Cameron gasped at the mango on the ground. "Oh, no, Karen!" He waved another slice near Karen's face. "If I let you have my mango, Karen, are you going to make an effort?"

"Oh, just give it." She tried to take it from him, but he snapped his hand back. Betchy was glad Cameron could see how ridiculous Karen was.

"Let's go over this again," he said. "Watch Rebecca, Karen."

Cameron gently slid the mango into Betchy's mouth. She knew Cameron was performing again, and she was happy to be part of his performance, happy to have all of his attention. As she licked the juice off his finger, the world receded and it was just the two of them.

Karen interrupted and put one hand on Cameron's shoulder. "Let me try it again," she said.

She's jealous, Betchy thought. Couldn't even keep the fruit in her mouth on her first try. Karen's second try was better, but Betchy was confident she still did it better. They walked and ate, though they had to stop every time it was Karen's turn because she couldn't walk and take a bite from Cameron at the same time. Karen licked her lips as Cameron enjoyed the juice from the bag. Cameron didn't offer the juice to Karen as he'd done for Betchy their first time. Betchy believed this was because he knew she wanted to watch him
have it. He tossed the bag into a dumpster along the way and stopped to pull out his pack of Marlboro Lights. It was the spot he had tasted Betchy two days ago.

"Light one for me, too, please," Karen said.

"You don't smoke," Betchy said.

Cameron threw back his head and blew the smoke straight up with a laugh. He tucked the pack into his pocket and walked backward so he could face the two women. He grinned and sucked a generous lungful of smoke, exhaling it straight up again in a tall billow. Karen's heels thudded on the pavement and she fiddled with her unbuttoned blouse. She looked cranky, which Betchy assumed was because she was vying for Cameron's attention and not getting enough of it. He looked at both of them equally, though Betchy wasn't doing anything extra to get it.

By the time they arrived back at the parking lot, he had sucked his cigarette to a stub. He put it out on the pavement and glanced up the street toward the 7-Eleven. "Yellow car!" he said.

"It wasn't," Betchy said. She hadn't seen the car. She thought it would be fun to challenge him, play with him and exclude Karen.

"It was, too," he said.

"Where?" said Karen. "What car?"

"It's a game," he said.

"You don't how to play," said Betchy. She didn't want Karen to know about the game. She liked that it was something private with Cameron and thought he seemed to like
that, too. He was playing it with her and making no attempt to explain it to Karen, even though the explanation was simple. She said to Karen, "You can't play with us."

Karen grabbed Cameron by the wrist and tried to pull him toward the door. "It was nice to meet you, Betchy. Rebecca. Whatever," she said. "We have to be getting back now."

Betchy thought Karen put too much emphasis on the word "we." She wasn't Cameron's "we." Betchy was much closer to being his "we." Cameron would have kissed her a second time by now if Karen weren't in the way. She knew what to say this time. She reached up and held his collar, bringing him down to her. She whispered in his ear, "You can have me."

Cameron kept his eyes on Betchy as Karen pulled him away. Betchy thought he definitely looked like he was considering what she'd said, and thought she saw him wink his approval just as the door was closing.

When she'd nearly finished her last shipments for the day, she found Marlin doing inventory and stood before him.

"I thought about what you said, Marlin, and I really might try to improve my attitude."

He watched her with his good eye as she walked back to her labels and boxes. His tongue rolled back and forth in his open mouth.

Betchy was buoyant as she stood at her bus stop after work. She planned to tell Cameron tomorrow that she didn't want anyone else going with them for lunch. She was
considering the wording for this when a green Ford Escort pulled over to the curb next to her. The passenger window rolled down and Cameron leaned out.

"Just wanted to say that we may not be able to have mango again any time soon," he said. "It seems I interrupted an office triangle."

Betchy leaned down to look inside at the driver. It wasn't Karen, but another woman, who was impatient to leave. Cameron looked sort of sheepish but Betchy thought he was putting on a show for the woman. She could see a playful smile. "So yeah, I can't go back there," he said.

She was devastated by the thought she might not see Cameron again. She tried to think of something to say to make him return anyway. He pulled a scrap of paper from his pocket and gave it to her. "Here's a list of places where the truck parks. Maybe we'll meet there sometime."

She took the paper from him, thrilled that he had thought to write down this list and have it ready for her. Was it like a test? To see if she could find him? As the car pulled away he licked his lips and said, "I'd like to taste that again."

Betchy stood there until her bus passed by. Then another bus passed by. Sometime after the last bus passed, she sat down on the sidewalk. It was still warm from the day's heat. By the time her father's Chrysler finally pulled up to the curb, the cement around her had cooled. But the area underneath her was as warm as if the noonday sun still bathed it.

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WHY NOT HAVE CANDY?

Beth met Marcus on her seventeenth birthday as she was panhandling in front of his favorite off track betting room. He was charming and kind to her, the first man to invite her home without expecting to sleep with her. He introduced her to his eight year old son, Darence, who seemed suspicious of her but was friendly when Marcus was nearby. Marcus cooked dinner and before morning, she had slept with him after all and agreed to move in. She was the kind of feminine comfort they needed, he said. Darence's mother had passed away the previous fall, and though he never said he wanted Beth to take her place, she felt him positioning her. She had been alone for so long, looking after herself since she was fifteen, that she accepted this role and never questioned Marcus when she heard from a neighbor that Darence's mother hadn't died, but had left them in the middle of the night.
She assumed there was a reason for his lie, probably for Darence's sake, and knew that sometimes a lie was best.

One month later, Marcus handed her his prepaid phone before getting into his friend's car. "Be good, little man" he said over his shoulder to Darence, who was dumbfounded and frightened. She reassured him they'd have a nice time and his father would be back in a few days, which she believed. He went to work at a resort over the long holiday weekend. His friend had told him they could make good money doing concierge work, enough cash in tips to last months, if you hustled right. Neither Marcus nor his friend knew anything about being a concierge and they were too scruffy to hustle cash tips out of rich golfers and their blond mistresses. When Marcus finally called, two weeks later, he said the concierge jobs had been filled by the time they'd got there so they'd worked the room service carts instead. He wasn't able to return right away because his friend had been arrested and the car impounded. Some sort of misunderstanding, he said. Marcus claimed he'd used what little money he'd saved on his friend's bail, but they were saving up to reclaim the car.

"The thing is," she said, "you didn't leave us any money."

"Put Darence on the phone." The line crackled and buzzed.

"Where are you calling from?" she said. "The connection is bad."

"A pay phone. Just put him on, I don't have any more change."

She handed Darence the phone and watched him listen. She could hear Marcus putting a tastier spin on the room service and bail money story. "You said you were coming
back in a few days," said Darence. "Really? Cool!" He handed the phone back. "I'm getting a Playstation."

"Marcus?" she said. "Are you still there?"

"I have to go," he said.

"The manager wants the rent. I can't pay it."

"Tell him to hang tight for a few days," he said. "Explain what happened. Come on, girl."

"I can't even buy food." The line had gone dead.

Each time Marcus called, with another story about a new opportunity and more financial misadventures, she'd hand the phone to Darence at the end and watch his face. At first he would smile at the sound of his father's voice and nod as he heard why Marcus couldn't return yet, affecting a countenance he thought was brave. That expression wilted with each successive call until Darence's face went blank and his nodding had turned to surrender. Three weeks ago, Marcus called to say he'd be on the following day's three-thirty bus. Darence's smile returned. Beth entertained a little hopefulness.

They sat at the bus stop until nine that night, when a cop pulled up and said, "You been sitting here since I came on duty, what's the deal?"

"There's no deal," she said. "We were waiting for someone but he got off at the stop up the street. He's waiting around the corner." She'd been telling herself a variation of that story for hours to ease her anxiety. Marcus had gotten off at the wrong stop and was waiting for them at the apartment. He'd taken a later bus, and would arrive any minute. She'd misheard the bus line and they'd waited for the wrong one. All of these scenarios
ended with Marcus's arrival, but by the time the cop came around, she'd given up hope of that. She hurried Darence down the street and around a corner. Her heart broke a little when she saw that Darence wasn't looking for his father, he knew this was a story to get the cop off their backs.

Marcus had left them in a lurch and they needed him back. The food cupboard at Our Lady of Faith said they wouldn't serve Beth again unless she filled out their paperwork. "We're only doing it this time because you have a child," said a woman with a clipboard and severe bangs. "You have to bring these forms with you next time, no exceptions."

Beth couldn't risk revealing that she was seventeen and living alone with Darence. She looked older and could easily pass for twenty. She often did. But the last place she'd tried to get work had kept her fake ID. She thought about turning a few tricks, but knew that if Marcus ever found out, he'd never want her again. He didn't mind petty theft or street hustling, but he was biased against prostitutes. He said they were filthy.

Even if she could find work, she had no place to leave Darence. He was out of school for the summer. There were plenty of eight year olds looking after themselves on the streets during the day, but she couldn't let Darence, Marcus's only son, be one of them. If she got only one thing right, she wanted it to be that she didn't leave Darence to fend for himself against the street bullies and crack peddlers, as she'd had to do at his age. And when Marcus finally did come home, he'd see how well she'd taken care of his boy with so little, and she'd be like family. "What would I do without you?" he'd say. "We love you."
Marcus called again a week later with the same promise. The three-thirty bus. They only waited until five that day, in case the same cop came by on patrol.

