

ANIMAL KINGDOM

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STORIES

BY

ALEX BEHR

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ANIMAL KINGDOM

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ANIMAL KINGDOM

Also by Alex Behr

Planet Grim: Stories

Grief Stick

For Eli and Chris

If we used too much soap, we'd get shiny and stars would come off our bodies.

—Eli Hall

Bodies are hideous and fantastic.

—Chris Hartman

In a Dream You Saw a Way to Survive and You Were Full of Joy

—Jenny Holzer

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ANIMAL KINGDOM

Humans

A LEATHER CHAIR IS tipped over in the cluttered bedroom. A divorce relic. Lover Monster opens a cedar trunk and shows me the rare coins and a great-grandfather's Army coat. An aquarium burbles with goldfish. No plastic castles or mermaids. I'm alone with the tall man. Under his flannel sheets with a tuxedo cat at the foot. Snow falls outside the Seattle window. He's my husband but not legally. In a cathedral, we'd consecrated our marriage with silent vows and strings tied around each other's fingers.

Now: the burying. My face on his thigh, smelling at the edge where it meets the pelvic bone. Breathing through mildew—what we cut away—babbling and reserving a soft moment. That lust revealed by a checkered vintage shirt—ripped along its smaller rip—shredded through the worn thread, loomed and ironed and dyed and washed and dried. Ripped along the front where the buttons once had purpose: now dangling in a strip. The scabs and those years of spacing out. The pounding that led to spaced-out awareness. Lover Monster wants to feel where my bones fit together.

Three decades earlier, in 1989, I'd met Lover Monster at the San Francisco Auto Repair. A gloom of oil and metal unrest. I was twenty-four to his thirty, and my Plymouth Valiant had a cracked rear brake cylinder. Pushbutton transmission. Fog and mercy and sex. He drove me to the wave organ, a jetty of marble graves played by seawater curves. Six-four in boots.

He said, “Don’t seek out the things that hurt you.” On Dolores Street he shut my door.

Lover Monster disappears for three decades. I worry before we meet in person. How will we feel about our aging, the wearing down of skin and tone? He assures me, “Our bodies have changed, but not the basic mathematics of your elbow. I look at you and parts of you resonate with this fundamental part of what I want to see in a partner.” We become inseparable.

He never forgot our connection in a small room on Dolores Street, my bass amp in the corner, a tabby hiding under the tub. He writes, of his love, “It’s like a string vibrating, making a silent sound that I remember from then. That sound from deep when I’m against the wall and the sky splits open and my arms fall off.”

In June of 2020, Lover Monster transfers job locations and moves into my Portland home with my feral teen and me. All the car tools. His tuxedo cat. The engineering books. A motorcycle helmet. Sparkplugs and feathers. Even his worn-out teddy bear. He plants a Japanese maple in our backyard, and we pick wild berries.

At night he puts a pillow between his legs because he is sixty, and his muscles sometimes clench. He pulls at his thighs to release them.

His forearm to his fingertips puzzles my hip bone to my knee cap.

That summer of 2020 I want my days off with Lover Monster. Bam. Focusing on the wound and the need. Sucking on it. Sucking on the need and the open mouth. The hard nub. The urge to hide.

Remember friends? Ambition? His need for speed. Like the bore kit on his motorcycle: he’s sexy, hot, and wild.

And he gets sick on a Friday. He’s had tremors, loss of peripheral vision, and a disturbing MRI test. He holds a coffee cup and his grip loosens. It shatters on the sidewalk. We go to ER on a September day with skies yellow from forest fires. He walks in through the automatic doors. He leaves with me, twelve days later, unable to walk on his own.

Nurse tells us, “He only has three months to live.”

Nurse tells us, “By the time he dies his brain will look like Swiss cheese.”

Nurse tells us, “You two are so cute.”

I watch, appalled, as he goes through spinal taps and other tests that confirm the inevitable: he’s dying of sporadic Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a variation of mad cow.

A man who just a week before had kayaked with me can no longer touch his finger to his nose without shaking. No cure. Relentless and fatal.

Bats and Humans

In rural Connecticut, bats emerge from the attic of my godmother’s mansion with its peeling wallpaper and unusable tubs. The shadowy disturbances head downhill toward the lake. The brown bats devour flying insects. The females return to suckle their babies in the rafters.

Bats, if loose indoors, risk getting whacked. They roost down the hall from the room hosting a tiger, its head stuffed with sawdust. It’s close to a cabinet with fishing lures and two human skulls, blackened and discolored, and two thigh bones, relics from Yale’s Skull and Bone Society. One severed, mummified hand is saved in a Tupperware container. Abandoned and menacing. A colonial crime. And in the sunlit dining room, a desiccated bat rests on a china plate.

Humans

In the neuro wing I stay with Lover Monster and line empty juice boxes on the windowsill. He wakes in fear, forgetting his legs are strapped to the bed. “Where’s the half of me?”

Nurse says, “He will have good days and bad. He won’t be the same person a month from now.”

Lover Monster tells me the symptoms started a year ago December. “It happens when you see the edge. Like in a mirror, like a reflection.”

“That was what you thought was the disease?” I ask.

“I don’t think so. It’s the glass bending.”

“Are you suffering?” I ask.

“A little bit.”

“Would marrying me for real ease your suffering?”

“Yes.”

Reptiles, Amphibians, and Pink Mice

From Lover Monster, in a letter to me: “My stepdad Smitty was into frogs and lizards. He had his own room in our farmhouse on Queen Anne Hill. The room was full of shelves with Suriname toads, emerald tree frogs, an iguana, and other creatures. To feed these animals he raised crickets, mealworms, and mice. The crickets often escaped and made their way downstairs, chirping from under the kitchen sink. Most of the amphibians would only eat pink mice, the babies, and they were the saddest creatures.”

Humans

From Lover Monster, in a letter to me: “In grade school, Mom would go to the neighborhood drug store and get a box of paper valentine cards. Everyone in the class did the same, writing each person’s name on the card or envelope. There was always one girl I wanted to give me one, and I tried to do something secret to hers, hoping she saw it and felt the same. You are that girl.”

To Lover Monster, in a letter from me: “I don’t feel I deserve anything, but I hope so much to have our thing deepen: you, an only child, and me, a brainy misfit attracted to bad boys. You’re the reformed bad boy with a sweet tooth who’s not afraid of my intensity. Crawling across the floor to you, lighting matches, smelling my way until you grab me and we bite.”

From Lover Monster, in a letter to me: “You have tried to find me for your whole life, but you didn’t know it was me. I am the idea you wished could be real.”

Bats and Frogs

Fringe-lipped bats tune into mating frogs. The male frogs wait in shallow water and croak to attract females, and as the water ripples, the bats find the frogs through echolocation. The louder the frogs croak, the more they are in mortal peril. The fringe on the bats' mouths neutralizes the toxins on the frogs' skins. As a child, Lover Monster writes a story about a frog prince. As the happily ever after, the princess kisses the frog and turns into one.

Humans

Friends in masks help me set up the house for the invalid man, clearing out junk from the bedroom, installing metal bed railings, drilling holes for banisters on the stairway. I hang a bell on the bedroom doorknob. Lover Monster can't be left alone because he might fall. It's COVID times and if he breaks a limb, he'll be taken away and die alone. If I'm downstairs, I can rush upstairs to help him at the bell's bright clang.

The urge increases to suck on lemon drops and to measure time in the soft belly. What gurgles mean what?

The speeding of the misfolded proteins in Lover Monster's brain. Spreading the disease. Ribboning his cortex. Only two weeks before: hands folded. Stroking my hair. Gripping a steering wheel all day in the big truck. Waiting to—We peel it off. Now his right foot dances. His left hand pulses.

Lover Monster is too scared at first to tell me of his mania, when he was lost teen, kicked out of his home, sleeping in the streets. He confesses his fear that I wouldn't love him. But I'd guessed his mental unrest already, years ago.

He says, "You are a goddess in my totally fucked mind."

Lover Monster sees black spots and dribbles food on the sheets. The spinning ceiling fan frightens him.

I hire my ex-husband to help me care for the big man. Seeing him lie in the bed that used to be his. Not knowing what the tongue did. And the hands and the wrapping. That big mess.

Drooling on the sheets. Biting and sweating happy. Now, I sweat fear and pencils.

Lover Monster says to me, when we're alone, "We made something from nothing. I want us to be back to being whole. I'm twisted sideways. I want us to be whole. Complete. Healthy."

I slow-dance him to the bathroom.

Bats

My godmother has arranged the dead bat on the dish. Its wings are folded in like a capital *M*, with the body splayed and distorted. The bats roost in the attic and the guano falls on the wooden floor, but this little bat corpse decorates a floral plate.

Bats have damaged caves and wrecked habitats. Distorted migration patterns. Dying off with white fungus on their dumb little mouths. Bats with their radar, bats with their rabies. Tick-laden bats. They're killed for magic, as symbols of death and rebirth.

Humans and Pathogens

In the neuro wing, the doctors walk in as our Gloom Team. Lover Monster wakes, attached to IVs and monitors and straps that keep his legs in place. He says to me, "Navigating the forests, you have to make room for clocks."

Some believe COVID-19 originated with bats and, through an intermediary animal, entered humans. Bats have ancestral viruses. Some think COVID-19 can inflame sections of the brain and activate the dormant prion disease that is killing Lover Monster.

The fluff on Lover Monster's head. The long tongue. Before the sickness, Lover Monster writes to me, "Memories of us are beneath the surface. Dark and full. I want to put our broken, crooked bits together."

At home, as Lover Monster weakens, we move from the bedroom to the futon couch to a borrowed hospice bed. His leg falls off the hospice bed, and he can't lift it, so I prop it on the piano bench. In his hands, I place roses and lavender.

I record his groans when I might as well be a cat, or a
Hamster, a
Turnstile, a
Gnome.

I play Brahms for him and almost apologize for the mistakes.

He clenches his hand on the railing and shakes it. His lasting
odor is a white narcotic drool on a travel pillow.

A toddler can bend his legs. Lover Monster can't. The prion
disease spreads exponentially, killing healthy neurons. He merges
with the larger animal kingdom, like diseased

Cattle

Sheep

Deer

Elk

Moose

Mink

Cats

Goats

Camels

Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease infects only one in a million each
year in the United States. I'm shocked Lover Monster is dying
from this rare calamity during a global pandemic.

He points to his chest and says, "See how you saved me?" I weep.

Bats

Bat fingers. Claws sewn into the selva of the sheets. Shave off
the fur from beneath the bat's chin and sprinkle it on a valentine.

Out on the mansion's concrete patio is a bat cemetery, open
air for the bugs and decomposers. My godmother names the dead
bats. There's Fife and Eeyore. Skin flakes off. She tucks the corpses
in cabbage leaves.

Black Cats and Humans

I taste Lover Monster's blood, as I would lick a kitten's eyes, if I

were its mother, knocked up at age one and stricken with pain, nursing one newborn as another pushes out. I lick Lover Monster's cut as I would suck my arm to quell the blood from a thorn, as I would chew a scab on the playground. We consume blood and eat pieces of ourselves to keep their magic intact.

Lover Monster says, "My bones are yours. And the muscle holding us together when we are deep in each other."

Eye of newt, black rhino powder, rat snake soup.

Slit a goat's neck. Drop clipped hair in a jar.

People can get mad cow from eating human brains.

Albinos in Tanzania are hunted for their limbs.

Black cat snores on Lover Monster's legs.

Lover Monster's penis shrinks. I wash it like a baby's. Gently, so it doesn't reek of piss.

After Lover Monster dies, the state pathologist calls because he wants to cut Lover Monster's skull open and add his name to the infectious disease registry. I confess I licked Lover Monster's blood. Would I get the disease, too?

The pathologist says, "Not likely."

Alone in my queen-sized bed. Lover Monster's comforter above me and his mattress below. Black cat spreads grit across sheets where I had trailed human ambrosia, my thigh to Lover Monster's. I wake, crying, and touch the sheets, sensing Lover Monster's body.

Bats

Bat intestines. Bat liver. Bat spleen. Mount them on a wooden plank with metal pins and they quiver at night. They sense the mummy hand up the circular staircase. It's locked in a metal cabinet by mildewed photo albums and maps and fishing lures. The mummy hand is gray and leathered.

Humans

Temporary curtains separate the dining room from the living room. We create a womb for the hospice bed, for the man who may not

know he's human. Sudden sounds, like a doorbell, frighten Lover Monster. The hospice bed has rubber sheets.