For Marcus's latest call, she'd had to put him on speaker because Darence wouldn't take the phone. He was angry and exercised the only power a boy has, his attention. This time Marcus said he'd found someone to hitch a ride with.

"Where'll he drop you?" she said.

"I'm not sure. Meet me by the statue at Main and Third."

"What statue?"

"The one at Main and Third," he said. "Are you deaf?"

"What time?"

"Depends. If we make good time, one or so. If not, maybe more like three."

Darence studied her to gauge how much credence she gave this newest plan. She adopted a look of assurance but could tell it hadn't been fast enough to fool him.

They ate their last two hot dogs for breakfast and were at the statue by eleven-thirty. Hot car exhaust hung in the air, suffocating them, until a passing car created a breeze to carry it away. They watched people on the sidewalks, crossing the streets, standing in front of restaurants and businesses, talking on their phones. They tried to look as if the day were passing as normally for them as it was for these other people. They weren't hungry and alone, they were just sitting by a statue, resting for a bit on their way to somewhere else.

Darence was poking at a flattened wad of gum with a broken spork. The heat had softened it, allowing tiny beads of moisture to collect. "Don't touch that," she said. "It's dirty."
"You're not my mother," he said. The plastic spork bent and snapped back into place with each jab. "Anyway I'm not touching it, I'm using this forky spoon."

"That's what I mean. It's dirty. When your father gets here and you hug him, you'll smear him with germs out of some litterbug's mouth."

Darence pressed one tine into the gum as he considered the word "when." Darence was too young to lose hope. She'd said "when" for his benefit. He pulled the tine out of the gum and set the spork down, wiping his hands on the cuff of his jeans. Some of his defiance had shifted into a guarded, stiff posture. He tucked his fingers behind his knees and looked straight ahead, his eyes circling the intersection, searching for Marcus.

A ridiculous woman walked by with a bright yellow parasol. Beth could tell it wasn't an umbrella, it was too flimsy for rain. It was made from a gauzy fabric and had delicate satin bows along the rim. The woman took slow, dainty steps as if she were in a parade. After crossing the street, she went down a narrow set of stairs. A sign above them read, "Percy's Candy Emporium. Open to the public."

Beth stood up to stretch her legs. Darence kept one tentative eye on her as she walked around to the plaque. It was covered in a patina that nearly obscured the letters. "Barkley Gibson," it read. "Led the charge against the Mexican army and preserved the peace and town." He pointed straight ahead, the way confident receivers did when they headed to the end zone, but she couldn't see what he aimed at. She wondered what he'd think if he saw his statue now, covered in green crust and being used as a perch for two hungry, nearly homeless kids. Dry leaves and trash pressed against the base, shifting as the passing cars blew another wall of hot air against it. Within the debris she could see the tip
of what was unmistakably a ten dollar bill. She'd gotten good at spotting money over the years, even if it was buried in dirt. It fluttered in her hand as a bus passed and kicked up more stinking exhaust and a few strips of paper that gently settled back into the gutter. Darence saw the bill and froze, his mouth open. A moment passed as they studied it and silently agreed that it was real.

"That's ten dollars," he said. He looked at it as if it might whisper a secret at any moment. He tried to appear casual but boys his age can't retain their composure once they're excited. He looked around, worried the bill's owner might appear and snatch it away. "How'll you spend it?" he said.

She knew she should buy food with it. Without Marcus, they had no way to eat tonight. As it was, they might return to the apartment and find it padlocked. With ten dollars she could buy a few day's worth of food, maybe a week, if she went to the Dollar Tree or the marked down section of the grocery store.

"Got something in mind?" she said.

Darence became very serious while he considered this question. He might ask for a fast food burger and fries, or a burrito. Soda pop would be a luxury neither of them had had in a long time. The idea of stuffing themselves with two burgers, curly fries and large root beers was tempting. She missed the feel of a full belly and knew that Darence missed it, too.

He was lost in his mind, smiling, the way children get when their private thoughts please them so much they forget to wear their public faces. He was looking at Percy's
Candy Emporium.

She realized that of course he'd noticed it before she did, probably as soon as they got there.

She felt guilty that she'd considered buying week-old bread and generic baloney instead of something fun for Darence. She hated the responsibility of using good judgment in a time like this.

She folded the bill and put it in her pocket. Darence resumed his brave face, trying to be his father's little man. "You should save it for later," he said. "In case he doesn't come."

She knew Darence would never admit his desire for candy to her. He resented his dependence on what little she provided and pretended he was only tolerating her for his father. She saw that every day he imagined himself closer to being on his own, but he was smart enough to know that day was far away. She admired him for playing at maturity but also felt sorry for him. Boys shouldn't have to rush out of their childhoods. She wished she'd stayed in hers a little longer.

"Your dad's definitely coming," she said. Darence studied her face. He was several feet shorter than her, but she was terrified of him. There were so many ways to screw a person up and she was certain Marcus had already done half of them. She didn't want to do the other half. Maybe it was better to lie in this case. It wasn't a lie, anyway. More like fragile assurance. Darence wanted to believe his father was coming home this time and she wanted to help him believe it.

Had she fooled Darence at any point since Marcus left? Darence seemed adept at spotting lies. He never asked about the promised Playstation and was so calm all those
hours at the bus stop. Maybe he didn't believe his father was coming, just playing along. They were both indulging in one last game in which they could decide what they'd believe in. By tonight they wouldn't get to decide. There'd only be one sure thing, whether they wanted to believe in it or not. They'd either head back to the apartment with Marcus after stopping to eat, or sneak into it to salvage what they could before they sneaked back out to find somewhere else to land, most likely the shelter on Tenth. They gave a meal and sometimes a cot. Surely they wouldn't turn Darence away and wouldn't let him stay there alone. She could talk her way in for a night or two.

And there was still a chance that Marcus would show up, she reasoned. He might even have money with him. Then it wouldn't matter how they'd spent this ten dollars. She knew that was another story she was telling herself, but was that so bad? Why not pretend they were free to spend it as they pleased? Why not have candy?

"Let's go to Percy's," she said.

Darence looked skeptical at first but his eyes opened wide as he realized she was serious. The brave, little man face turned back into a boy's, full of ebullience. "Really?" he said.

"Sure. We can each get something and buy your Dad a welcome home present," she said. She'd seen parents in checkout lines buy their kids all kinds of stuff and always wondered why they didn't just say "No." Now she understood what the joy of saying "Yes" felt like.
Darence bounced along beside her as they crossed the street. A green awning shaded the heavy, frosted-glass door to Percy's, through which she could make out a checkered floor of green and white tiles.

"What's an emporum?" he said.

"It's emporium." For once he didn't bristle at a correction. "We'll find out."

Darence stepped down first. He needed help with the door, so she held it open as cool, sugared air drifted out. The door closed quickly but without noise. Percy's Candy Emporium stretched across the entire bottom floor of the building and contained a stockpile of candy. There were too many display cases to count. Some were like bakery cases, some were flat tables set with glass canisters and cookie jars. Along one wall were waist-high barrels filled with wrapped candies. It reminded Beth of a New Year's Eve party, with streamers and confetti in bright colors draped over everything, except everything here was edible. The yellow parasol woman was at the chocolates counter.

Just inside the door was a stack of baskets with a sign, "Take One." Darence obeyed and picked one up, but unsure what to do with it, he put it back. She followed him along the wall with the barrels. Most of it was candy he was familiar with, stuff that supermarkets carry, but here was tumbled in a big heap. She stood over the Bit-O-Honey barrel, which had an inverted lid that held only an inch or so of candy but made it appear as if the whole barrel was full. Darence stopped at the clear plastic bins of salt water taffy, a small flag taped to each one indicating the flavor.

"Salt water taffy," he read, emphasizing the word "salt."

"Ever had taffy?" she asked.
He shook his head. "It's salty?"

"No, it's sweet. I don't know why they call it that. My old man worked at the pier for a while, he brought it home once in a while."

"He made it?"

"No, he just worked at the arcade." Her father had worked at the pier's arcade for only a few months before he returned to his previous job, drinking beer full time.

"You getting some?" he said.

"No, too sticky. I got a bad tooth in the back. You want to try some?"

Darence shrugged.

"What's over here?" she said. They moved over to one of the tables with the glass canisters. Someone had written names in neat lettering on each lid, along with price per pound. "Lemon balls are good. Does your Dad like sour?"

He frowned and shrugged again. "I think my Mom used to eat Lemonheads. Not sure about my Dad." He'd never mentioned his mother to Beth before. "What do you think?"

Darence had never, in the four months she'd known him, asked what she thought."We should get something different, something fun," she said. "Something you can't get at a regular store."

Darence's eyes settled on a display of lollipops. There were dozens of varieties, from mouth sized suckers to discs larger than dinner plates. Some were shaped like spears. There was one mustache.

"That's gross," she said. "Who wants to eat a candy mustache?"
Darence laughed. "Maybe we should get that for Dad, it's funny."

She checked the price. $25.95. "Holy crap!" she said. The woman behind the chocolates counter gasped. "Sorry!" she said. "We don't have enough for that," she whispered to Darence. "Maybe this." She held up a bouquet made of golf-ball sized lollipops tied together with red ribbon.

"How much?" he said.

"Six ninety-five."

He counted with his fingers. "That only leaves three dollars for us."

Beth was certain this was the first time Darence had said "us" and meant her and him. He was still at that age where he was at the mercy of the world around him. Bullies in the school yard. Kids two grades ahead. Teachers. Adults like his father and even her. He wasn't the guy who got to decide stuff. He had to go along. He was the kid who would get his lunch money stolen if he had any. She'd offered to share the money to buy candy for him, too, and that meant something. Sharing canned meat and stiff cheese from the food cupboard was one thing, but this was candy. Friends shared candy.

She put the lolly-bouquet down. "I think we should spend the money on us. A treat. We deserve it."

Darence was turning a stick of jewel-toned rock candy in the light. "It's pretty," he said. "What is it?"

She read the label. "Sugar and color."

"I didn't know sugar could get that pretty," he said.

"They're cheap, you should get one. I'll get one, too. What color?"
"Blue."

She chose a yellow one for herself and a green one for Marcus. Darence noticed the chocolates counter lady giving a sample to Yellow Parasol, so they moved toward it.

"Which one should we sample?" she asked him.

Darence shrugged. It was probably the first time he'd seen chocolate that didn't come out of a wrapper. He seemed amazed that they could sample it first. She wouldn't have known about sampling, either, at his age, but she used to pass a See's Candies store every day after school. They gave out free samples. The manager liked her and gave her whatever they were handing out that day, even though she wasn't supposed to. The samples were supposed to get you to buy candy, which Beth never did. Darence's face was so close to the glass, a light fog was forming on it. The counter lady was still helping the parasol.

Beth put a hand on his shoulder and moved him back a few inches. Through his thin shirt she could feel his muscles were relaxed under her palm. She left her hand there. In their faint reflection she imagined that they looked like two ordinary kids who stopped in to buy candy. The women at the other end of the display case might think they were family.

Darence was too preoccupied with the display to notice the women.

"Ever had dark chocolate?" she said.

"I think so," he said. "What's nougat?"

"Sort of like a chewy nut, I guess."

"You like it?"

"Not really," she said. "You like nuts? They have chocolate-covered nuts. Or pecan buds. That's got caramel. Or maybe one of these fruit ones. Strawberry crème? Orange?"
They sure have a lot of choices, don't they? Hey, look, peanut butter cups. My mom used to scoop peanut butter out of the jar with a Hershey's bar and eat it. One night we sat there for two hours, the only time she ever let me have a whole bar. She ate at least half a dozen. Then she went outside and twirled in the middle of the street. Got run over by a Roto-Rooter van." As soon as she said it, she realized she'd rambled and had said too much. Now she had put an image in another kid's head of a woman lying under a van with peanut butter on her mouth. It was bad enough she had it in her own.

"She died?" he said.

"Yeah, she did," she finally said. "But that was a terrible story to tell. I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry I did. Just forget about that."

"It's okay," he said. "Dad says my mom died, too. But that's a lie."

The counter lady stood in front of them. "What can I help you with?"

"We'd like to sample something," said Beth.

"What would you like?"

"What's that?" Darence said, pointing to a mound of irregular, dark chunks.

"Chocolate-covered honeycomb," she said.

"Is it sticky?"

"No," she said as she handed over two misshaped nuggets. "It's crunchy until it hits your tongue. Then it gently melts."

They bit through the chocolate and let the honeycomb melt onto their tongues. It seemed to evaporate and leave the honey flavor behind as they crunched the delicate traces that remained.
"I like the way it feels," Darence said.

"Me, too. Let's get some. What else?"

"That's it."

"All honeycomb?"

"We have these, too," he said, holding up the rock candy.

"You sure?"

"You said to get something different."

"You don't have to," she said.

"I want to."

They handed over the rock candy sticks and the lady put them in a bag along with a crisp pouch of the honeycomb. As she rang it up, Beth dreaded the possibility the total would be over ten dollars and she'd have to ask her to adjust the weight. It would spoil the fantasy that they were at leisure if she had to admit the ten dollar bill was their entire treasury. It came to $9.57. They could afford gumballs at the drugstore later.

They dug into the pouch of honeycomb and climbed the steps up to the hot street air. The chocolate melted on their fingers. They went back to the statue and sat under him to watch the passersby again, bracing against the occasional gusts from passing cars and buses. The yellow parasol paraded up the street to a second shop. Beth tried to figure out if what Barkley Gibson was meant to point at was still there or had been moved long ago.

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Karl was nauseated from the SpaceLink bus ride and preferred to remain quiet. The bus used refraction propulsion methods to save fuel, which caused it to sway and lurch as it bounced off the atmosphere of the stars and planets it passed. But he didn't want to be rude to the conductor, who insisted on making conversation. Plus, Karl wanted to correct him.

"My girlfriend didn't leave me, she's been misplaced. The whole planet, actually."

Karl was just out of high school and the conductor had suggested Amanda may have left him because he didn't have his own vehicle. "I have my own vehicle. I was running an errand for her and when I returned, Amanda, the planet, everything was gone. I thought the Bureau of Universe Services might be able to help. I'd have driven myself but I already used up my public parking stipend for the year." The Bureau occupied an independently managed satellite platform that only accepted approved public parking coupons.
Karl hated the bus, it smelled like sweat and rancid nuts. But SpaceLink bus service was the only carrier who offered a route to the Bureau without a layover. He had to find Amanda. She was his third girlfriend, but the first one he'd fallen in love with. He was even thinking they might move in together, if he ever found her. She baked him chocolate chip cookies with walnuts and even though he hated nuts he never said anything. He wasn't crazy about her annoying mechani-dog, Stan, either, but Amanda was heartbroken when the dog fizzled out, so Karl had offered to get a new battery. When he returned, he found only empty space where Amanda's planet had been. He checked and rechecked his navigation and searched the area. He tried to send her a voice message, but without knowing what direction to send it, the system would only reply, "Location Not Found." He couldn't afford multi-directional media transmission service. He was distraught to think that Amanda was sitting at home on her chintz sofa, petting the inert Stan and waiting for Karl to return. It had already been a day and a half. Maybe she thought he was never coming back.

The bus was packed tight with rumpled people so he'd had to stand for most of the journey, keeping his knees loose and in a constant state of adjustment to the swaying compartment. Karl's knees buckled in a gentle swoop as he stepped onto the landing dock. The stationery surface surprised his joints. A few other people exited the bus with him, some moving with quick steps like they knew where they were going and others standing still like Karl, senses befuddled by the cool, oxygenated air drifting out of the portal ahead. He filled his lungs with relief. The bus never used fully saturated air.
A sign read, "Bureau of Local Universe Services, a subsidiary of Universe Management." The bus disengaged and pulled away with a blast of coal tar fumes. Karl rushed in the opposite direction, across the dock toward the entrance.

The double doors opened automatically but didn't give him enough time to get all the way inside before closing behind him and sweeping him into the main lobby. Still unsteady, Karl nearly tumbled over. The lobby's ceiling was at least two stories high, and a few of the panels were missing, exposing fluorescent light tubes. Each person's footsteps echoed. A giant fan built in to the wall at the far end turned much too slowly to fully ventilate a lobby with so much empty space. The air wasn't as cool as it seemed when Karl first got off the bus, it only seemed that way because the bus was so hot and fetid. In the lobby's center was a steel grey kiosk with a backlit directory on the right and an attendant behind a glass partition on the left. The directory was hard to read, scratched and soiled with what looked like bird droppings, but there were no birds in sight. The attendant yawned as Karl explained how he'd returned from the Mechani-Battery store and been unable to locate Amanda.

"Misplaced People," the attendant said, pointing to the map. "Office 1211."

"Which corridor is the most direct?"

"I can't help you with that, sir."

Karl chose the corridor on the right. The linoleum had been polished too intently into an obtrusive shine and was a bit slippery. He had to step carefully. The walls were covered in ash colored cubicle fabric. His footfalls made a sharp sound as they landed but were then muffled by the walls. His feet and legs were already tired from standing on the
bus and the long walk wasn't helping. He passed Office 1162, "Aviary Management – Closed." Arriving at Office 1211, he saw a sign taped to the door. "We have moved to Office 1009." After another long walk back in the direction he'd started, he found the correct office and took the number twenty-eight from the reel at the door. The clerk called out number fourteen and a man walked up to the counter, complaining about his foot being asleep. Karl sat on one of the molded plastic chairs that had once been soft and pliable, but the years had dried it stiff. He tried several, but each had its own defect. A piece had broken off the front of one, leaving a sharp point that stuck his right thigh. Another one was uneven from a missing foot. He was about to try another chair when a woman with smeared mascara and hair sneaking out of a tight bun ordered him to choose a seat and stay in it. She reminded him of one of the dumpster divers in the alley behind his favorite produce emporium. Who the hell did she think she was to order him?

Karl distracted himself as he waited by imagining what he'd say to Amanda when he found her. "I stood on a stinking bus for hours and hours! I love you that much!" She'd throw her arms around him and tell him how much she admired his loyalty. Hopefully she wouldn't want to celebrate with nutted cookies.

Karl's number was called. The clerk sat on a stool behind a high counter. There was no chair on Karl's side, so he stood, moving his weight from foot to aching foot.

"Hello," said Karl, looking at the tag pinned to her lapel. It read, "Misplacement Clerk" with an empty space below it as if a label had been removed, leaving gummed residue. "Your name is missing from your tag."
"Employee names are disallowed due to safety regulations," she said. "There were incidents."

"But you've got a name tag."

"Please don't point, sir. How can I help you?"

"I've misplaced my girlfriend, Amanda." Before Karl could go on, the clerk turned to a filing system filled with various colored sheets of paper and handed him a white one.