The dining room table is covered with flowers and medicine bottles. Wipes and potions. I feed Lover Monster morphine in spoonfuls of my raspberry jam.

I lean my head by his. His blue-opal eyes can no longer focus. I don't know if he can see.

I say, "If you're scared, smell me and know you're safe. You're going to another plane. I will find you."

He says, "You smell so good."

Nurse comes in the last night of his life. She criticizes me, "He looks uncomfortable. You didn't clean out his throat. We can't put on his pants after he's dead."

I start to panic.

Nurse says, "Do you want a hug?"

"No," I say. I cinch Lover Monster's worn cloth belt around my waist.

Rose placed in one hand. Lavender in the other. Twenty-four days to death. The doctors promised three months. We hoped for a year. A cure.

Lover Monster promised he would never leave me, but he does. His wings: burned. The myth rots. I want the muscle and voice. A doctor cuts open his skull, and strangers smoke him to the sky.

Red lips on fire. Pink tongue flares to ash. Stained teeth meet smoke, his skin: our air.

I'm left with one leather boot. One box of ash. One leather boot. Another. His skin is not the skin in a word. His ashes are not the bones I crushed.

The night after he dies, Lover Monster crouches at the foot of our bed. "Take me to the ocean," he says.

"You don't have a body," I say. And he disappears.

I wake with these words: "I met my peaceful other. I met my ferocious other. Some people see only one."

BE LIKE THE WOMAN

STEP 1.

BE LIKE THE BABY. Make the bottle. Clean the bottle. Wipe the mouth. Wipe the butt. Put on a new diaper. Throw out the wipes. Tickle the baby. Hug the baby. Wash the baby. I do the park things. The swing things. The mommy-baby time things. I hold the baby when he cries. I am still married. We sleep with the baby. He pees in our bed. He cries on me. He screams in my ear. He hugs me. He laughs and talks to worms. He wails when I go away. He has a tantrum. I'm supposed to sit with him on the stairs. That's what adoption therapists say. But he kicks me. We sit it out. I spend so much of my weekends with him. In this time-out. In the tantrum parade. And he starts to hold the anger inside. But not always.

Toddler baby sits on me when I play piano. I make up a song about animals: a snake made of an augmented chord, agitated monkeys formed of jumpy triads, and a lumbering hippo who moves with the chunky I-V chords. The tiger's growls are pounded chords at the lower register and birds twitter at the top. I play ragtime for toddler baby, speeding up and slowing down to watch him dance beside me. He's hypnotized.

Teen baby grows up to play cymbals in the marching band. He leaves my songs behind. Teen baby never stops grieving for his mom in China, a stranger to us all. He was left at an orphanage at less than three weeks old. Now he is too old to think blowing kisses will reach her.

He is thirteen years old the summer of 2017. Skinny dirt teen baby climbing roofs for kicks. He makes me laugh, but sometimes he yells. “Don’t make me do chores now. I said I will. Why are you so mean?”

And sometimes I yell at him. “You need to come home right now! It’s two in the morning!”

And he argues. “But we were about to meet up with girls!” Then we apologize. We have no one else here in Portland, Oregon. His dad left us.

One week the teen baby stays in his bed for forty-eight hours. Is he ill, or is he ill like his absent dad, who’s working in China? Does he have that acute depression that pins a person to a couch, to synthetic fibers and the buoyancy of a factory product?

I know I am not well. My friend says unwell means dope sick, but unwell for me is biting my t-shirt all day. I don’t put laundry away or care that the tulips I’d planted are coming up. I care a little, but it means I should weed, which means I should fix up the house to sell. I can’t afford it now, can I? After the divorce? I carry a tray of food upstairs to feed the teen baby in his room, and he sets the plates outside the door when he’s done. I take the dishes to the kitchen and notice all the ants.

The ill man, the very ill man, my former husband, had stayed on the couch for a year and a half after telling me he was in love with a fellow artist. He became top-ranked nationally in the phone game Bejeweled. He would not move out. He didn’t love me anymore, we didn’t even like each other, but he was enraged when I filed for divorce. He threw his Converse sneaker against the wall. He yelled, “I was trying!”

The divorce news crushed the teen baby. He texted me from a room away: “You murdered me in my brain.” He hurled special objects into my bedroom that represented our family, and some, like a hard blue hippo, were aimed at my head. The dad hid in the basement.

Telling an adopted child that his family is breaking up destroys

a big chunk of precious. The teen baby with the dark brown eyes. The teen baby with the stinky feet, whose back I scratched every night. In sleep his face turns back to the baby who slept hot in our bed, who wiped his snot on me, who craved his dad to read to him, to hoist him on his shoulders, to be the kind man.

During the divorce parade, when the attorneys and even the State of Oregon got intimately involved with the dissolution of our family and our financial disasters, the ill man left me and his son, the teen baby. After Trump's election, he flew away. I'd begged him to not abandon me to raise our son on my own. I washed his dirty laundry and packed his empty prescription bottles in boxes with the rest of our half a lifetime together. He left for a minimum wage job: teaching art to children in China.

In the summer of 2017, the ill man visits from his job in China for two weeks: one week with his family in California, who used to be my family, and one week here in Portland, where he does the ill man things in his former home. He plays guitar on the couch and pets the cat. He does not smile when he opens the door for me, bearing lattes for us both, an old habit. His lips stay tight and dry. He returns to the couch and watches *Game of Thrones*. I put a note on the fridge: "How are you feeling? What can I do to help?"

I get sick when the ill man is in my home. I can't hear. The ill man and the teen baby refuse to leave the house, so I do. At community acupuncture, I lie flat on a sheet in an air-conditioned room. The woman, who is white, has a kind voice. She takes my Chinese pulse and finds my Chinese nerves. She asks, "Is your stress high?"

I say yes, and I shake the white bed with the shivering needles.

This is like.

And this is like.

And this is all like. The cloud is going around me.

I am not completely well.

I fake it for my son.

The teen baby looks on Craigslist for jobs for his dad. He looks for modern apartments close to our home, so he can skateboard between us.

The ill man hasn't worked in our city for ten years. I tell the teen baby, "It's not your responsibility to find a job for your dad. No one likes being told what to do."

He says, "Dad can't divorce me."

I see Nick Cave writhing. His pointed shoes spin by the lip of the stage.

I am high on tequila and pot and beer.

He shakes my hand once. I touch his leg twice.

We give ourselves over in ecstasy to a dancing monster alien.

He doesn't seem all the way human.

His teen son fell off a sea cliff and the gate by the beach was locked. It was an accident. The ambulance drivers couldn't reach him.

The watery depth of blue, the blue that will break your back and kill you. The ill man, my ex, it soothes him to fantasize the jump—he won't say where. That is the blue.

I am playing Brahms' Intermezzi, or "character pieces," on the Yamaha upright. I court Brahms, as I would a ghost during a séance. A sensual feeling braces the pieces. As with a love affair, the music builds to a climax then dies away. Alone, I express my deepest musical emotions to my black cat lounging on the back porch. My fingers linger on the sigh motifs, two descending notes, expressing regret.

That December, I reconnect with a man across the country. He is in an open marriage, a "therapeutic separation." He will never love me, but he desires me. He's been pursuing me online for weeks. Flirtatious, solicitous. Pushing the charm drug.

We'd first met at eighteen in 1983 in music classes at UC Berkeley. He had a combed-over mohawk, this tall, handsome,

brown-eyed teen. I couldn't match his deviance. He lived in a co-op where people hosted spaghetti and acid parties, where people threw old dryers off the roof. On his arm, he'd carved an anarchy sign with a razor blade.

Separately, we crossed the bridge to North Beach. Flipper. Hardcore. Vibrating memories of red velvet wallpaper, Alameda kids vomiting down the stairs, rats under shirts, strangers dry-humping in the theater seats, men and their Docs with coded laces play-wilding in the pit. The neon tits of Carol Doda blinked their welcome up the street.

We hold this vague punk crush for decades, but the center rots. He is raw sex. I call him Damage. He says I'm dangerous. I say I knit. Parked in Chelsea, he puts his hand in my mouth after we kiss. He presses me against a brick wall to feel my body, broken. On a bare floor, he covers the tattoo of my son's orphanage name when we join, briefly, for sex, and I fly away.

Step 2.

Be like the man. Don't call. Don't email. Don't text. Call when he wants me to call. Fail often. Be sexy. Talk about sex. Make jokes. Make jokes about sex. Say, "I have a photo to take." Say, "I won't take it now." He has fifty-two images of me in his folder, the same number as our age.

My ex has been in China for a year and three months, and yes, I'm counting. And I don't cry often, but when I do it can be like a drip, or it can be many drips, and my face is red and ugly, and I hide the tears from my teen baby.

The new man is happy to hear from me. Leaning on a concrete wall downtown, I talk about sex long-distance. Sure, he is happy. He has a topless Polaroid photo of me in his wallet. I must be like the man. Focused. Disciplined.

I have cried about him. He's come on so strong, saying how rare I am, this first man since my marriage ended.

He is vague about this February visit, this visit that he is paying for, this visit that maybe shouldn't happen. He says, "You should see friends while you're here." Does that mean he doesn't want to see me?

I write, "Be very clear. If you want to see me only certain days? Say that. Don't say: 'Thanks for the ten emails, but I can't keep up with them.' Say, 'Don't email for a week.' You want time away from me? I will lick a subway pole." He likes it that I am intensely into sex. I send him photos that even turn me on. His wife has her own dark pursuits in another state.

The day after Valentine's, I fly across the country, get naked, and be what the man wants. He loves my body only: the abstract skin set apart from me but still me. The fat and curves and lean parts and liquids and smells. He says being with me makes him feel alive in ways he needs.

I'm smart and weird and bored easily by many men, but not by him. He puts his hands on me. I put my hands on him.

He brings me coffee in bed and makes sure I'm warm enough. I make sure not to spill the coffee on his wife's sheets. I'm blind to how shallow it is.

Women check him out at bars, and I wait. My skin is yellow and full. He puts a drumstick up my shirt. He holds my hand. He puts his hand on my leg, like he does with his wife, in their wedding photo. Snow falls on our hair and our eyelashes. His emotional slip-ups, like when I step on that wine glass. I feel for shards in the skin. He wants me to feel beautiful all the way; he says I'm this thing, this beauty, and I want to show him my ugliness as if to say, "You still want?"

I brush my teeth in the sink, cozy in the new man's plaid bathrobe, and look in the mirror where his wife applies her fairy makeup. She is tiny. I am wide. We are all unwell.

Teen baby says, "We have millions of little sperm. How could the sex feel good for a woman with all that sperm in her? It just dies inside."

The fact of my body. Walking around nude. The fact of darkness.
The fact of marital wounds. The new man wants a fix.

He will say, once the wife returns and they close it down, that he will not abandon me as a friend unless I transgress his “real adult boundaries.” Then he promises he’ll get the fuck out of my life.

The man will lose me, and maybe stay lonely but have fewer distractions in his in-box. Or on his phone. Or on Facebook Messenger.

The man says he has loved only his wife.

My teeth bite the collar of my t-shirt, and it is wet with spit.

This man makes me wet.

I arc over the continent to see him. I fly one last time, for my April birthday. We hold hands and caress, skin on skin. He says he’s happier than he’s felt in years. Body weight: I missed it so. On his keyboard, I play him Schoenberg. I fall so hard.

Step 3.

Be like the woman. I am the bacteria that got confused in a strange man’s bed, by the foods I swallowed, the dead lamb parts on Coney Island. I am hunger. I am caught by the unkind tongue: cortisol, adrenaline, dopamine, pet names, generosity, coldness. Serotonin. The drippy oxytocin machine. He feels joy with me. Is he a monster? He says he doesn’t want it to stop. No one can make me stay away, not even the new man. He knows how shallow he is.

Teen baby says, “Sex is like holding someone’s sweaty hand.”

I am the lover of someone else’s husband. I am the mother of someone else’s child. The teen baby asking me: “Why didn’t she tell me my real name? Why didn’t she take me with her?” The baby with the brown skin lying on the white body. Playing the triangle without holding the suspended string is dull. You can’t get a tone. The human kills the metal.

In April the new man plays me “Happy Birthday” on his marimba in Brooklyn. Backstage at one of his concerts, he rips open every snap on my jumper. This banal humiliation. He says he’s memorized my body. When it ends, he says how good it was we could use each other.

The last day I will see him, I have turned fifty-three. I call my friend, crying. My friend says, “Get out and don’t look back.”

I will never see the trees through his lace curtains bud and flower. Biological chemtrails will flatten me all summer. I dream I have sex with him. I wake with fingerprints on my stomach. I dream his cock turns into a stick of butter and melts between my legs.

Do what the baby wants.

Do what the man wants.

The man says he doesn’t think about me all day and all night.

He used to. Now he doesn’t.

Teen baby will turn into the man.

Teen baby thinks of me. Teen baby thinks about what I will do for him and what I am preventing him from doing.

Step 4.

Be like the keys. At my piano lesson, I sit at a Steinway, regal and chipped, and open my Prokofiev book to *Visions fugitives*, Op. 22, no. 7. These twenty pieces are small rooms of lulling melody, of sharp mood shifts and chromaticism. Across my teacher’s dusty parlor are painted tin butterflies.

My teacher says, “Every note has a life of its own.” When I play well, she dances on the worn rug. Her long gray hair sways.

I play the Prokofiev piece again, struggling toward *dolcissimo*. I get stuck on a *glissando*. My fingers are cluttered. My teacher tries to help me, saying, “Fear is when we hold onto where we are.” I write her comments on my sheet music, as if writing a spell.

My subconscious is hurt. Heartsick. My brain is goth and unrelenting.

My teacher says, of Prokofiev, “How is it easy?”

I laugh. “I’ll find out,” I say. I lift my hands above the keys, as a skateboarder, as teen baby, as if poised on the lip of a halfpipe. I breathe and I drop.

CAT RITUALS

1. PLEASE EMPTY THE litter box. Albus pees a lot. Play the game called “Find the prize” every day with the scooper thing. There are lots of prizes!

2. Please put the litter bag out on the porch. Better yet in the outdoor trash. If you put it in the kitchen trash, it will smell. Can you lift the lid and smell? Do you think it smells bad? Like, unusually? Did you notice weird smells on me? Like between my teeth, or behind my ear, or in my navel? Remember when you used to kiss it? Or is that inappropriate, now that we’re divorced? When you’re smiling and walking toward me at baggage claim, do you forget you’ve told me you don’t love me? Our cat is on my thigh. Two paws on, two paws off. Remember after a trip I found a weird walnut on the rug, but it was a bird’s head?

3. Please give him meds twice a day. First, heart meds, one pill cut in half and crushed, twice a day. Put it on a spoonful of squishy meat. But wear the blue latex gloves when you give him the thyroid meds and mark the doses off on the dry-erase board. It’s hard for you to remember medications. Like when you forgot to renew your heart meds and you ran out for five days straight? And who, indeed, was late for work getting them for you? And you texted, “Thanks.”

4. Please pet him as much as you want. The abscess is healed. The vet cut it open. That was a lot of goo. Part of it was gray.

5. Please don't read my journals. They're all over the place, like the porn in my friend's house growing up. The father had stored it by the cookbooks and boxes of Ritz crackers, and by the salad tongs and the Quaker Oats. Let's pretend we're still married and all the bad stuff never happened, like you never were hospitalized for wanting to kill yourself, but let's pretend you got caught at the neighbors' house, spying on them. Maybe that couple who used to watch gay porn with the curtains open, even though they looked like a regular hetero couple with a yellow Alfa Romeo. Let's pretend they invite you in and seduce you, under the cathode glow, and you ask them to order bread rolls with marinara sauce from Hot Lips. When they moved out, they put a lot of diet books on the street. Once they left, they didn't care who knew they were ashamed of their weight. So, let's pretend I didn't wake up with cat hair in my mouth. Let's pretend I was able to have a baby. And the baby had red hair. Red curly hair. And he was a musical prodigy. Someone you could love but envy. We wouldn't have had to drag our actual son, the adopted one, to piano lessons. Once, he hid under the bed and we had to pull him out. I pulled him out. Did I? I know he cried while playing scales. "This isn't for me!" The red-headed one would want to practice scales for hours and would have gotten fat on praise from those who basked second-hand in his gifts. They would be genius adjacent. We would've spent many hours at recitals hating the other parents. And with the parents we did like, we'd have to downplay our son's unique musical gifts.

6. Please brush his hair, or, duh, his fur. Sometimes he seems human, or human adjacent. To have fur means he has a dependency on us, by which I mean me. To have hair means he'd eventually move out, unless he moved into the basement and couldn't function. Which is no judgment on you being in the basement for so long! Watching

effects pedals videos on YouTube! It's a fact: we're all maladjusted, what with the microplastics in our brain, our gut biomes all messed up, and our autoimmune disorders. We wait for the phone to ring. It doesn't. We wait for the doorbell to buzz. It's silent. We take down the "No Solicitors" sign so at least someone will visit. And by *we*, I mean *I*. Do you remember holding my stomach when I had cramps? Do you remember when I had a miscarriage? I couldn't stop crying on the rug. And you told me to get over the psychodrama? Does that mean you are autistic? The emotions were too much? And I knew there was death in me. The doctors told us as they transferred the malformed cells into my uterus. People care for you. In that sense, your hair should be called fur. Our very only newly adult son asked for red dots for Christmas. Red dots sound fun, like Rudolph's nose. A clown nose. A candy. But they're for his guns. *The better to see you with, my dear*. Remember when he was little? He said, "I don't care about people. I care about having fun." Do you remember how mad I'd get when you'd sit with him on the couch and nothing got done? And I'd get so frustrated when you'd read to him for hours. Then I'd have to get him to sleep, but I was exhausted? Where did that anger go? I thought it had coated the windows. Plumped up the silverfish. Blew out the lights. Crushed my will to flirt. But here's the truth: The anger got poured into one glass. Then another. The glasses emptied into me. Night after night. And the glasses were stacked in one dishwasher then another. Dishwashers down the block to the playground.

7. Please run the dishwasher. Make sure to keep the cookie trays underneath. The dishwasher leaks, which makes you nervous. I don't bake cookies. And I don't cook frozen chicken nuggets. Everyone I'd feed cookies and nuggets to are gone. I heat minestrone soup in a pot.

8. Please don't leave an almost empty peanut butter jar. It will make me sad. It will make me think you don't know me.

9. Please fold the blankets when you leave. You can stack them on the couch. It's okay to leave before I get back. Just make sure to check off the meds on the dry-erase board. I'm still not drinking. And I miss alcohol. I even miss you.

HOW NOT TO BE A GROUPIE

AT FORTY-NINE I TAKE a summer temp job in DC as a production editor at an economics institute. I steal office supplies. My gum chewing annoys my young co-worker, and my recording and touring days are in my past. I live vicariously through rock memoirs. One day, on the Metro, I add a Post-it to Richard Hell's book *I Dreamed I Was a Very Clean Tramp*. It marks this quote: "Being a rock-and-roll musician was like being a pimp. It was about making young girls want to pay money to be near you."

It's easy to be a groupie if you have the man-pleasing gene. Here are tips on how not to be one:

At twelve, when you're called a priss-butt by the mean girls: Don't spy on the kid across the street with the bandanna wrapped around his forehead and think, because you show him your copy of Kiss's *Alive II*, that he will like you. He will like the cool girl instead.

Diary: "I saw Sharrock walking with that girl again. She has long brown hair. In gym class, we watched a filmstrip on loneliness. I wrote a whole page on it. After school, I drank hot chocolate with the Whitman boys. They said that their cousin Sharrock smokes, steals, drives, and lies, and that he is fourteen. The mystery is solved."

At thirteen: Try to broaden your personality so you're not fixated on bad boys who ignore you.

Diary: "At school, my deodorant didn't hold, so that wasn't good, but I joined forensics."

At fourteen, when forensics doesn't bring reciprocal love: Don't offer to clean the house of the guitarist of the only band in school, Sudden Attack, and on the first day break a glass. His grandmother won't hire you again. Take guitar lessons instead.

Diary: "I lost all my notes for social studies, and someone took the screw that held my derailleur on! But after my guitar lesson, I felt better. It reminded me that there's so much not connected to this shit school."

At fifteen: Don't offer to do the lighting during Sudden Attack's set and think that turning the lights off will look "cool" and the band will like it. They won't be able to see. But continue to buy pot from them and memorize their class schedules.

Skip your junior year.

At sixteen: Don't think that buying a Fender Lead II and practicing in a small room at the same time as when Sudden Attack is practicing in the choir room will make them accept you. The band members will play "Stairway to Heaven" a few beats off from your faithful rendition.

Diary: "I'm getting involved in mucho things. All I need is people to party with, a boyfriend, a new body, and a better personality."

At eighteen: Go to UC Berkeley and study composition, sight singing, and ear training. Fall in love with an art student and dive into the punk scene across the Bay Bridge in North Beach. The art student paints scenes of Flipper mosh pits on car hoods salvaged from a junkyard. Don't think your nerd self is camouflaged. The art student will see through it and dump you on your nineteenth birthday. You go to The Cramps alone, with menstrual cramps.

Journal: "Right now I don't apologize for myself. I don't feel uncomfortable; I don't make lists like: 'I need to get a tan, I need to smile, I can't be weird anymore.' Maybe I just seek out people who I can conform with in their unconformity."

At twenty-four: Don't think you'll become the next Jeff Beck, much less the next Keith Levene. Sell the Fender Lead II for a bass

guitar and start a proto-grunge band with two female friends, one of whom jokingly calls you and her “riot hags.”

Journal: “Anarchy’s real band practices for five to six hours a day, and the room is bursting with ash-filled beer bottles. Their set lists, taped on the walls, number dozens of songs. Anarchy’s band is established, with fans who dance ecstatically and who keep time on the stage with their hands, but our trio is delicate. At any moment it could crumble, and I am the weak link. Delirium, with her Doc Martens, ripped tights, short skirts, Stooges shirt, and frizzy black hair; Anarchy, with a similar look, but with cut-off jeans instead of skirts. Slacker, skinny, desirable women. At my bass lesson, Diggs tells me I should develop style and tone. I can become the link between percussion and guitar and cement them together.

At twenty-four: Do I have to say it again? Don’t sleep with bad boys who treat you like shit! This is groupie-adjacent behavior. Don’t date someone who sits beside you on a dirty curb and proudly shows you where he shot up heroin. Don’t crush on someone whose employment ambitions land him a job cleaning up sperm-drenched tissues at the Lusty Lady. Don’t spend the night with someone who tells you he won’t feel sad if he sees you with someone else, even if he has floppy hair and deep brown eyes and a tattoo from a ZZ Top album. Don’t waste tears on this guy while you walk with him through the Folsom Street Fair, passing men in open-ass chaps and collars around their necks, and women in leather bondage masks and vests, being walked on leashes.

Journal: “I drew diamonds on my legs talking to Catastrophe last night on the phone, and now I’m wearing all black, plopped in the sand on Ocean Beach. Catastrophe told me he did speed and drank too much, so he threw up all day. At night, I cut off all my hair while listening to the Swans.”

Twenty-four: Model your love life on Delirium’s. She’s not a groupie. She lives with a real-to-god rock drummer. She gets backstage passes!

Journal: “Delirium called me on the phone, her voice husky from cigarettes. ‘We should call the band Crankshaft,’ she said. Then she changed her mind. ‘Let’s call it Big Girl Ass.’”

At twenty-four: Go to a party in a green velvet dress. Seduce a quiet artist-musician into giving you a tattoo of a spiral. He wraps a needle with thread and dips it into a bottle of India ink. He pierces his forearm first to test the pain. While other partiers wrestle in the hallway, you watch him. His hand touches your ankle to steady it, and the other inflicts a sharp, stinging sensation. The needle inserts into your thin skin covering the bone. He admits, later, he feared you. Feared your wildness. Fall in love. Start an experimental band with him and write songs together. Switch off on guitar, bass, and keyboards. Get married in the fog. Pledge forever vows below eucalyptus and redwood trees exhaling in a San Francisco grove.

NEEDLE DROP

Track One

DURING SURGERY, THE DOCTOR and his assistants removed adhesions on my liver, ovaries, and tubes. Adhesions were lacy, transparent, blood-filled fibrous bands. They had twisted, pulled, and blocked otherwise healthy organs, including my Fallopian tubes, preventing me from getting pregnant. There was a chance the tubes would close in the healing process, but it was unlikely.

“Whatever disease caused the blockage happened a long time ago,” the doctor said. He didn’t judge me. I could do that on my own. My parents sent flowers from Virginia, but Sam, my husband, said he was still scared about having a baby.

The incisions looked spongy as they healed from the inside out. I was repulsed by whatever had caused this fertility crisis.

Almost a year after the surgery, I still hadn’t gotten pregnant. IVF was our next choice. I felt it was bougie. An indulgence. I told few people, and almost no indie musician friends. One of my best friends, a bass player, contemptuously called people who wanted to be parents “breeders.”