"Fill out this Affidavit of Loss in black pen," she said. "Complimentary pens are available against the wall."

Karl took the form to a counter that was too short to stand comfortably at but too high for the chairs. Pens were attached to thin metal chains. The first pen was dry. The second was blue ink. The third pen had to be shaken every few letters to restart the ink flow. Karl bent at the waist and filled in as much of the form as he could. His and Amanda's names and addresses he did with no problem, as well as the date of misplacement. But he was stumped by questions like "History of misplacement incidents." He and Amanda had never discussed it but he was fairly sure this was her first time.

"No line jumping, sir," the clerk said when he brought back the form.

"I was here before, you said to fill out this form."

"Take a number, please."

"Again?"

"That's the procedure," the clerk said.
After forty minutes, it was Karl's turn again to approach the counter. A lanyard of green yarn held the clerk's glasses, which she put on to read his affidavit. She put the paper down and folded her hands across it.

"Last known address and current address are the same," she said. "I thought you said she was misplaced?"

"She is."

"She can't be misplaced if you know what place she's at."

"I know the address, but it isn't there. I ran an errand and when I came back, everything was gone. It was just empty space."

"Maybe you were lost."

"No, I have the latest nav-expansion pack." Karl was irritated that she thought he'd simply gotten lost. He'd been going to Amanda's nearly every day for five and three-quarter months, ever since Amanda moved into her own place, a tiny studio above a noodle shop. And while he might have taken a turn down the wrong street a couple of times, he'd always managed to find the planet. "I stopped a sanitation cruiser and they agreed that the planet wasn't in its right place."

"This is the office for misplaced persons, I can't help you with a misplaced planet."

She slid the affidavit across the counter.

"But where did her planet go?"

"That's not for me to sort out." The clerk tapped the counter and called the next number.

"But who can help me?"
The clerk dropped her glasses back to her chest. "Try the Satellite Locator. Or the Galaxy Planning Division."

"Where's that?"

"Check the Directory. Main lobby."

Karl returned to the kiosk. The attendant was sitting upright but napping. How could he sleep with all those footstep echoing? Karl had to bang on the glass to wake him.

"I went all the way out to Office 1211 only to find that they'd moved to 1009. It's very annoying to walk all that distance when I didn't have to."

"Would you like to fill out a complaint?" the clerk said.

"No, never mind."

"Can I help you with anything else?"

Karl studied the map. "Yes, the Galaxy Planning Division, where is it? It's not listed."

"They submitted their directory information after the deadline. They're on that sheet at the bottom."

A long strip of paper dangled by one pushpin off the bottom of the directory. Karl bent to read it, his lower back aching. "It says Office 1141, but is that correct? Are you sure they haven't moved?"

"All I know is what's there, sir." He yawned and settled back into his napping position.

"How can you sleep with all this echoing?" Karl said.

The attendant closed his eyes. "You get the hang of it after a while."
Karl felt as if his arches were flattened against the hard linoleum as he tramped back down the hallway.

Office 1141 was empty. There was a counter at the front of the room and more stiff plastic chairs against the wall. Behind the counter were rows of empty drafting boards. He took a number, just in case. "Hello?" he called out.

A head of dark curls popped up from beneath one of the drafting boards. "Just a minute," he said. "I'm making some adjustments to my workspace."

Karl flexed his calf a few times to try to alleviate the knot growing behind his knee. Amanda had hugged him when he left, so excited at the thought of Stan being functional again. If Karl hadn't left to get a stupid battery, he would have been with Amanda when the planet moved and this wouldn't be happening now. He'd try to convince her to get a real dog when they moved in together. Real dogs had far fewer technical difficulties.

The clerk's badge read, "Planning Supervisor," though Karl was unsure who he supervised since there didn't appear to be anyone else in the department. "Can I help you?" the supervisor said.

Karl explained. The supervisor consulted a large stack of papers in a comb binder. "You're mistaken. That planet hasn't been moved yet. It's not slated for repositioning until the adjacent system goes supernova."

"But I was out there," said Karl. "It's gone!"

"It will remain in place until the appointed time for its relocation, I assure you."

"Someone must have taken it upon themselves to move it early."
The corners of the supervisor's mouth rose in a small smile of assurance. "No one takes anything upon themselves in this department. That's not our policy."

"Maybe it was another department who moved it?"

"Sir, this is the Planning Department. We plan each and every placement and replacement. No one moves anything without our authorization."

Karl slapped his palm on the counter. "How do you explain it then? I promise you, it's moved."

The supervisor clicked his red pen and put it back in his pocket. "Your maps must be in error. That happens sometimes. Some departments are very sloppy. If I were you, I'd report the error to the Galaxy and Inter-Universe Map Oversight Committee."

"I don't care about the error, I just want to find Amanda."

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" the supervisor said.

"Where do I find the maps department?"

"Do you mean the Department of Galaxy Maps or the Chamber of Interstellar Transportation Routes?"

"Galaxy Maps, I guess."

"I'm only familiar with this quadrant," the supervisor said. "You'd better ask for directory assistance in the main lobby."

"I don't want to hike all the way back there. Could we call?"

"I wish I could, sir, but the regulations restrict telephonic communications to interdepartmental business only. No personal calls."
"It's not a personal call. I'd be calling the Directory Assistance kiosk to ask for directory assistance."

"Even so." The supervisor shrugged.

Karl slammed the door as he stepped into the hall, its brief echo absorbed into the walls. He trekked back to the main lobby. The attendant was doodling along the edge of his time card.

"I need to find the Department of Galaxy Maps," Karl said.

"Which galaxy?"

"This one, of course!"

"There's no need to get snippy," the attendant said. He pointed to the map and traced his finger along the list. "There it is. Office B-26/27. That's the basement."

"But it says those offices are the Division of Diagramming and the Compositional Architecture Commission."

"They consolidated." The clerk pointed over his left shoulder. "The elevators aren't reliable. You might want to take the stairs."

The stairwell's air was hot, damp, and pungent, like the unventilated showers at his high school gym. Karl stepped in gum on the landing and wrenched a muscle trying to lift his foot. He tried to scrape off as much as he could, but as he exited onto the slick linoleum his left shoe made a sticky suck as he walked. Just inside the office was a sign attached to a stand. It read: "Please fill out an Assessment Request (no exceptions!) and form ONE line."

Karl filled in Amanda's planet information again as well as where he'd searched for it. Under "Other Information" he wrote, "Went missing sometime Tuesday." The line
snaked around a group of tight switchbacks filled with dreary people. As he took his place at the end of the line, he asked the man at the front, "How long were you in line?"

"About an hour," he said. "But one of the clerks just went to lunch."

Karl was almost entirely numb from the waist down but he couldn't leave now. He may have finally found the department to locate Amanda's planet. He was terrified at the thought of never seeing her again and realized now he should have told her how much he loved her when he had the chance. He distracted himself while he waited by counting the holes in the ceiling panels and the petals in the flower design on the jacket of the woman in front of him.

When it was his turn, he stood at the window hopefully. As the clerk read his form, he said, "The planning department says they haven't moved her planet. But I used the latest navigation maps and it isn't there."

The clerk checked the box at the top of the form marked "Corrections/Errors." She typed some information into her database and a sheet printed out. She tore off the bottom portion and handed it to him.

"What's this?" he said.

"That's your receipt. We'll look into the error and make any applicable corrections. Thank you for bringing it to our attention and sorry for any inconvenience."

"So you'll find the planet?"

"We'll send an engineer to investigate your claim. Please use our automated service to check on the status of his findings. The reference number is on your receipt."

"How long will it take?"
She placed the sheet on a stack of papers behind her that was two feet high.

"Requests are processed in the order received."

"What? I can't wait for all those others to be processed. I have to find Amanda now!"

"I'm sorry, sir, we no longer offer expedited service."

"But you have to! Please, I'm begging you."

"Next!"

"I'm not done!" He slammed his fist on the counter. "Help me figure out where the planet went. Amanda's waiting for me. Don't you have engineers out there right now? Can't you call one of them?"

"That wouldn't be fair to the inquiries that came in ahead of yours."

Karl slammed his fist again, his voice rising. "I don't care about fair! Fuck fairness! Someone moved my girlfriend's planet and didn't even leave forwarding coordinates. What kind of galaxy is this? Is this any way to run things? Move planets around and not bother to change the signage? I want an explanation! These are people's lives you're interfering with. People are out there making plans based on the assumption that you fools know what you're doing. I should be able to leave my girlfriend to go get a dog battery and come back and not have her planet be moved. I shouldn't have to stand in lines and fill out forms and get no service whatsoever."

Karl was disoriented as two pairs of hands seized him by the shoulders, lifted him off his feet and hauled him out the door. They dragged him down the hallway, his heels gliding on the linoleum.
"I won't be treated this way!" Karl continued to rant but didn't resist the security guards carrying him. One of them was tall and strong, clearly doing most of the work. The other was slender and huffing, trying to keep up his end. They reached the double doors leading to the security station and banged through them without breaking their stride. They dropped Karl into a straight-backed wooden chair that reminded him of the kind he sat in at school. The strong guard sat at his desk as the other one swallowed some water. Karl was glad to be sitting, it was a relief on his feet and joints. His outburst had wore him out, he was unused to shouting. He felt relaxed, though he was still disturbed about losing Amanda. He wondered how long she would wait for him to return. Would she try to come find him?