Alone and menstruating, I arrived at my IVF appointment in San Francisco’s Pacific Heights. It was January 2001, and in two months I’d turn thirty-six. I had been on the Pill for a month to regulate my ovaries, and now I’d stopped.

A nurse took my blood to check the hormone levels and said, “Hopefully it’s the last period you’ll have for a long time.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Everyone’s nervous the first time,” she said. I didn’t want there to be a second time.

Yet she also said, “The lining of your uterus is thin. Everything looks good.”

I would start injections to cause my body to produce more eggs than normal, as if I were not human but rather a snake, a turtle, a frog, or a mosquito.

At home, Sam and I fought in the living room. “If I get a shit job, I’ll be too depressed,” Sam said.

“What should I do, just write you a check for ten grand and be done with it? Our marriage?”

He was working on a moth painting for a friend. “I’ve been busting my ass to get it done. I want to get illustration work, and you’re telling me to get a shitty day job.”

“It’s not fair I have to work all day on projects I don’t care about.”

“Did you marry me just so I’d buy you a house?” he asked.

“Why don’t you go to school so you can teach art?”

“Fuck you. I don’t have to listen to your pressure.” He left the house.

I woke to my landlady yelling at her elderly mother. Through two sets of windows, iron grates, and an alley: a loud slap. The landlady screamed at her mother that she’d soiled her bed.

Our building in the Lower Haight was managed and terrorized, at times, by the landlords, who lived next door. The landlord dyed his white hair with a cheap rinse, glowing purple in the sun. He hunted wild boars in Marin to relax—with a knife—and stretched animal skins in the garage under our apartment. Their Caddy could barely fit inside among the broken stoves and fridges, bags of half-empty oil cans, ketchup cans, and other debris. The landlord’s Silverado took the public parking space outside his home.

In our quiet kitchen, Sam gave me two injections of Follistim. Sam did not want to inject me, but I felt too scared to do the shots on my own. We followed the procedure almost silently. After my abdomen was swabbed with alcohol, Sam prepared the needle, making sure it was free of air bubbles. He was calm and orderly.

Once the needle pierced my skin, I fell into a fifteen-second pain tunnel. The anticoagulant in the stim drugs caused the liquid to burn when injected. Counting to fifteen, I watched, with my mind's eye, the searing across my abdomen.

The shots got easier as the days went on. I knew how long the pain would last each time. I could breathe through it, gritting my teeth.

Down the hill from the Pacific Heights IVF clinic, the wind picked up flecks of white across dark green waves. The waiting room views were delicious, expansive. This procedure was a high-priced, low-guarantee gamble, and the clinic knew it.

I rested on the examination table with goo on my stomach and looked at the ultrasound screen. I'd grown only four or five follicles instead of the fourteen or fifteen the doctors had expected. Why? I was so frustrated and sad.

The next day, the doctor examined me again. She said six to seven follicles looked large, and she would look in them to find eggs, like an Easter hunt.

At home, I asked Sam again, "Can you do just one thing per day toward getting work?"

But he said no because of the stress of IVF. He stood in the spare bedroom, his back near the wall, his eyes closed and his knees slightly bent. His arms were suspended in a circle for the flow of chi.

He said I smothered him.

At my last appointment before the egg retrieval, the nurse commented on all my pinpricks. I'd been injected with Follistim

multiple times because I was at risk for not producing enough eggs. She joked about the city's druggie reputation: "What, you live in San Francisco?"

Sam and I drove to the Sutro Baths, the crumbling concrete of a dead playland butting up against the Pacific Ocean. We passed through an open cave to a rocky inlet, where the incoming tide splashed against the cliffs. Inexplicably, I felt happy. I had seven eggs growing inside me, ready to be harvested, maybe three to four were good.

Later, I got teary seeing a pregnant woman with her guy, his hand resting on her full womb. I wanted fairness, a baby. I would be a good mom. I was ready.

After the follicles were stimulated, I got one last shot of a drug called hCG, using an inch-and-a-half-long needle. This drug triggered the mini eggs to mature before they were removed.

The morning of the IVF egg retrieval, I got an IV in my wrist to administer the narcotics. Other women getting the same surgery were a curtain away. Anesthesia lured me into nothingness. After the egg retrieval, I exited from the drugs in the post-op room, and a slow, cloudlike movement dragged me back into my skin.

The nurse told me they got six eggs out. The woman beside me had twenty taken from her, and her husband was effusive. She told me she had lost an ovary; that's why she was doing IVF. I couldn't feel happy for this stranger. I should have, but I couldn't. Why twenty from her and I'd gone through so much pain for just six?

Sam joined me and held my hand. We chatted about the Charlie Parker documentary we'd watched the night before on NPR. The nurse told me I'd babbled about Parker after the procedure, when I was still on drugs. Only a nerd like me would get high and discuss public broadcasting.

In the cab home, I leaned against the vinyl seat with the

window cracked. People waited for MUNI rides, bike messengers in patched jeans and bulging bags skimmed across the lanes, and cars passed each other to highways and clogged bridges—the city an electric ribbon of movement through the gray and rain. We turned up Market toward Waller, where we lived.

The cabbie said, “You’re the calmest ride yet.”

I said, “Sedation helps.”

He said, “Tell me what you’re on.”

The nurse called to tell me only one embryo had developed out of six. She said for most women, more embryos would have developed. I cried. I’d failed.

The embryo transfer back into my body would happen the next Saturday.

The nurse said, “They’ll grade the embryo, and look at the number of cells and fragmentation—hopefully there’s none—and the embryo’s symmetry and roundness. In most cases, if it’s at an embryo stage on that day we’ll progress to a transfer.” She told me I might have an “egg issue” to go along with my “tube issue.” I didn’t care. I wanted that fertilized egg in me.

Before we hung up, the nurse said of Sam and me, “You guys are a cute couple.”

Sam held me. He wanted me to be happy.

That thing, those dividing cells, were across town in a test tube. I wanted it in me where it would be safe.

From the kitchen, I heard a rustling in our backyard. No one lived upstairs anymore, although the landlord was constantly hammering or sanding down the remnants of the Victorian features.

I looked out and saw a Golden Retriever and the landlord, yelling, “Sunshine.”

Trash covered the yard. The dog panted on the concrete, quiet and scared. The landlord had kicked the previous dog. This new dog, Sunshine, guarded snails.

Sunshine needed food, water, and shelter. I could dwell on that neglected dog instead of the embryo transfer. I wanted the dividing cells to burn themselves into a human.

Sam held me all night, with hands warm and strong.

No one was at the front desk. No other patients sat in the waiting room. If the embryo had split after twenty-four hours, the chances were good that it would continue to be healthy. This was what I hoped.

In the exam room, the doctor put the catheter in my vagina to transfer the dividing cells into my uterus. I kept my shirt on. All this effort to create life, yet these cells were less fortunate, and far less active, than a package of yeast in flour and water.

After I got off the exam table, I stood at a metal counter and looked at a magnified photo of overlapping circles: the dividing cells, whatever would be or could be my baby. I dripped tears on the paper.

The doctor talked in numbers. “There is only a ten to fifteen percent chance of the embryo surviving because it’s a grade three, not grade one or two,” he said. “It’s fragmented.” He warned of an increased risk for Down syndrome if the embryo managed to develop further. I would require more tests the next time I did IVF. He assured me there would be a next time. Today was not the baby time.

At home, my sister called. “It’s not hopeless yet,” she said, while I cried. Meanwhile, Sunshine barked and whined all day and night.

The next day, my breasts felt bigger. I had a fragmented embryo inside me. I put out water for the dog. The landlord set out garbage food—old potatoes—for her to eat. Because the landlord had mistreated the previous dog, I fixated on Sunshine’s needs.

At band practice, the guitarist told us that in New York, G.G. Allin had slept in her bed when she was out. He threw up on the wall and, she claimed, gave her crabs.

“I slept with so many junkies I felt death all around me,” she said. I didn’t tell her there was life in me, or so I hoped.

Two days later, our landlords’ daughter brought Sunshine to the sidewalk. On most days she sang Madonna hits, off-key, out an open window. Now she was yelling, so I opened the front door.

“Speak nicely to the dog,” I called out to her.

I stepped out to the sidewalk and smiled. “Put food in the dish, not next to it. Pet her; she’ll like it.”

The daughter’s parents weren’t around, so the girl was talking to me. Usually, she ignored me. She was developmentally disabled. Nice then mean to us, depending on her parents’ whims.

“She loves you,” I said.

“I know.” Yet she yelled at Sunshine like her mom yelled at her. I turned to go back inside, and Sunshine sniffed my butt.

After buying dog food, I placed it in a metal bowl for Sunshine. The next day the bowl was gone—I called the landlady to complain.

“I consider this harassment,” she said. “This is personal. My daughter says she didn’t take your bowl. Do you want me to *beat* her in front of you?”

My heart was pounding. I needed to calm down. She had the economic muscle, as the landlady, to make our lives miserable.

I found the metal bowl buried in the backyard by the woodpile.

On a morning in early February, a large chunk of blood fell into the toilet. The ordeal would begin again. Before the blood, I *felt* I was going to stay pregnant and have a daughter.

I sobbed for an hour, with a quiet racking of my body.

That morning, exhausted, I heard the daughter out front with Sunshine. I opened the door and saw the girl with her belt off, wrapped around her hand. She was about to beat Sunshine for wandering around.

Then it began to hail. Rain followed, rushing into the gutters and melting the frozen ice.

I stood on a stained sidewalk in Chinatown with Sam and fellow kung fu students. I felt numb inside, post-IVF, but needed to support the school during the New Year celebrations. My bamboo stick prevented tourists and other shoppers—clutching bags of jade trinkets or soggy eggrolls—from walking into the firecrackers.

We stopped by a food market to bless it for the New Year: to cleanse it and attract wealth and to symbolically chase away evil spirits. In one stall, three dead armadillos were propped in a pan, the fur visible on their chests. Next to them, two fish flopped on ice by freshly killed ones, the pan filling with blood.

For hours we performed lion dances with cymbals and drums, directing the lion's heartbeat and movements, and with wilted lettuce, oranges, and firecrackers. Sam often hid inside the lion or flapped its fur- and sequined-covered satin tail. I had stick duty. After each visit, our sifu collected money in a briefcase for his school's sponsor, a Chinese American family association.

As the Green Street Mortuary Band passed us, the drums thumped and the trumpeter goose-stepped and smiled. Two young men sat in the open backseat of the funeral car. Between them was a wreath of pink carnations. Instead of focusing on our ritual spreading of good luck, I commiserated with the men. Their faces were ashen.

Before our band's next show, in a run-down West Oakland house, the guitarist drew astrological Jupiter symbols on both of our bellies.

"We're going to be the only women performers tonight," she said in her southern drawl. "We need extra strength."

I felt tendrils of recent baby death, all I'd been through, but I didn't tell her. She drew on my skin with a Sharpie, near where doctors had cut me open, trying to unbind my Fallopian tubes.

Track Two

A two-week-old baby boy entered an orphanage in the foggy city of Chongqing. His records said the gatekeeper found him at the front entrance. He had no possessions and no note left with him. The mystery I pondered: How long did this baby wait to be found? That little bundle, helpless, weighing only a few pounds.

Years later, Sam and I will learn from documentaries, birth parent search groups, and other sources that the finding story of our adoptive son, like that of many adoptive children, might not be true.

Patriarchal harm, economic disparity, and the complications of transracial adoption are real and lasting. Yet adoption has always existed and always will, among humans and in the larger animal kingdom.

Often boys in orphanages had medical needs—heart defects or cleft palates—that their parents couldn’t afford to fix. But our future son was healthy. The orphanage named him Yu Chen. All the orphans at this institute shared the surname Yu (you), for river. And the name Chen means “dawn.”

The orphanage placed a finding ad for Yu Chen in a local newspaper, with a blurry, black-and-white photo of our future son, just an infant, along with his finding date and other vital information. This step was legally required to see if blood relatives would claim him as theirs. His was one photo among dozens of abandoned babies gridded across the pages. For Yu Chen, no one responded.

China wanted its sons. That’s what people told me when Yu Chen was a baby, as if I didn’t know the cliché. In a nation that had invented bureaucracy, townships collected data. The pregnant mother had to present a certificate of permission to give birth, and every newborn had to be registered within a month. But what if Yu Chen’s mother were unmarried in Chongqing and far from home? She could not register her newborn, and he would have no legal right to schooling or healthcare. As an adult, he could

not easily travel or even get married. His fate would be that of a *heihazi*, a hidden, invisible child.

Officials might have pressured Yu Chen's mother into relinquishing him. But even if she had left him at the gate, our joy—and our son's—were forever linked to her loss.

When Yu Chen was born, about eight million out of 1.2 billion were unregistered. If he were one of them, he would remain in the margins, especially to a migrant mother. Chongqing was inundated with impoverished workers from the countryside in the years of economic growth and the building of the Three Gorges Dam. And if he'd stayed institutionalized, he would have left the orphanage at sixteen, with only his wits and a generic surname marking him as "other."

But in May of 2005, we weren't told all we'd come to know about the Chinese adoption bureaucracy, the scandals and corruption, and the harmful effects of the one-child policy. After a week of sightseeing in Beijing, we flew to Chongqing to start our family. From the plane we saw Chongqing's hills rising from two rivers: the Yangtze and one of its tributaries, the Jialing. At its margins, concrete farming villages bordered rolling green rice paddies.

In Chongqing, we ate sweet and sour noodles, fragrant hot pot dishes, spicy dumplings, and carrots carved into birds; we drank flower-scented tea poured out of six-foot tea spouts. One of our guides told us about the Cultural Revolution: Her family had almost starved. But we didn't talk current politics. Instead, we got massages and shopped for music cassettes, baby books, and carved monkeys for our future son, born in the Year of the Monkey. Tomorrow we would be parents of a ten-month-old baby whose brief life was primarily spent in one building among fellow crying, curious babies in identical metal cribs.

At dinner, we toasted each other. My dad, a seasoned reporter, got sentimental. He said, “You’re brave. He’ll be a great joy to you as you guys have been to us.”

Sam and I held each other in the double bed, our final night as a childless couple. His deep hesitancy to be a parent was now replaced with excitement. He said the moment he saw the referral photos, Yu Chen had him wrapped around his finger. We’d set up an empty porta-crib next to us. The full suitcase we’d brought for our son-to-be would finally have a purpose.

That morning, we took a rental bus to the orphanage, passing a young man on a motorcycle who wore aviator goggles and a stylish scarf. People on their daily commute seemed momentous in their anonymity, a possible future cut off for this child, now committed to us. We were removing a baby out of the only home he knew. And taking him from his culture, language, and any understanding of being a Chinese national.

On the bus, my mom squeezed my hand.

A wealthy Taiwanese businessman had sponsored the Chongqing Children’s Welfare Institute, which brought in an American NGO to teach nannies how to practice attachment with the infants. Unlike in years past, these nannies held and bonded with the young children: meeting their primal needs for touch.

The head of the orphanage led us to the Angel Room. Shiny blue stars and large photos of happy Chinese babies decorated the windows. Two dozen baby girls milled in walkers, as in bumper cars, or played on colorful mats. Where was Yu Chen? Would I recognize him? I was supposed to be the mom.

Then, a nanny brought a baby boy with a round head to me. He was vaguely familiar from the placement photos sent to our adoption agency, but a few months older now. He wore a green shirt and pants decorated with chickens. The nanny put him in my arms first. I was the mother. The stranger. I smiled and stroked his cheek. He looked at me curiously. “My baby, my baby,” I said, teary.

Sam, smiling, put his arm around me and touched the baby's head. I looked at my boy with his dark-brown eyes, not sensing warmth toward me. He tugged my sweater and pulled Sam's nose. I fed him a cracker, and Sam and my parents took turns holding him. The nannies smiled and hugged each other.

The baby had a mosquito bite on his cheek. He was heavy, solid, and a complete mystery. And yet we were allowed to leave with him, into a bus with no car seats. His only possessions were his outfit, a pair of shoes, a red rattle, and about twelve sheets of photos and good-luck sentiments his primary nanny had written to him.

At the hotel, Yu Chen sobbed. I rocked him and held him, but he could not be soothed. I worried the soup was too hot or he was choking on noodles. But the truth was he was scared and grieving.

During the days in Chongqing, my parents eased us into parenthood. My mom held him and admired everything he did, as only a grandmother would notice and want to share with her daughter. She bought him a rattle and told him Mother Goose rhymes. Her voice was ancient to me, speaking as a grandma, as my mom, as the daughter she once was with her own dolls. My parents propped their newest grandson on pillows and sang to him. They adored him, his two baby teeth, his grin, his curiosity.

Over wine, my dad said, "When you're sixty-five—our age now—you'll be just as proud of him as we are of you."

The next day, I walked over an overpass to a convenience store for diapers and wipes. The opulence of the hotel's curved driveway and fountains shifted to an ordinary merchant street—concrete apartments above shops. I wanted the normalcy of everyday transactions.

Women gathered against iron railings and sold skewers of watermelon. One woman had her toddler son near her. He stood in a bamboo container, not smiling at me. This was his life, the open air of Chongqing, close to his mother. This boy was connected.

Track Three

It was autumn in Portland. The rains had not yet started in earnest. I was forty-one, with money worries in the Pacific Northwest, aging out of the “creative class” of a hipster city. I wasn’t fully entrenched into middle class, as a freelancer in educational publishing.

The afternoon sun filtered through dirty blinds. Measuring the length of Yu Chen’s cries from the floor below, I curled up my knees on the bed. The shape echoed the curve I’d made inside my mother’s warm, liquid space.

A woodpecker slotted his beak against a crack in the telephone pole. I counted to myself, down from one hundred, hearing the bird so percussive, hungry. But Yu Chen was downstairs and wailing louder. Why couldn’t he help me? By “he,” I meant his dad, Sam. I needed the soft grip of sleep, oblivion.

Sam wasn’t getting steady animation work, and I had to hustle for writing projects from educational publishers. Not the bright, shiny life, but enough.

Yu Chen loved overturning rocks to see worms’ pink flesh squirm and writhe. To feel the cool, pulsing life in his small hand, worms he called his pets. Sam often walked Yu Chen around the neighborhood, where they formed a secret society with strangers’ cats and dogs. Or he hoisted him on his shoulders.

I leaned over the bed and smelled cat pee afterburn from the previous owner’s pet. Maybe I could count down from one thousand. Or recite the Lord’s Prayer. I didn’t believe in God, but the prayer had been good enough to ward off vampires when I was young and fearful, and my pelvic bones felt like knives.

“Mama!” Yu Chen called.

“Thy kingdom comes. Thy will be done.”

“Mama!”

“Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven.” I pretended he wasn’t crying for me. His “mama” was his other mother. His first mother. We didn’t know her name. But what baby knows his

mother's name? He knows a smell. He knows a touch. *Mama*, the primal word, the word he screamed at night when Sam fetched him from his crib. He wanted me.

Yu Chen ran up the carpeted stairs, crying, into our bedroom, away from Sam. I felt that adrenaline pinch. Why *couldn't* Sam take care of him so I could rest?

Climbing on the futon bed, Yu Chen put his face toward mine. I put the pillow under my head and smiled. "Baby," I said. "Why couldn't you stay with Dada?"

I loved him so much I could choke. I'd lost my old life.

We brought him here to America, away from everything familiar. He had no choice. In his orphanage referral photo, he was dressed in pink and scowled, like he'd been crying. I thought, Whoa. This won't be easy. The orphanage nanny had written to the placement agency that he giggled a lot and pushed other babies away so he could have her to himself. Why wouldn't I want that?

Yu Chen had a huge, round head, round cheeks, dark-brown eyes, and faint eyebrows that looked half-shaved. A red scab filled the space between his flat nose and top lip. It never got wiped enough at daycare. When he laughed, his voice and body shook with joy.

I felt his soft skin from his armpit to his waist; his muscles—is he gaining strength? Is his blood flowing smoothly? His hair felt coarse between my fingers. I measured the tips of his fingernails—do they need to be cut? If they bent back and hurt him, it would be my fault. Little pale semicircles—his clipped nails—he called them moons.

"I bunny rabbit," he said. He sat and jumped on me. He smiled and put his body perpendicular to my head and pushed his feet under my pillow, to burrow under it.

Shifting, his body now lay across my forearms and elbows; his hair smelled of sweat and dirt. His past was secret.

I crooned "Rock-a-bye, Baby" to my toddler in a watery soprano. At the end, I sang that the cradle falls. I'd wept on my

first Mother's Day. Every good thing in my life meant something hollow for a stranger in a foggy city, across the Pacific depths.

When times were tender like this with my son, I wished for no end and no beginning. And what will my life be like at eighty-one, I wondered? My parents will be dead and the oceans will have risen. I imagined my son turning back into this age, this moment. Taking my hands in his, he will jump on me and say, "I bunny rabbit. You mommy bunny rabbit. We go hide in cave."

He'll collapse my lungs into my final breath, pick a dandelion, and blow the seeds in my ear. Puff.

Track Four

Sometimes, Yu Chen pretended he was inside me, in my uterus that he called a "universe." He'd made me into a mother since I held him at ten months old, in an orphanage across the ocean.

One day, Yu Chen called me a kangaroo, and himself, the joey. He acted out the pregnancy we never shared. We sat in the upstairs hall, my back resting against the wall. I moved him against my chest and zipped him inside his dad's large hoodie.

"I am growing," he said. He wanted this for himself. He was a fetus and then the infant again.

"Are you ready?" I squeezed his legs from outside the fleece. He laughed.

"You're born!" I unzipped the hoodie and brought him out to be rocked.

I'd never attended a birth, only friends' abortions, where, each time, I'd whispered, "So long," a prayer to that coda, to those splitting cells and tissue sucked into a hazardous waste disposal unit.

Sam and I savored Yu Chen's childhood; we bathed and fed it. We lay with him as he fell asleep, singing and relaxing into his beauty. It was like being drunk before the spins, utter peace. We wanted to slow time, knowing how quickly it went, whereas Yu Chen was eager for the future. He was always inquisitive, eager to play outside, run, climb, laugh, smash sticks

against trees, dig bridges and tunnels, read books, and make sushi with “invitation” crab.

Yet Yu Chen often panicked when I dropped him off at daycare, weeping, wailing, clinging, arching away from caretakers toward me—wanting, desiring, and craving me. I got teary and short of breath, walking to the car or the bike or pushing my legs forward on a long walk home.

People who liked labels had one for me: “adoptive mom,” as I had one for his original mother: “birth mother.” But Yu Chen didn’t call me “adoptive mom.” He knew he was from an orphanage and had three moms, including his nanny, in his short life. He was proud of having more mothers than other children. I was mama as he learned English. Then I became mom.

He often took off my sunglasses so he could see my eyes.

He sang, soothing himself, “Mommy, Mommy, Mom.”

Yu Chen asked me to make a nest. I spread my legs out like a diamond under the quilt. He rested on top, cradled by me, his head on my thigh. I was the mommy bird and he was the baby. I pretended to feed him. Through accepting this basic need, whether a sweet cracker when he was in my arms in the orphanage or an imaginary worm in Portland, he claimed me as his mother.

He named my breasts Little and Cutie, or Mom and Dad. He told me I could cut them off with scissors since I wasn’t having any more babies. “I’ll be your baby forever,” he said, “Even when I get big.”

Yu Chen asked if Chinese people gave him to the orphanage. He knew, in a simplified way, that Chinese “workers” used his baby photo and our photos to match us. “Workers,” to him, also operated concrete mixers and cranes. They were his heroes.

“Your Chinese mommy gave you to the orphanage,” I answered.

“What’s her name?” he asked. I wasn’t sure what to say.

“We don’t know,” I said. “Should we name her?”

“No,” he said. “I want to make her a paper-plate flower with one eye, like a daisy, and a long paper stem.” This came from a sweet boy who picked flowers for me—dandelions half crushed in his palm. I hugged him, but I hid my tears.

I wondered what ghosts were in him. I asked him if he missed his Chinese mommy. “I love her,” he said, “but I don’t miss her anymore.”

On our mantel rested a pale-gray rock, the size of a child’s fist. My dad had found it near the orphanage gate. It may have been from the last place Yu Chen’s birth mother saw him. He must have wailed. His cries can pierce. I liked to imagine she breastfed him and whispered all her joy and pain to him.

I sent photos, letters, and money to his orphanage, to his nannies. Would they remember him? I pined for his birth mother, what she couldn’t experience. He turned to me when he was sad, wiping long strands of snot across me, dripping blood, wanting me to wipe his butt, buying me the sappiest cards from Fred Meyer. He hummed before his toys killed each other. I monitored his contented engine of life.