The guard at the desk picked up a pencil and started to write. The other guard had recovered from his exertions and announced that he was going on his rounds. The first guard nodded without looking up. Karl supposed the guard was writing a ticket or a court summons. He'd probably have to pay a fine for causing a disturbance. He sat up straight to look at the paper. It was a crossword puzzle.

"Are you going to give me a ticket?" Karl asked.

"Ain't you had enough paperwork today? I got the impression you had." His voice was soft and untroubled. Unlike his partner, the effort of carrying Karl seemed to have had little effect on him. His large frame was at ease and he hadn't even perspired.

"It's not like me to have a tantrum," said Karl. "I was frustrated."

"Hell," the guard said, "it happens nearly every day. Bureaucracy can easily cause derangement, even in a sensible person."
"It's just that my girlfriend's planet was moved and I can't get anyone to help me find her. That's why I was yelling, I only want someone to tell me where it went."

"Is that all?" the guard looked up from his puzzle and scrutinized Karl. "You can't find it yourself?"

"I tried. I'm using the latest navigation maps and everything. Galaxy Planning says they didn't move it, but where is it, then?"

The guard laughed. "Galaxy Planning – at least half of the so-called planning they do is figuring out what already happened. Don't you know that all of space is expanding? Stuff is moving around all the time."

"But even sanitation didn't know where it is. Their route still listed it in that spot."

"Their route doesn't mean much. As long as they come back filled up with debris, they get paid." The guard pulled a large soft-cover book out of the bottom drawer and opened it on his desk. "Which one is it?" Karl pointed to Amanda's planet. "Did you look over here?" The guard pointed to a spot much further out than Karl had looked.

"You think it's way over there?" said Karl.

"Of course it is. You take the general direction of natural expansion and factor in aggravating components like this nearby supernova."

"But that system hasn't gone supernova yet."

"That doesn't mean it isn't aggravating stuff," the guard said. "Damn, boy, sounds like you need remedial training in space biology."

Karl sat back in his chair. He couldn't decide if he was embarrassed or elated. "Are you sure that's where I'll find it?"
"If it's not there, ask somebody. Find a parcel delivery service or a taco pod. They're pretty good at finding their way around. And get yourself a dynamic stellar atlas, the kind that adjusts automatically. That's helpful for people who don't know what they're doing."

The guard returned to his puzzle.

"So, that's it?" Karl said.

"Looks like it," said the guard.

Karl walked back to the dock. He was still tired from all the standing and sitting and walking, but he felt a little lighter now, knowing he would probably find Amanda. Maybe instead of asking to live together, he'd ask her to marry him. Would she marry a man who didn't know basic space expansion theory? He didn't want to be the type of husband who couldn't be allowed to run interplanetary errands because he might get flummoxed by an aggravating supernova on the way back. If he rationed his gaming budget, he might be able to afford an extension program expansion class. Then he could assure Amanda that he'd always find his way back to her, that there would be no more misplacement incidents, at least none that were his fault.

Karl boarded the bus and found a seat. He put his face as close to the window as he could without touching it and watched the view carefully. The cosmography advanced and receded as the bus swayed past.
It's possible to drown and yet be dry. It's a formal distinction, used by people who study this type of thing. Medical examiners and the like. It isn't the presence of water, but the absence of oxygen that kills you.

If submerged and unable to reach air, the terror of sucking water into the lungs is so great, you'll try to hold your breath as long as you can. This is simple instinct. Your brain won't allow you to surrender to the water until the last possible moment. You'll try to squeeze every bit of oxygen out of the air in your lungs, anticipating the moment it will be used up. It takes a lot of determination to pull the water in before that, purposefully.
Eventually, you go from voluntary apnea, choosing not to breathe, to involuntary apnea, incapable of breathing because there's no oxygen to be had. For most people, involuntary apnea causes a spasm that drags water into the mouth and down the windpipe. Some of it goes into the stomach, some into the lungs. It's a common misperception that drowning fills the lungs entirely. In fact, the lungs may take in only three ounces of water.

By this time, most of the drowning has already occurred. You may even be unconscious. But some people, maybe ten percent, have a laryngospasm. This occurs when the central nervous system responds to the water's presence on the vocal chords with an immediate contraction in the larynx. This contraction is so powerful, it completely seals off the throat and overpowers the breathing reflex. The laryngospasm suffocates you with no water ever touching the lungs. In this case, you suffer a "dry" drowning.

You can't know in advance if you'll experience a laryngospasm. Once in a while, someone survives a dry drowning, but there's never been a study to find out if these people will have the same response a second time. The phenomenon is impossible to predict.

I spent a lot of time wondering if I was a dry drowner or a wet drowner. I imagined that it was serene down there, especially in the clear water of the Van Norman reservoir, and that I'd sink into peace. But what if I didn't sink? How much weight would it take to make sure I didn't bob around on the surface like a denim-wrapped buoy? I
wore the same denim skirt when I went out. The top button at the waist had fallen off. I thought about replacing it every time I slid the skirt on, but I never did.

§

My parents were divorced and my father had a small apartment a few miles away. I lived in my mother's house as a sort of caretaker, though I didn't actually do anything. She had a reverse mortgage that required her to live in the house. My job was to maintain the pretense that she lived there while she was actually on an endless cruise. She'd travel from port to port and when one cruise ended, she'd find another and leave again immediately, sometimes without having to disembark.

She was convinced the finance company checked up on her, beyond the annual certification she signed to confirm her residence, so when anyone called for her, I said she was shopping, sleeping, playing bridge, at the garden club or hot air ballooning. That last one was my own idea.

In return, she let me live in the house rent free. More than that, she still paid the utilities and gardener with autopay. She was afraid that if I was on my own, I'd be homeless or worse. I think she believed that as long as I was there, in my childhood home and surrounded by my family's walls, I was safe.

I don't know where she got this idea. I was in more danger there than anywhere else. Within that house, I was stifled by memories of my potential, which I'd lost track of. My family had moved on with their lives, though my father's life hadn't moved on so
much as fluttered day to day. Once a college professor, his mind had left him. My sister had married a few times and the last time I'd heard from her she'd moved to Washington. Or maybe it was Idaho. Someplace green. And there I was, wandering around the house and rarely leaving it, pretending someone lived there, and if anyone asked who I was, I'd say, "I'm the house sitter."

§

I spent almost all of my time in the living room, on the sofa's right side, leaning my elbow on the high armrest and resting my feet on a small ottoman I picked up at the local senior center's Discovery Shop. Was it a sofa or a couch? I didn't know. I read that a sofa was nicer than a couch. Furniture stores advertised sofas. Classified ads featured couches. So what I had was a couch that had once been my mother's fancy linen sofa.

I could see the television and any shadows on the front door from there, but I couldn't be seen from the front window if anyone were to look in. As far as I knew, no one had ever looked in, but I wanted to be prepared. If someone came to the door, I didn't answer it unless it was someone I knew. Sometimes not then, either. For one thing, I wasn't always dressed, especially in the summer. But mostly it was because people bothered me. People who came to your door wanted to talk to you. They asked questions and expected you to answer them. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to anyone. Howard, my therapist, was an exception, but just barely.
From my spot on the sofa I'd watch television or read. Often I read many books at once, setting them around me and stacking them at my feet. My father had been a book lover and had collected a substantial library which I had added to when I inherited it. So when I had a question, such as "Which element do you use in high magic if you want to expel a demon?", or other useless trivia, I'd gather as many books as I could find and read through them, noting the relevant pages with slim sticky posts and making notes in my yellow spiral notebook. Eventually it would occur to me to look it up on the internet and I'd have what I needed within ten minutes or so, but it was never as satisfying. Scoping out an answer made it more real, more memorable, because I'd worked hard to find it in that sea of pages and words. Plus it gave me something to do.

§

I had a ridgeless Rhodesian Ridgeback to keep me company. He was quiet and somber, like me. I gave him a wicker bed with a big pillow in it. He chewed half of the rim off straight away, but I forgave him because he went through periods of extreme oral mania and only chewing for hours at a time satisfied him.

He was such a good friend, I sometimes forgot he was a dog. I enjoyed it there, just the two of us. Oliver had no schedule and made no demands on my time. He ate breakfast whenever I woke up, even if it was past noon. He ate dinner whenever I remembered to make it. If I stood in the back yard at midnight and watched the raccoons face off with the possums, he sat on the concrete patio with me, sometimes showing off
by sneaking up to the wall and snatching a critter as it passed. I'd try to get him to drop it before his teeth could do any damage, but I was successful only about half the time.

If I cried, as I usually did when I was drunk, he respected my privacy and looked the other way. If I was especially weepy and made a lot of noise, he sat in front of me and gently assured me there was still hope.

One of the questions I had to solve if I were to drown myself in the reservoir was what to do with Oliver? I'd have to find someone to take care of him. I didn't want to leave him with just anyone. It had to be someone who would love him and not scold him when he chewed obsessively. I considered taking him with me to the lake. I didn't know if he could swim or how he would feel about drowning. I read about a scientist who drowned dogs so he could watch their physiological responses. He described their terror. I didn't want Oliver to be terrorized.