Yet he was so prone to tantrums, said to come from the initial “disruptions”—the cataclysm of adoption. All systems were set for him to bond with his mother. After two and half weeks that ended. Then, a room full of babies, also traumatized. No wonder he was jealous for years of other babies. It was a survival technique to protect limited resources. Scarce love, sparse amounts of undivided attention.

In 2009, Yu Chen started formal education in a predominantly white city, raised by white parents. His skin was dark brown, with a few freckles and perfect, smooth muscles. His skin was soft but tough at the knees.

His kindergarten teacher said, “Don’t touch other children.” But he couldn’t help it. To touch was to learn, to be in this world

and the magic world of Santa, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny. We blew nighttime kisses into the air to his nanny and first mother in China.

If he'd had a tantrum about each day with us that lasted at least fifteen minutes, then, compressed, over four years that equaled more than three hundred and sixty-five solid hours of screaming, crying, throwing, kicking, biting, running away, hitting, slamming doors, ripping up paper, spitting, and yelling.

One night, Yu Chen got riled up and ran away from me, throwing popcorn around. Later, he bit Sam. The heat caused rashes on my neck.

Seeking guidance, I took Yu Chen to an adoption specialist. I begged Sam to come with me, and he agreed. But over the course of the appointments, I often took Yu Chen by myself. The office was across from a café. After the sessions, which often brought me to tears, I'd cross the street to get a latte for myself and a steamed milk for Yu Chen. A warm grounding, and a slip, for him, into dream land.

Mary, the adoption therapist, wrote: "I am not surprised that he has meltdowns. They come from deep in his unconscious in the form of anxiety. Hold and rock him, predicting when you see the signs before the actual eruption. If he does fall apart, teach him that he pays back the time he has used for the meltdown. Putting on a 'brain coaching hat,' you can work with him when things are going well, to supply information to his left cortex on handling his feelings, speaking clearly and slowly, giving him reminders and practicing with him on calming his body, being aware of it and where the feelings are felt, breathing slowly and deeply through his nose and out of his mouth."

During one tantrum I tried to take her advice, I said, "Let the volcano out, Yu Chen. Don't let the volcano control you."

He stood, out of his mind, and yelled, "You're a liar! There is no volcano inside me!"

At the next appointment, Mary showed Yu Chen a large heart. She said, "This is your birth mother. This is how big her heart was when she had you. She loved you more than anyone." Then she took scissors and cut the heart in half.

I didn't think Yu Chen was paying attention. He walked to the sand table to arrange helicopters and plastic animals in a battle.

Mary said, "Yu Chen, listen."

I sat on the couch, listening to the bubbling of a fountain that was supposed to soothe. The room was always chilly.

Mary held the pieces apart and said, "Now your birth mother's heart is broken."

Yu Chen looked at me. He crawled across the room—something he hadn't done since he was little. When he reached a plastic baby doll in a basket, he picked it up, along with a plastic doll bottle filled with white liquid. He handed them to me so I could cradle and feed the doll.

We didn't get tape to secure the parts of the Chinese mother's heart. We left the pieces, and laid a heart representing him, and one for me, on top of it.

At home, he asked, "I was left at a gate?"

"That's what it says."

"Hmmm. Maybe that's why I want to be with you. Always."

Years later, when I was putting Yu Chen to sleep, he said, "I want to be rich to find my mom."

I asked, "Do you want to go to China?"

"No." He paused. "I want to find my mom . . . Well, you're my mom?"

"For right now?" I asked like a journalist, but I was curious. How far would he push the truth? I knew when he got mad at me, he felt I was a stranger, like a babysitter.

"No, for my life," he said. His bed was covered with handmade quilts. Dream protectors.

Then he asked, “Why do moms not tell what their babies’ names are before they’re given away?” He talked in the dark, with me scratching his back, along the curves of his spinal cord.

“I don’t know.”

“Why not mine?” he asked. He wanted to know his name, his pure identity. “Why did they give me away? I’m not a little toy to be given away. I’m a person! Why didn’t she run away with me in a car?”

“She might not have owned a car,” I said. “She might have been poor and not known what to do.”

“Why didn’t she run away with me in a wagon?” he asked. All logical extensions of his practical mind.

“I think she loved you very much.”

“Well, why wouldn’t she? Is that a question or what?” he asked. I had to laugh. Of course she would love him.

On his eleventh birthday, Yu Chen asked me, “Has my mom forgotten me?”

I said, “No, never.”

SPECTACLE

—OF THE CHILD SAYING to his mom, “Can you wash my tooth off? It’s bouncing around my lunchbox. I was eating Chex Mix from Hunter and it’s kind of dirty.”

—Of a camper on a Girl Scout cot. Down one leg: pink, puckered skin. The girl and her friends were in a pit. Someone squirted lighter fluid and dropped a match.

—Of tumors cracking open the wife’s bones. The wife, high on fentanyl, talks to chipmunks no one else sees.

—Of the boyfriend, drunk at the party. Dickies on the stereo. He wants to stay on the bathroom tile floor because it’s cool on his cheek. But a girl wants to pee. The boyfriend refuses to leave, so guys drag him out and punch him. At home, the boyfriend throws up blood in the tub. The rock girl documents the evening on a paper bag.

—Of Tommy, the troublemaker. In sixth-grade health class he passes around a *Penthouse*, but the brain is through reading garbage like that!

—Of the husband throwing a Converse sneaker against the son’s wall, and yelling: “I was trying. The divorce is on you.” The wife sneaks on the husband’s phone, seeing photos of a dark bedroom, of trees bending in silhouette, sent as texts to the woman he loves. *Better Call Saul* makes her cry.

—Of the middle-school girl rating list. Katie gets A+ in all categories. The brain is not on it.

—Of a young woman greeting the rock girl at a party. She sticks her finger in the hole at the crotch of the rock girl's jeans. The hole isn't a temptation—it's laziness. It's an anticorporate gesture to the corporations that don't want her. The finger doesn't want the rock girl, either. The hosts' secret cameras record bad behavior. But not this.

—Of being thirteen. The brain wears a new jumper to school, but it doesn't match her shoes. Billy, Adam, and Paul throw rocks at the brain after Dawn runs home.

—Of the husband, erased. Deep pockets of a sleeping bag where he'd slept. Could the fleas have crawled on his balls? The house is marked with clutter and dust. Fleas jump on the son's iPad. The husband leaves for China, and the wife kills dozens of fleas, combing them out of the cat's fur and marking hash marks on yellow Post-its.

—Of a stranger wearing an "I love my husband" t-shirt with an arrow pointing left, but to the left is only the ocean.

—Of Rick, nineteen years old, calling the brain on the phone. He'd hitched up to Virginia from Alabama. He tells the brain, who's fourteen, that he has sex with other girls because "I know what I'm missing." The brain drinks a slug of bourbon, follows it with milk, and throws up in the sink.

—Of twenty-six. The rock girl dances onstage during a band's cover of "Shattered." She jumps off the stage and the crowd parts. She lands on her knees.

—Of a cousin's wedding, and bagpipers play. It's all sea wind and cheese cubes. Attorneys in khaki. A stuffed eagle in a cage. Does the cousin remember? When he was young, and his parents had split up, the brain had asked him, "Have you had a wet dream?" And he punched her in the stomach.

—Of the bus ride home in seventh grade. These jerks pull on the brain's hair. The brain turns around and gives them the evil eye. She's not going to take anything from anybody.

—Of the cousin whose girlfriend reads *Getting High at Home*.

The cousin snorts Glade aerosol air fresheners. His girlfriend and her friend drink Coca-Cola, crushed aspirin, and a shot of nail polish remover. “Desperado” plays on the turntable, and the two girls sob.

—Of the rock girl dancing all night and ripping her dress. She hits a frat guy in the spine and swallows vomit twice. One guy gyrates with two cups of beer, and another dances with his skateboard.

—Of an alcoholic farm lady who sells chicken eggs that are often rotten and black. She seems mysterious to the boy and his brothers, as are the reasons their dad keeps buying her eggs.

—Of the son’s friend drinking bubble tea. Tapioca balls lounging against his tongue. He swallows. He lies flat on the twirling playground equipment. The boys laugh, waiting for their friend to puke. He pukes. They film it on their phones: intimate, warm.

—Of the *Saturn* rocket. The gleam. The wife’s eyes are wet in Houston with the pregnant sister-in-law and other assortments. The chocolate truffles nestle in paper wrappers. The wife eats her in-laws: the caramel, the salted hazelnut, the raspberry filling. The wife returns to the apartment and bleeds big chunks of a nonbaby into the toilet. Now the wife can drink.

—Of the subway ride. A grandpa leans in to look at the map. The grandson kisses him on the butt.

—Of the mother telling her daughter, “Bailey’s not dead. He’s still here. I hear him whacking his tail on the floor.”

—Of the stranger at Lost Lake. He yells at the fire, “Got my clothes! Got my drugs!”

—Of the hand above the piano. It wants to close to a fetal position. Of the piano teacher saying to her student, “Notice the highs and lows and let your unconscious take care of the middle.”

—Of the teen boy smashing Christmas ornaments in a stranger’s backyard.

—Of the grocery cart across from rock girl’s apartment. The rock girl and her Lower Haight neighbors huddle around the cart

but touch nothing. A Converse sneaker rests on the wire basket. The rest of the man's body is folded down where one might put diapers or paper towels or beer.

—Of the preteen seeing worms that want to escape the petri dish and his friend who tries to burn them.

—Of the stepmother with cream cheese in her hair. Vodka yogurt sunrise. Her husband gets angry. She isn't filling the pickles correctly. The visiting couple, the stepson and his wife, flip through old auto mags in the breakfast nook. The stepmother throws the turkey gizzard at them, hot from the pan.

—Of the pickup on fire. Black smoke drifts to Hot Lips Pizza. The mother and the feral teen drive toward the smoke, not knowing about the man inside the truck. Not knowing the man had parked it in front of his girlfriend's place. The teen eats a slice of pepperoni. The mother has cheese.

—Of the boy snorting teen baby's dandruff off a scuffed desk. The boy doesn't know what it is—he sees powder.

—Of the blonde chimera sock-skating down the hall. A San Francisco, blue-eyed scream by way of Idaho. A banjo-playing ghost wrangler and unrepentant gypsy boy thief. She opens the freezer, takes out a bag and another and spills out clothes—lace tops with rips and bloomers with ribbons. She yells, “Santa Cruz hippies gave me scabies!”

—Of the cat tormenting the mouse. The mouse's screams enter dreamtime. The small gray body is left by the wife's side of the bed. She still has a husband, warm, pressed against her ass. In the morning, he throws out the corpse.

—Of seeing the Buzzcocks at the I-Beam. The rock girl punches another girl in the back because she'd stomped on her toe with high heels. The rock girl can't understand fake punk slam dancing.

—Of the basement: the musical instruments, amps, cords, and dirt from another life. The band jokes written on the sheetrock. The husband tells his wife that if he'd jumped, he wouldn't have left a note. The wife sobs on the concrete floor.

—Of Barbara throwing Brandon’s guitar across stage. She kisses Anne and draws blood with her tooth.

—Of the car guy, 1990. Mission District. The car guy says he has thoughts about dangerous fucking, and he jumps out of the rock girl’s Valiant. She goes to Chas’s and drinks tea, listens to Sonic Youth. The car guy says he’s found beauty by meeting the rock girl. The wheel hub on her Valiant is busted. Then the car guy breaks a pilot light. He sleeps with the rock girl though he misses his girlfriend, who’s screwing a rich guy in London. The rock girl makes up a boyfriend named Fred. The car guy drinks, takes mushrooms, and snorts speed and cocaine. He says that the rock girl is trouble. Outside the barred window, someone yells, “Norman, you abandoned me in the middle of an operation that went sour!”

—Of the devil in the walls. The car guy, now old, returns to Seattle later than expected. He’d been visiting his new girlfriend, the former rock girl, in Portland. The car guy’s bedroom wall bubbles with black mold. His adult son hovers in the doorway, so jealous, furious that his dad is in love. “Who are you?” the son says. “What. The. Fuck.”

—Of the son telling his mommy about secret friends. He says, “Dad will build a fire. He will hold up a spoon, see them, and shoot them. Then they will be dead.”

COLD PLUM WINE

I TESTED STRESS. I am stress. That's what my wife told me. I stressed her out. Airplane wings have flex. Otherwise, the planes wouldn't fly. At LAX, when I crossed the threshold to the 737-MAX, I paused, almost the last one onboard, and peered into the cockpit.

At Boeing we put airplane wings into fatigue state. If people saw the corners we cut, they'd see why I don't like to fly. Plus, human error. Pushing planes to their limits. Commerce. Profit. It's numbers. It's numbers. The right number comes up, and we fall into the sea.

The captain and co-pilot, both men, both with reg haircuts, had their backs to me. I wore my Boeing windbreaker, the one my wife had wanted to donate because it didn't fit so well. I'd gained weight on Olanzapine. Her concern touched me. I didn't let her know. I had a hard time expressing myself verbally, or I'd talk too much. I'd brought her something, though. In the duty-free bag was a bottle of Japanese plum wine.

Boeing's swag jacket and lanyard made me seem more official than I deserved, considering I snorted amyl nitrate for fun in my twenties and, when arrested as a teen, smoked a joint laced with PCP in the holding pen. I also took PCP instead of going to algebra class. My wife was in first grade at the time, sucking on a braid or trying not to pee through her tights. Maybe gluing hearts on doilies. But I was pimply and high as fuck, and I hallucinated people were perched in trees. Hostile. Wanting to swing down and slit my throat.

I fumbled with the duty-free bag and my computer bag. The wine purchase had delayed my boarding. I wanted something for our deck, even though my wife let my former buddy, Maurice, lick her neck at our last party.

My wife called me Clutch. I used to fix cars and smell like axle grease. Oil. She fed off that buzz, holding my waist when I drove my Honda GB500 to the Washington coast. I was her pitstop at the Island of Lost Boys. But she wanted money and status, so I finished my engineering degree and garaged the bike.

The captain's and co-pilot's monitor screens were yellow, waving, like the ocean. Like a kid would draw. I would move my hand to show my wife. If she were here. I didn't want to call her with my fears. She'd get irritated.

"Captain?" I asked. He didn't answer. I said it again.

My boss, in first class, said, "Tim, c'mon. You're embarrassing us. Take your seat." He wore a Boeing tie clip, already into his glass of wine.

I didn't want to lose another job. Not one that paid so well. Kept my wife in plum wine and turquoise. Kept her amused. Seattle was not like San Francisco, when we were young and did acid with roommates and messed around naked.

I ignored my boss and asked the pilot, "Sir, are you testing for that persistent noise issue?"

My boss stood up, smiling, but the smile was a threat. "Go to your seat."

I wasn't an authority. I was another passenger, seated in the back of the plane. Shouldn't that tell me my days at Boeing were numbered? Maybe my life, too. Boeing was a living death. Back pain. Long commute. Wondering who my wife was flirting with. Wondering if she was sleeping with someone at her graphic design firm. Maybe the guy she'd skinny-dipped with at a conference. Jerome. She laughed when she told me. But I cried.

I was gripping the fucking duty-free bag with the plum wine. Yamazaki Distillery Reserve. That shit I buy after every work trip.

I didn't enter the cockpit to pursue my theories. But something was wrong. Those yellow lines. Could I avert a disaster? "Captain, that noise problem." I said it loudly as I moved through the curtains to the main cabin.

There's pressure for Boeing to pass jets, get them out, get them in service.

"Boeing exists to support the war machine," I announced. A cabin flight attendant moved toward me. Her name tag: "Autumn." Her uniform tightened across her breasts. And she had Invisalign on her top row of teeth. Maybe she wanted to live. She'd invested in her teeth. My teeth were worthless. All that cigarette smoke and speed.

She said, "Sir, take your seat now. Follow me." She touched my elbow. I shuddered. I had a vision of her with a gun against her neck. Was she raped once? Should I tell her I sympathized? That I'd been through tough times, too? I shook my head. No, don't be a fucking wacko.

I sweated but kept my Boeing windbreaker on, and I nodded to a co-worker in the emergency exit row. An ass who cheats at cards.

Day after day, sucking the dick of the war machine. Even my patent, registered with my cohort, was repurposed for a Boeing Integrated Defense Systems weapon.

And a baby wriggled on his mother's lap in the row ahead of mine. Drooling. When you're a baby, you're kissed all the time, kissed like you'll never be again, not in public at least. And you don't kiss back so much as suck, like a sucker fish. Strangers would hug the dough coating your bones if it were culturally acceptable. Primates. Vestigial tails. Infant primates are passed around, cuddled, picked over for lice. Suckled by family teats. Auntie's. Mother's. Sister's. And the baby will forget this kissing, as he'll forget shitting himself.

I scanned the rows, memorizing the faces of the future dead.

Autumn waited as I squeezed the computer bag and the duty-free bag in the overhead and took my aisle seat. Across from me was a man who'd grown fresh scabs on his face, one on his forehead and one on his nose. He didn't exist as a human, but as the body that strangers' hips and ass would either turn toward or away as they danced with the next one to and from the aft. They would fear contact with him after they exited, as if his scabs imparted moral turpitude. He had messy white hair and blotchy skin, and it's certain he had a sad story attached to those scabs.

Our row was the worst on the plane. Far from the jet's center meant turbulence would be more extreme, and the auxiliary power units whined. The flight attendants wouldn't chitchat, and you couldn't count on them stocking enough cheesy wedges, not to mention Beefeater. The baby ahead of me was crying now.

Salty pretzel remnants and humus coated the dropdown tray. I gritted my teeth. I leaned my elbows on the filthy tray and put my hands over my ears. The toddler beside me arranged orange fish shapes across the tray and kicked, fish flying into the aisle, fish flying onto the floor, and yelled, "Score!"

I wanted to slap the kid's hand. The kid's mother had taken the window seat. She wore blue yoga pants and a flowy top with a trapezoid pattern.

"You read mommy blogs?" I asked her.

"What?"

"Mommy blogs? You read them? Or write them? Are you one of those TikTok mommy influencers?"

"Sometimes."

"You probably tell other moms to take the space they need," I said.

She gestured to my lanyard. "You must be an authority about planes, Tim," she said. "And mothering."

"S-s-sometimes I feel like a black hole of information." I got a small but genuine laugh. Now that I was middle-aged, older

women were more open and willing to show attraction than the younger ones.

“Do you think the plane sounds off?” I asked the mother. She put her AirPods in and ignored me. I looked around to see if anyone seemed perturbed. The scabby man was staring at his hands.

I couldn’t stop my leg from shaking. It started jittering, like how it used to when my wife was concerned about my mental health, before it made her angry. I put a hand on my leg to stop it and pressed my other hand to my ear.

Craning my neck, I looked out the oval window to see if I could sense any disturbance among the ground crew. The mother closed it halfway. I reached across to open it. Not caring if she thought I was aggressive or remote or whatever else they usually put on my job reviews or that my wife brought up in couples therapy. She looked sexy in counseling. Maybe how she squeezed a sofa pillow to her chest, or the perfume. She wore \$120 Chanel. Vanilla. At the last session, I sniffed her arm and said to the therapist, whom I hated on sight, “You’re an ogre.”

Last night, I’d stayed up late, huddled under the thin coverlet, thinking about the force of gravity and why birds can fly but humans can’t. How planes are tested and retested in the factory, but what if Boeing wanted to test one in real life, if it needed subjects to study like monkeys are studied? This kicking child next to me. This screaming baby ahead. Was this how I want to die?

The engines stopped and the pilot announced the fuel lines had to be drained. The sweet, nauseating odor of engine fuel entered through the air system. “The scent is normal,” the pilot announced. “We’ll be taking off as soon as the fuel is replaced. Remain in your seats.”

I undid my seatbelt, my hands shaking. I stood and opened the overhead to collect my things. Autumn and another flight attendant stood by me. My leg, still shaking, my eye, twitching. This flight was doomed, and people were filming me on their phones. The man with the scabs got up, too.

“C-F-I-T, C-F-I-T, C-F-I-T,” I said. No one knew what I meant. “Controlled flight into terrain,” I enunciated each word as if leading a seminar. I pictured the plane crashing into a mountain. Pilot error. Flames. Acrid smoke pluming into blue sky.

“The monitor,” I said loudly. “The monitor with the yellow. Yellow is caution. Why did they empty the fuel lines? Everyone’s so lost inside their screens they can’t wonder why they’re putting their lives in the hands of a pilot with a yellow monitor. I’m a Boeing aerospace engineer!”

“I ain’t staying on this plane,” the man with the scabs said. “Poison air.”

“I’m getting off too,” I said to Autumn. “I-I can legally leave.”

“Yes, sir, but you’re disturbing people,” Autumn said. “Leave now, quietly, or you’ll have to speak to the authorities.”

The mother moved her brat into my seat, not even waiting for me to shut the overhead bin.

Autumn escorted the guy with the scabs and me through the plane. I stayed silent. I passed the mothers playing hearts on their iPads, fathers wishing they could watch porn, clipped-faced women, children wearing Mickey Mouse ears, and teens with ear gauges, their dogs crammed under seats. I flipped off my co-worker and blew my boss a kiss.

The scabby guy’s name was Charles. Good guy, despite the scabs. We shook hands in the terminal and didn’t exchange numbers. He saved me from getting arrested. He saw truth in me. Because I had an ally, a witness, I didn’t make a scene. Didn’t make it worse.

I drove home from LA to Seattle in a rental, listening to the news, wondering if they’d mention a plane crash, but that plane didn’t fall from the sky.

The next week, however, another plane did fall. And they called me to the crash site. All onboard had been killed: two pilots, four flight attendants, and a hundred and twenty-seven passengers. The wind had ripped most of the clothes off the bodies. They’d

entered the world naked and left it pure. The lack of pressure made them pass out. Tunnel vision, loss of all vision. Unconscious when death passed through them. I always told my wife we existed in a half-conscious state. No better than mollusks. She wanted “fun.” I forgot to be fun. That’s why the marriage was failing.

There’s no one better to exam airplane failure. And maybe no one worse. I wasn’t sleeping, and I wasn’t taking my antipsychotic medicine. I saw things in people that confused me. Like implants.

The wreckage floated on the sea, news helicopters clattering and whirring above. Most of the deceased sank the first day, but when I arrived, two nude bodies had floated to shore, one wearing only one shoe, another only a torso, but with a lacy bra. Waves washed to the sand open suitcases, socks, cords.

I paced the shoreline. Was I bipolar? Was my wife correct? Or was that diagnosis modern bullshit to keep smart people like me medicated and in check? Like zombies.

I examined the wreckage with other investigators. Maintenance error, a jackscrew fuckup, a failure of lubrication had caused the crash. Loss of airplane pitch. The pilots couldn’t control the plane. It nosedived and the fuselage broke apart.

My wife left me and didn’t leave a note. I fed the dogs. I waited to hear the birds at dawn. The woodpecker, the starlings, crows, geese. I didn’t know where my wife was. Her friends wouldn’t tell me. I sent her photos of the dogs and she blocked me. I still watered my wife’s hydrangeas and jasmine on the deck, wondering if she’d come back.

I brought the plum wine and half a bottle of tequila to the deck one night. Clase Azul Reposado. Slow-cooked agave. Hazelnut. Vanilla. And a kick to the head. Naked, I stepped into the steaming hot tub.

The plum wine tasted repulsive, overly sweet, but I drank and smoked. I cursed my wife and forgave her. Those bodies, floating. They kept appearing in my nightmares. I wouldn’t want to live

with me, either. Crazy. Not always kind. Reaching over the edge of the hot tub, I poured out the saturated plums.

The crescent moon emerged behind clouds. I aimed the plum wine bottle at the string lights, released, and shattered a few. Finished off the tequila and smashed that bottle on the deck.

I licked my lips. Coyote o'clock. They lived in a den down the road by Crown Hill Cemetery. The howls buoyed me. I got out, tiptoeing around the broken glass, and collapsed on a teak deck chair, mosquitoes piercing and drinking me all night.

The raccoons surfaced from under the deck. They licked the spilled wine and ate the plums, coagulated and dotted by dead ants. The raccoons traipsed across the broken glass and bloodied their paws. One was a mother. And two were infants.

THE PROBLEM WAS STARTING

THE PROBLEM WAS COMING up with reasons to scoop rice on the plate one more night. The stove worked. She could boil water. Pasta. Rice. Pasta. Rice. Boil and pour and scoop and swallow.

The problem was the streetlight, which leaked through the blinds, and she could put the extra pillow over her head, but she feared the nightmares. She waited until the birds started singing or squawking or whatever they did at four in the morning from branches the cats couldn't reach.

The problem was her son: She forgot to smile at him. But she scooped the rice. She scooped the pasta. She scraped off the leftovers and filled and emptied the dishwasher. She forgot to shave her legs. Hair grew on her toes.

The problem was the weather forecast cycling through the months, and the egg yolk and wine glass stains on the tablecloth. The pieces of dried cat food stuck to the linoleum.