Unlike me, Oliver greeted each day. One time I got up at four in the morning and though he seemed inconvenienced at first, he shook off his sleepiness and became instantly cheerful. He convinced me to improve my attitude that day. We were lucky to be alive and we should act like it. I couldn't keep it up, though. Most mornings, I woke up with the overwhelming sense that one more day would stack another slab of blackness on top of me, making it even harder to walk or even to lift my face to the sun for a brief moment.
Every Tuesday, I drove fourteen miles to see Howard, who had an office in Newhall. I drove a classic Cougar with no air conditioning, manual brakes and shoddy alignment. I used to take the freeway and brave the frantic lane changes to get around the trucks. I hated driving near big rigs and couldn't bear to have them behind me. A properly trained truck driver, when faced with a sudden obstacle in his path, such as a classic car stuck behind an idiot who hit his brakes for no reason, will attempt to slow his rig but will not swerve into an adjacent lane, even if it's empty. Switching lanes or hitting the brakes too forcefully can cause the rig to jackknife. There's less destruction if the rig plows into the car in its path than if the driver loses control of the rig and jackknifes. I didn't want to be the sap with eighteen wheeler tire treads on my back.

Sure enough, one day there was a collision involving a truck. I was trapped in the traffic between exits and funneled into a two lane detour around the crash site. I'd seen the reservoir before, obviously. I'd passed it countless times over the years, but always at high speed. This was the first time I really looked at it. It was much wider and deeper than I'd realized. The surface was cerulean, its ripples animated the sun's reflection. A lone seagull, probably stranded after following the marine layer inland before it swiftly evaporated, sat on the perimeter fence. Its cries were alternately plaintive and menacing.

As I neared the collision, I was surprised by an intense lemon aroma. The truck had been hauling lemons and they'd been thrown from the hold and scattered across the highway. The impact with the asphalt and subsequent crush under the tires of passing vehicles had released their scent. Most people had their windows up, so only I seemed to
be aware that the exhaust of the cars and trucks had parted to allow that fragrance to hold court.

§

I stayed off the freeway after that and took the Old Road exclusively. It snaked around and below the freeway and was a less frenetic drive with better scenery. After weaving around a wood lot and the entrance to the Sunshine Canyon Landfill, the Old Road abruptly turned a sharp right to climb uphill about two hundred feet before it became Balboa Boulevard and dropped into the Valley.

The base road lost its name and continued on beneath the freeway overpass and beside the reservoir. In the shade of the overpass, there was a small triangle of dirt, sparse with grass, with room for only one car to pull off and park. A square wooden sign was there, nailed to a set of generic lumber posts. It was an official city sign, but other than the replacement of the posts, hadn't been maintained since it was put there in the seventies.

Until I pulled over to look at that sign, I didn't know that the reservoir was called the Upper Van Norman Lake. There was no Lower Van Norman Lake, as far as I knew, unless you counted plain old Van Norman Lake, which was a real lake in Michigan. The Upper Van Norman Lake wasn't really a lake. A lake was a place you took your family to picnic and swim and maybe do some fishing. You could look at Van Norman, but you couldn't get close to it, couldn't touch it.
I had heard a story once from a friend of a friend who'd sneaked in and gone swimming. She said there was a spot where the fence was weak and that patrols were infrequent. The water was fresh and cool, she said, and smelled like rain water.

The Los Angeles Aqueduct began way up at Mono Lake, which was devastated by the aqueduct's construction, and Owens Lake, which was obliterated by it. The map showed a blue outline for what had been Owens Lake, now the source of magnum dust storms that choked the people who lived nearby on what had once been thriving farm land. It didn't say anything about the devastation and dust storms on the map, of course.

The aqueduct used gravity and momentum to transport the water South until it reached the Cascades, a lovely word and even lovelier experience to watch. The water bounced down a studded flume that aerated it and kept it traveling at the appropriate speed into the reservoir. At the lake, it went through six feet of anthracite coal to consolidate dirt and whatever else it picked up along its journey before it headed off to houses like mine.

A lot of people refused to drink municipal tap water, they thought it was unsafe, full of impurities and bad for the health, but I'd seen where it came from and it was beautiful to me, pale and perfect.

§

One night my mother called to say that she had agreed to let cousin JuJu Bean live at the house until she got back on her feet. JuJu's fiance had thrown her out and
she'd been living month to month until recently, when she filed for bankruptcy. Her full name was Julia Beatrice, but her younger brother couldn't pronounce "Julia" properly when he first learned to talk and soon everyone else used the name JuJu, too, including JuJu herself. I don't know where the Bean came from.

The morning after my mother's call, JuJu arrived to inspect her room with a boyfriend in tow. He had pale eyes the color of a Sparklett's water bottle, a soft blue that calmed and excited me at the same time. I don't like the color blue, but it's soothing in eyes and water. I made an effort not to stare.

JuJu introduced him as Elton, but as she surveyed the house, which she hadn't been inside since she was a toddler waving Christmas ribbons from room to room, he said to me, "It's Abe." He said it quietly, as if he were afraid to correct her. His hair was so short I could see the freckles on his scalp. Oliver lurked behind him, just out of his sight, and wandered away after one unsatisfying sniff at his pant cuff.

JuJu seemed both younger and older than her twenty-five years. She had agile energy and a dancer's body that glided across the floor. Her eyes reminded me of a weary old man I once saw in a nursing home feigning interest in his tapioca pudding.

She wanted to cram as much of her stuff into the guest room as possible to save on storage fees. "This room is too small," she said.

"I thought you were only staying a little while?" I said.

"Yeah. I guess it'll do for now." She plopped onto the bed. "Jesus! This thing is a rock!"
As I watched JuJu massage her lower back, I knew that the proper response in this situation was probably to apologize for having a crappy bed in the guest room. But then it'd seem like she was my guest and she wasn't. I didn't invite her and didn't even want her there.

"You could get a memory foam for the mattress," said Abe.

JuJu looked at him as if the sound of his voice astonished her. For a moment he'd looked as if he had a whole conversation of words in his mouth, but he swallowed and retreated to the hallway. He seemed like a nice guy. I thought it was a shame she treated him like decoration.

"We never have guests," I said. It felt stupid to say "we" when I was the only one who lived there, but it was a habit. "I guess Mom chose the cheapest one."

JuJu nodded and took some measurements. "You know me, I can make anything work."

A few days later, JuJu returned in her perky compact car, followed by another young man in a van. Oliver followed me out and we watched as the young man unloaded her stuff onto the lawn as she cursed at him. I think she may have made up some of the curses, because I'd never heard them before. It's a rare talent to invent a workaday curse.

"Don't carry anything," she said to me after he'd driven off. "I'll do it all. I don't want to impose on you."
I appreciated that consideration, though she was already imposing just by being there. I couldn't read JuJu. She had the ability to blend normal speech and sarcasm seamlessly. "Where's Abe?" I asked.

"Who?" she said.

"Elton. Isn't he coming to help you?"

"Oh never mind him." I would later discover that JuJu had an infinite carousel of attractive young men who shifted in and out of her sphere as needed. She was a quick change artist of boyfriends. I stopped trying to remember their names and called them all "Fella."

"Come here, Ollie," she called, slapping her knees. Oliver turned away and inspected his butt. He could be self-absorbed and seem cavalier about people's feelings, which was rude and probably the result of living with me. I had the same character flaw.

I felt a little awkward about not helping, but not enough to actually help, so I went inside to my spot and watched cable news. There was a protest in London I was following for no particular reason. After a while I realized she had been carrying in far more stuff than the van guy could have deposited on the lawn. Apparently a second vehicle had arrived and yet another young man was unloading it for her.

JuJu was appalled that I didn't have wireless internet, only an old router and several very long cables. "Nobody has wires anymore," she said. I felt ridiculous for not being more modern. We ran a cable to her bedroom and taped it down so we wouldn't trip over it. Her presence made me look at the house with a new perspective, as an
outsider would. It was unnerving. JuJu had brought the real world with her, reminding me how much I avoided it.

Although JuJu was annoyingly energetic, she turned out to be less of an imposition than I expected. She was gone most of the time and when she came home, she went straight to bed and could sleep through an earthquake. She worked for an accountant during the day and tended bar at a low-rent strip club several nights a week. Sometimes she'd be getting up as I was considering going to bed. And although the Fellas came by the house sometimes, she courteously fucked them elsewhere.

§

Just off the foyer was a room my family had mostly used as a dining room. Before my father's mind became addled and he lost both his job at the university and my mother, he used to meet visitors from other universities and sometimes from newspapers there. It was formal and unfussy, the type of room my mother assumed academics would feel relaxed in. She never met with her friends there. All of her friends came in through the back door and mingled in the kitchen, especially after the divorce, where she had spent all of her time before leaving for her perpetual cruise.

I now used the table to hold all the newspapers and mail I never opened. Every few days, I'd go to the end of the driveway and collect the newspapers at the curb and empty the mailbox. They won't deliver mail if the box is completely full. I tried setting a basket at the base but the postman refused to put any overflow into it. Instead he left a
note referring me to section SPUSPS-STD-7B01 of the postal regulation, which he said I could find online, regarding approved mailboxes. I resolved to make a better effort to get out there and pick up the mail more often, at least every third day.

When I brought the mail in, I'd set it on the dining table. The stack grew and grew, yellowing newspapers and flyers and junk mail and real mail, until it threatened to spill over the side. That's when I knew it was time to go through it and throw away the papers and junk mail and look at the real mail. Once in a while I'd open some and read it, too.

I began to sense that the pile disturbed JuJu, so one day I cleared it away and relocated it to my bedroom bureau. I was pleased with myself for that accomplishment. It was the first time the table had been empty in a long time. I'd stacked the miscellaneous stuff that had been on the bureau, empty shoe boxes, magazines, an old jewelry box, on the floor. I thought I should look inside the jewelry box and see if anything good was in there. I had no place to wear jewelry, but it might be fun to look at it.

When I returned to the dining room to admire the clear space I'd made, I was shocked to see the table set. JuJu had found place mats in the hutch and set two places. She carried the salt and pepper shakers from the kitchen. "Want some shrimp? I'm making enough for two."

I hadn't even heard her come home and she'd already revived the family dining table. As we ate, she told me about her job at the strip club. "At first I was going to dance there, but one of the girls told me how much she makes during the week. Only certain
girls get the weekends. It's pitiful. No way am I showing my junk for that kind of money."

"Like how much?" I asked.

"Maybe a hundred. It's a dump. I'm hoping to get promoted to executive assistant to the head accountant in a few weeks. Then I can quit the club. How's the shrimp? Not too spicy?"

"No, I love spicy." The shrimp was overcooked, but I didn't say anything. "The rice is good, too. I like the butter in there."

"You can taste that?"

"Sure. I have a sensitive palate."

"Wow." She seemed genuinely impressed, which flattered me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd impressed someone.

§

My friend, Belle, had introduced me to Howard. He'd counseled her and her husband for a while, and then just her. He was always composed and relaxed, which Belle told me wasn't as common in a mental health professional as someone might expect. He had a thin grey braid about three inches long in the back, but was otherwise ordinary.

I arrived one day for our usual session to find colored pencils on the table. When I sat down, Howard handed me a sketch pad.
"Draw a rose bush," he said.

"I'm not an artist."

"It doesn't matter," he said.

My rose bush sat on a mountain top, surrounded by water on all sides. On one side of the mountain it was day, with a bright, cheerless sun. The other side of the mountain had a crescent moon and one star. The rose buds were just on the cusp of blooming. When I finished, I showed it to him and he handed it back to me.

"The rose bush is you," he said.

"What do you mean, me?"

"You drew yourself when you drew the bush," he said.

"What does it mean?" I asked. I hadn't told Howard about the reservoir, though I'd told him months ago that I thought about killing myself. He hadn't asked about it recently. My psychiatrist had made me write and sign a note that promised I'd call her before doing anything, which I had no intention of honoring.

"Tell me what you see in your drawing," he said.

I told him it looked like I was alone, which was true. But also that I had nice buds, which was surely a good thing?

On the way home, I rolled down the window as I passed the reservoir to smell the water. The breeze lifted my drawing off the passenger seat and pressed it flat against the seat back. I bought a sketch pad and crayons from the children's section of the dollar store and a few nights later, I decided to do some drawing after a few glasses of vodka.
When I looked them over the next day, I only remembered drawing the first one, Oliver in his wicker bed. The next one was a forest with one red tree. After that, there were drawings of some sunflowers bent at the neck, an ordinary house facade, and a perplexing aerial view of a mountainside half cleared by logging in a checkerboard type pattern. I'm pretty sure I saw that once from an airplane as I passed over Oregon.

The last drawing was entirely black. I had worn the black crayon to a pitiful nub by filling the paper with waxy scratches. It was undeniably creepy. Even Oliver looked away. I put the sketch pad on one of my shelves next to the velvet box I kept my childhood pet's ashes in.

That's probably enough drawing, I thought. Maybe I'll try a jigsaw puzzle next time I need something to do with my hands.

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Many days later, I thought I understood why I'd drawn the logging scene. I'd remembered my seventh birthday party.

My mother had decided to throw a party for me but didn't take into account that my birthday was in the Summer, when all my friends were on vacation with their families. I waited at the front window for people to arrive, watching the driveway with the same intensity I watched for the garbage collectors. In those days, the garbage was still picked up by "garbage men." One man drove the truck, and one or more men hung off the side, hopping down to pick up the bins, which we called cans, and toss the
contents into the back of the truck. For some reason, I was obsessed with the idea that we'd been forced to put out something we'd desperately need later, and the garbage men were thieving bullies. I got a sensation like the wave of a harp in my groin when I saw them coming for our trash.

When I realized no one was going to show up for my party, I pressed against the wall until my disappointment had been squeezed from my face. My mother decided we should go to Busch Gardens, the Anheuser-Busch Brewery Park, which was two blocks from our house. I remembered little about the park itself. I was told there was a bird show and I had a vague memory of the man-made lake and of the stink of hops on the brewery tour. The tour went around the park on a high monorail, across the lake and through the middle of the brewery itself.

One of the park's main attractions was a log ride that also followed a raised track, a flume of water. I didn't really understand the log ride. Why a log? Where did people hollow out logs to ride them in raised streams? How were logs related to beer and birds? My father could answer none of these questions.

I was frequently a frightened child, cautious and suspicious of everything. The main thrill of the log ride was anticipation for the final drop, which ended in a suitably wet splash. I watched the logs drop numerous times before agreeing to wait in line.

The air was very cool near the log ride because of the water. Maybe the rushing sound made it seem cooler than it was. The ride itself was unremarkable. Most of the excitement happened at the beginning and end. First the log defied gravity and climbed uphill against the rapids as the water pounded its nose. I knew there was a mechanical
system beneath the water, but still found it intriguing. After that, our log bumped along and thumped me against the side, kicking water in my face.

As we came around the final turn, the big finish waited for us, a steep drop that burst into the shallow lagoon at the bottom. I heard people's screams long before I could see it. Just before the drop, there was a red and blue canopy with the Anheuser-Busch logo that provided a few brief feet of shade before each log disappeared below. To one side of the track was a small landing with a man stationed in a chair next to the railing. A child's life is governed by adults and their rules, so I assumed he was an official monitor who made sure riders were sitting in the logs correctly. Perhaps he was.

As the log before us approached him, one of the guys inside it stood up with a terrified cry. His friends were so startled, they didn't even try to keep him from toppling over, which he nearly did. He leapt toward the landing and into the arms of the monitor, who received him with an air of calm utility and helped him get both legs over the railing. His friends, baffled, were forced to go over without him. He was safe. He stood blinking and looking around as if he couldn't believe there was solid wood under his feet. As we passed, the monitor comforted him, "You're fine now."

What I remember most about that day, aside from the image of that guy leaping to the safety of the landing, was the revelation that you didn't have to go over the drop. You could "opt out," as we say these days. Prior to that, I thought you had to stay the course in everything. Once decided, no deviating. But that wasn't true. You could quit. Right up to the last second, you could quit.
A few years later, the park closed. The brewery remained, but the rides were dismantled, the birds were set free and the lake was filled in for a parking lot. Only a short, covered portion of the monorail tracks still stood, about the length of a semi-trailer, inexplicably left to pose on stilts in the parking lot as a bridge from the past to nowhere.

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I told Howard about the log ride and he asked if I felt like "opting out" because I was afraid of the drop.

"It's not a drop," I said.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's an eddy. It's a spiral of blackness leading further and further down, and I can't swim out of it and there's no one on the side to pull me to safety. Soon I'll have sunk so far that I'll be submerged and I'll be gone. The anticipation of the end is what's killing me. I can't stand it anymore. I can quit. I can suck the blackness in now and surrender. It can be over."

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The day after Daylight Savings began and the evening was still light and warm, JuJu asked me to answer the door while she finished changing her clothes. It was Abe.
"Hey, look, it's me again," he said. "Did you wonder where I'd gone?"

I hadn't wondered where he went. I'd forgotten about him until I saw his blue eyes again. With the sun at his back, they were a darker shade of blue than I remembered.

"We're going over to the college and sneak through the fence. They have an Olympic sized pool. Wanna come?"

"I don't really swim," I said.

"I can teach you," he said.

"I know how to swim, I just don't do it. I keep to the sides where I can hold on."

JuJu came to the door and as they left, I said, "Actually, I'm terrified of water."

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BENJAMIN IS GOING PLACES

It was just after Monday morning's Pledge of Allegiance when Benjamin noticed a stranger enter his classroom at Brooks Elementary School. As the class handed their homework up the aisle, Benjamin turned around in his chair to grab Aaron Yates's paper off the desk since Aaron sat daydreaming as usual. Benjamin's mother had told him not to stare at people, but it was hard not to stare at this strange man. The long points of his collar stuck out over the lapel of his dark jacket, and his white socks were absurdly white between his black pants and black shoes. New people hardly ever came to town. He couldn't understand how his classmates appeared so uninterested in the stranger, and even acted as if they couldn't see him. Benjamin couldn't stop staring. He knew that he was often too interested in other people and their business, or at least that's what his father said. But
everyone in Perdido was interested in other people's business. There was little else to do. Perdido was a small, rural town, so small that residents had to take their own trash to the community bins. An unknown person was generally met with a lot of interest.

Yet no one gave any attention to the man who stood at the back of the room and leaned on the art supply cupboard next to the sink, not even Shelley Zucker, who always kept an eye on the cupboard. She was known to eat paste.

Miss Maryland collected the homework papers as they arrived at the front row of the class, smoothing out the ones with wrinkles. Some kids always had wrinkled homework, Benjamin did about half the time, but not that day. She patted the papers into a neat stack and then tossed them onto her desk. If there were any announcements, which there hardly ever were, she would read them now, but today she stood at the front of the class and swept her eyes over the students. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. This usually preceded a lecture about how none of them had performed well on yesterday's test, or maybe how they made too much noise when they came into the classroom. Miss Maryland turned and wrote her name on the board in careful strokes. It would be a lecture about poor penmanship. She, too, ignored the man at the back of the room.

"Now, young people, I want you to look at my name on the board and notice the attention I have given to each stroke. We must all be attentive when we join our letters. A shocking amount of carelessness has been going on."

The man removed a small notepad from an inside pocket and flipped it open. Maybe that's why Miss Maryland won't look at him, he thought. Maybe he's here to watch her. Some older kids said teachers were sometimes tested, too, and that some of them even
cried afterward and had to go home for the day, and then never came back. The man put his hand back into the pocket and held it open to look inside as if he’d expected to find something in there and was shocked to see it empty. He searched each of his pockets, first on one side and then on the other and each time he withdrew an empty hand and fiddled with the notepad. He felt behind each ear and finally looked down at a small pocket on the front of his trousers. It was a very small pocket and he could only fit two fingers inside to fish around. When he withdrew them a small piece of string fell out and Benjamin watched the man watch the string fall slowly to the floor. The man held the notepad in one hand and tapped it against the palm of his other hand in an easy, measured cadence. He had no pencil.

Miss Maryland told the class to write their names fifteen times and to not be careless. Benjamin opened his pencil case, a birthday present from an uncle he’d never met, that had contained five pencils with his name and an affirmation on each one in a different color. "Benjamin is smart." "Benjamin is tidy." "Benjamin is friendly." "Benjamin excels." Only one pencil was left, it was the one with shiny red lettering: "Benjamin is going places."

When Miss Maryland was satisfied that the students hadn't been careless with their letters, she resumed the usual morning lessons of math and spelling. Benjamin was not good at either math or spelling so he wrote and erased, and then wrote and erased again many times. Soon his pencil was dull. As he headed to the pencil sharpener mounted on the wall he tried not to stare at the man, who had put his foot up on a box full of last week's science projects and tapped the notepad on his knee, still in the same cadence.
Benjamin inserted his pencil and focused on the grinding, withdrawing once to check the sharpness of the tip and reinserting it to grind further. He pulled out his pencil and blew off the dusty shavings. The man had stopped tapping and now stared directly at Benjamin, his hand with the notebook suspended in the air above his knee as if he were posing.

Benjamin felt that staring at the man was allowed now, because the man had initiated the staring and therefore could not denounce it. The man had cool, placid eyes and was very good at staring, so good he would surely win a staring contest, for he hardly blinked. The man broke away from Benjamin's eyes and looked intently at Benjamin's pencil. Benjamin didn't mind the man staring at him, that was expected to happen once in a while, but he did mind the man staring at his pencil because he knew that a man with a notepad and no pencil is likely to steal someone else's. There were plenty of pencils in the supply closet, plain gray pencils with "Bertram Brand" stamped in yellow, but Benjamin was certain the man wanted his pencil by the way he looked at it. He didn't want to lose his last birthday pencil.

He walked back to his desk, looking over his shoulder a couple of times. He was annoyed that everyone else pretended the man wasn't even there. Was it a joke on him? He wanted to ask the other students, but he'd been in trouble three times already this month for talking out of turn in class. He tried to concentrate on his work but really his attention was on his pencil. Usually he left his pencil in his pencil case when they went out to the playground, but today he took it with him. As they left the room in single file, (Miss
Maryland opposed disorderly lines), Benjamin made certain the man saw him slide his pencil into his front belt loops. Let him steal someone else's.

Out on the playground, Benjamin joined a group of boys and intended to ask them why the man was there and why everyone but him knew to pretend he wasn't there at all. But they were already deep in a discussion about why Miss Maryland was fixated on penmanship.

William Connors said, "I'm telling you, she's got bad eyesight, that's why she's always on us about it. She doesn't want to wear glasses."

"No, it's all got to do with nervousness," said Aaron. "My dad told me all about it."

"Your dad doesn't know anything about women, Yatesy, that's why your mom left."

Benjamin put his hand on the pencil in his belt loops. He felt bad for whoever was going to lose theirs. "She probably just wanted to make a good impression," he said. "In case it was on the test. But she doesn't have to worry because he couldn't write anything down."

The other boys turned and gaped at him.

Aaron said, "You don't make any sense."

Benjamin thought this was incredibly rude because Aaron Yates hardly ever made sense, he was too daydreamy, so he really couldn't say what made sense and what didn't.

Benjamin said, "I want to know why, if we're not supposed to look at all, he's allowed to just stare and stare?"

"Who?" they asked.

Miss Maryland called to them. "Don't just stand there boys. Find an activity."
They were not allowed to just stand on the playground. They had to have an activity, like dodge ball or tag. Benjamin joined a dodge ball game and did well for the first ten minutes, but was distracted when the man came out of the classroom and stood near a tree on the other side of the benches. Distracting him during math was bad enough, but interrupting dodge ball was too much. Benjamin dodged north when he should have dodged west and the ball slammed into his back between the shoulder blades. He fell to the ground face first, which didn't surprise him because he often dodged the wrong way and fell onto his face. His pencil fell out of his loops.

The playground was slanted, (a fact that made marbles especially problematic), and Benjamin's pencil rolled toward the benches. He jumped up quickly but he was not as quick as he should have been and the pencil got ahead of him. The man watched it roll and stepped away from the tree and stood closer to the benches, waiting for it.

Benjamin ran as fast as he could and just as the pencil reached the benches, he slid down on one knee and snatched it up. He held it triumphantly, swiped at the asphalt dust on his clothes and put the pencil back in his loops. The man smiled and appeared to laugh, but no sound came out. His teeth were very white, almost as absurdly white as his socks, like the teeth of people on billboards.

The rest of the afternoon the man stood outside the open door of the classroom, where he could see Benjamin clearly and Benjamin could see him. The man kept the same inscrutable billboard smile painted on his face. Benjamin was now almost sure that the man was not here to test Miss Maryland, and in fact had nothing to do with Miss Maryland at all, but he couldn't be completely sure. He had heard stories from older kids who'd had Miss
Maryland before and they said that sometimes she would pretend something was not important but then later say that it was. She was known to be deceitful. It was possible she intended to test the class to see if they could recall details about him, like the memory games she gave them on rainy days when they couldn't go out to the playground for lunch. Benjamin felt he would do well on such a test.

As he walked home after school Benjamin checked behind him many times, certain that the man wouldn't give up. But he never saw him. Of course that doesn't mean anything, he thought, because everyone knows where I live, and it would be easy to find me. I live in the only house in town with a big red apple painted on the front door and around here nobody lives anyplace that everyone else doesn't know about.

He went into the house and removed his pencil from the case to look at it. He found his grandmother sitting in the hallway between the front room and the kitchen. She was superstitious about sitting near the windows.

"Grandma, a man came to the school today and stared at me and tried to swipe my pencil. I'm telling Mom and Dad."

"Gone to the Blue Exchange," she answered.

Everyone in town called the community trash bins the Blue Exchange, but his grandmother always whispered the words and wouldn't explain why. She was also afraid to go there, and she wouldn't explain that, either.

"I'm not letting him get my pencil, this is my birthday pencil. It has my name on it and it's my last one. See my name on it, Grandma?"

"Gone to the Blue Exchange."
Benjamin kept his pencil beside his dinner plate that evening.

"How'd your face get scuffed, sport?" his dad asked.

"I dodged west when I should have dodged north. Or maybe it was the other way around, I don't remember. A man was eyeing my pencil."

"I don't think dodge ball is a suitable game for children," his mother said.

"It's my birthday pencil, too," Benjamin said. "My last one. I'm not letting him get it."

"Don't give up!" his grandmother blurted.

When Benjamin cleared his plate from the table and scraped the unwanted peas into the trash, he saw that the bin was full, so his grandmother was mistaken about the Blue Exchange. No one had gone yet.

Before climbing into bed, Benjamin set his pencil case on the desk, with his pencil beside it, and made sure the window was latched shut. He waited at the window for a long time but he didn't see anything, not the man lurking, as he thought he might, or anything else of interest. A ficus tree cast a long moon shadow onto the grass.

He fell asleep quickly but woke up several hours later to a cool breeze. The man's cunning shadow rose on the wall and then receded. Benjamin sat upright and looked to his desk where the moonlight reflected off his pencil case, but not his pencil. His birthday pencil was gone!

He jumped up and ran to the window, wide open when it should have been closed because Benjamin had latched it, he was sure. Outside, the man stood on the grass with a
moonlit smile and held Benjamin's pencil. He flipped open his notepad and wrote in it with a whisper, "Benjamin is going places."

Benjamin gasped and yelled, "He has it! He has my pencil! He came right in my own room and stole it!"

The man turned and walked across the lawn, twirling the pencil. Benjamin hoisted himself up and leapt out to follow him, his feet slipping on the moist grass. The man headed down the dirt road that led away from Benjamin's house, and while Benjamin ran as fast as he could, it seemed that the man was always the same distance ahead, even though he appeared to be walking. Benjamin persisted even as he grew tired and he followed the man until they were nearly at the edge of town, quite near the Blue Exchange. The man stopped and Benjamin caught up to him. His legs were weak and he sat down in the dirt. The man stood over him. As Benjamin looked up, he felt as if he were spinning. A bright light, wide and white like the moon filled his vision and his pencil pierced the center of it, rolling between the man's fingers. He could hear the man's laughter now. Benjamin reached for his pencil but couldn't grab it. It teased his fingertips, leading him farther and farther away until he couldn't feel anything except the moon surrounding him.

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