The problem was she couldn't delete the voicemail messages from her ex-lover.

The problem was that photo her ex-lover took of her, which she'd kept on her phone, where she's sitting on his kitchen chair with orange peels balanced on her nipples. Her tits look fine, but she has bags under her eyes and looks demented. What is happy? This?

The problem was Nancy, a Christian who sat on a PTA committee. Nancy sent an urgent text message with the orange

peel photo—a black bar superimposed over the eyes, and one over the tits. Nancy added a thumbs-down symbol next to the photo and typed a long screed.

The problem was the orange peel photo had been shared on multiple Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok accounts. She never locked her screen, not even when her son's friends were over. One boy, apparently, had also found her pot chocolate. He ate it all, though it was stale, and he got too high, crashed his bicycle, and sprained his wrist, thus, ruining his tennis season. That friend, unfortunately, was Nancy's son. Nancy had a lot invested in his tennis prowess.

Oh, my God. She dropped her phone and ran upstairs. Her son was hiding under the covers, though it was the afternoon. At fourteen, her son was growing so much he went through two boxes of cereal a day, but he still slept with a stuffed bear.

The blinds were down. His phone was on the floor and powered off, a bad sign.

"I'm quitting school. I hate you," he said.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked. She sat next to him, and he curled up tighter so she wouldn't touch him.

"I can't stop thinking about you having sex," he said.

"Don't think about that!"

"I can't help it," he said. "It's in this part of my brain," he pointed to his right temple, near a large pimple.

"You shouldn't think about me having sex. It's gross," she said. "Do you think about Dad having sex?"

"I don't worry about him."

The son deleted his social media accounts and refused to go back to school. For hours he hit tennis balls over the back wall. She watched him from the screen porch. It was easier to be silent.

She replayed the dead sex in her mind. The brain lit up the same parts through memories as if they were happening. Her ex-lover promised they would forget each other. He got colder the

more she cried. She wondered how memories shifted and moved to different parts of the brain. Like clothes in a dry cleaner.

Late-night Google was her companion. Dopamine and acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter, helped form memories and damned her to nightmares. Her ex-lover said she was exquisite. He'd had cataract surgery; he couldn't see her clearly.

The affair felt like having sex in a hospice, waiting for the death tone, but in this case the accompanying music was not dulcet harp tunes but the krautrock group Can. They met in her ex-lover's four-poster bed, whenever the wife stayed at her sister's, or hotel rooms with wrought iron bedframes. Yoga straps. Useful. Do anything. Don't leave marks. He can bruise. You can't. Don't look when his phone lights up. Don't assume others. We are holes.

Her son dropped out of school. Everyone he knew had seen his mom's tits. She told the school counselor she would homeschool him. Instead, she bought them two tickets to see the Australian Open, blowing out the savings from the divorce.

The problem was her ex-lover's email, arriving before the plane took off. When the wife came back, he said their marriage might still open for others, but not her. But he said he'd memorized her taste. She'd almost left her purse and iPhone by the charging station at the gate. She forgot to pluck the dark hairs on her chin and didn't monitor her butter intake.

The flight attendants told passengers to put their phones in airplane mode.

She compulsively reread the email while eating airplane pretzels. He'd *love* to be friends, but *casual*. The words vibrated on the screen. He had no *headroom* for her tears because this was a harrowing time with his wife. He wanted her to be a friend who wouldn't care about him. She had perfect tits, but he was not coming on to her. Gifts were forbidden: *Friends don't send friends chocolate*.

She'd lost language during sex. Language rushed back on the plane with crying babies. Her son's head rested on the fold-down tray table, while air currents buffered the plane above clouds. A red gash between them. Only in the air did people walk up and down aisles with blue pillows around their necks. She'd had a pain in her shoulder for months, during the sex thing, and her left hand would go numb at any thought of him, or any story that required empathy.

She would scrape her skin off and grow new skin, reconstruct her body from the nights of drinking scotch, being thrown on the bed, dozens of times.

Through satellite links, she texted, "No, we can't be friends," and more words in anguish, and a few clever things.

He quickly texted back, "Peace. Healing. Respect." And his initials. In case she forgot.

"Who are you texting?" his son asked.

"No one important," she said.

A baby wailed behind them. She shut her phone and said to her son, in the chill, "Should we kill the baby?" She tested out her old personality. The funny, crass one.

Her son beat on the tray table with his knuckles, listening to Queen. Bopping his head. Took out his ear buds. "What?"

She repeated herself. She hated doing that.

"Think you're funny?" her son said. "Think you're funny about killing a baby?"

"He's crying." But she laughed. It felt. Good. She woke every morning feeling dead.

For hours, she monitored the icon of the plane on the map of the Pacific, not letting herself think of what would happen if it, and them, fell.

The flight attendant brought them colas, and she clinked plastic glasses with her son.

"Did you know when you were little," she asked, "We put

the toilet seat up on an airplane, and you put your balls right where men pee?" She would crawl out of this bad thing.

"That's sick. That means my balls have been to exotic places." Her son showed her his phone. "If it's eleven-fifty-nine in the morning in Melbourne, tomorrow, why can't they predict the future for us?"

RESIST TECHNIQUE

TAYLOR SWIFT IS WAITING for her football star boyfriend to bring her a slice of pizza. And the headline below, jacked into my consciousness in this zombie scroll, states that a nuclear war would destroy civilization in only a few hours. Reward. Threat. Continue.

I'm reclined on a sticky pleather chair at my parents' house in the West Hills of Portland, Oregon. Forty-four, aging in dog years, I'm spread out, massive thigh expansion, barbecue chips within reach. I know secrets about Taylor that I can never tell, not if I want to stay in the business.

The dim room suspends me, but I need to finish artwork for Adira's album. The music industry got me my first house. And my beach house. All that's gone. Enemies. Backstabbers. Flat-out creative thieves. Therapist says don't go there, so I quit therapy.

My parents' house is my free crash site to regroup. I plan my comeback. Adira's album cover project could lead to posters, billboards, and a social media campaign, which could lead to more work on her label. Must lead to more work. I hate-scroll farther until I find a competitor, posing for yet another award. "Fuck her!" I yell.

Mom yells from the kitchen, "Gwen, language!"

"Sorry!" I dig into the bag of chips. The chips offer a proper salt ratio to my beer, which is half gone. My snack food logic would make no sense to others. The tongue has strong urges. Obey the tongue!

I head into the kitchen for more beer. Mom has the TV playing Fox News and is making a special energy smoothie with an immersion blender.

Mom looks good in an ikat-patterned wrap dress. Silver statement earrings and matching necklace. A diamond bomb on her ring finger. Coordinated shoes. God, even hose. She tells me I can go with her to her art appreciation group at the library.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask.

“Home Depot,” she says.

“Right. All those shelves.”

I’m still worrying about nukes.

The fridge offers nothing good. Mustard. Suspicious pastrami. A six-pack of nonalcoholic beer. I shut the door.

“Didn’t we figure out nuclear deterrence?” I ask Mom. “Haven’t we moved on to global warming as the big issue? We need to focus on massive species die-offs. Melting ice caps. Climate migrations and potential climate wars. There are tribal conflicts going on. Not to mention floating microplastics in our brains. Why is the news back to nukes?”

“What?” She sips her smoothie.

“The headlines! A nuclear apocalypse! Look, here. Oh, shit. I can’t find the article. Never mind. Is there more beer in the basement?”

“You drank it all.”

I have orange fingers from the barbecue chips.

“Did you buy more cheese dip?” I ask.

“It’s in the pantry,” she says.

I try the shelf-stabilized dip on stale crackers. Can I stomach my culinary downfall? I find that I can. My phone lights up with multiple notifications from my son. I power down my phone. He’s twenty-one but sends texts like I’m a target in a video game.

I drive to the store for more beer and see Paul in the wine aisle. Shit. He’s still sexy. It’s his down-and-out nonchalance. An ease as he stretches his lanky body to reach for a bottle. And he’s whistling. I turn and duck my head, all sweaty and jittery.

In the parking lot, he calls my name and catches up to me. He's surprised I'm back in town. "I thought you were in LA for good. Do you want to get a drink sometime?" he asks.

"I'm not sure," I say. "Things didn't end too well." I remember bong hits in high school with him and his friends. The coughing and the stumbling to the bathroom. Forgetting to wipe. Or not remembering to stop wiping. That kind of high. Stripping in the dark with other girlfriends with guys shining camping flashlights on us. Everclear parties. Falling asleep in slick piles. Did I love him? I must've told him. But I don't think I ever meant it.

"Don't be a stranger," he says.

"People don't move home unless they've fucked up. My dad still saws down trees. My mom verbally chainsaws down slow drivers, slow bank tellers, etcetera. They'll bury me."

"Quirky as ever," he says. "Put your number in my phone. I'll text." All the layers of people we've lost our hearts over are between us now. His broken teeth. My broken marriage.

In the car, I block his number. I unblock it. Then block it again.

I go to the library to kill time. I'd moved back a couple of months ago, but it's not like my parents want me there. Dad keeps reminding me of their "open door policy," like they're operating a food kitchen. I sit at a wooden table and flip through *Rolling Stone*, studying the new releases' album art, and my son texts that he's bought another Glock.

I text, "I don't want to see it."

He immediately sends a photo. Black and sturdy. It fits in his hand like all those Lego guns we used to stick in the Lego guys' hands.

"My toy," he writes. He's posed with it in the bathroom mirror. Duck lips.

I resist answering back. I fail. We argue. I have a son who loves Trump.

When I get home, Mom's sipping another smoothie. And I want a beer. Her dog, a crusty cocker spaniel, Sir Duke, hovers beside her. They move as one.

"What's wrong with him?" I ask. I should know. I forget.

"Cataracts," she says. "He moves by smell and memory. Knocking into things."

"He's like an old man. His pleasures reduced to food and licking himself."

"Don't be crass!" she says.

"He's a dog. All dogs are crass." I open my phone and check the news headlines and Adira calls. She's about to launch her first major release. She's a streaming star. A YouTube phenom.

I put her on speaker. "Hey, Adira. Did you get the album mood board?" I ask. "Isn't it sick?"

"Sick?" Adira says. "You can't dump slang on me." Her breathing sounds weird.

"Are you vaping?" I ask. "I thought you quit. Naughty."

"Tangent," Adira says. Mom's eyes are big. She knows of Adira. Her daughter is adjacent to the stars again.

"Adira, you're on speaker. My mom can hear you," I say. "Her name is Sharon. She likes smoothies and I like beer."

"Sharon," Adira says to my mom. "Tell her to come up to Seattle."

"Oh, God," I say. "Don't gang up on me. I'll take the train up from Portland. Tomorrow. Promise."

"Mom?" Adira says, "Keep her to her word."

"I love your songs," my mom says. I grimace and end the call.

I'm in downtown Seattle, in the cave of a historic cafeteria. The restaurant coasts on mediocrity. At a long picnic table, I pull off the bread and lettuce from my tuna salad. The lettuce, a translucent green more gift tissue than sustenance. Hand-rolled balls of sandwich bread dot my plate by the time Adira comes in, all

pink jumpsuit and white platform boots, and shag haircut precisely messy. Out of bed messy. Eyeliner messy. Plummy lipstick.

She greets me with a one-armed hug. Sits across from me. Beams. “You look fantastic!”

“Liar,” I say.

“Bitch, it’s true! I bought you a gift.”

I open the bag. A pair of socks that read “Hiya Cunt.”

“Cunt?”

“Designer. Forty-five bucks. But I got them free.”

Adira fiddles with the vape around her neck.

A boy fan comes over. He’s shy, skinny, maybe eighteen, and his friends at the other table are laughing at him. Adira convinces him to get her a piece of pie.

“Look at him go,” I say.

He soon returns with a piece of lemon custard pie on a paper plate. She kisses a napkin for him. Tells him to get lost. He blushes. Leaves.

“You can afford that,” I say. “Why did you make him buy it for you?”

“He wants to. People give me things all the time. Lots of homemade stuff. Witchy stuff. If I say no, I’ll hear about it on the socials,” she says.

I murmur back. Hungry. The tuna smells off.

She shows me the stats of her TikTok account. “These things come with responsibility,” she says. She pricks the top layer of her lemon pie with her fork. I resist checking my phone to focus on her.

Adira adjusts her pink pantsuit. “You like? Sample sale. Kind of retro, kind of hick.” She holds my hand across the table, in between mouse-sized bites of lemon custard pie.

The pie is ultra-bright yellow and pillowy white. I say, “That yellow would be a good yellow for Mr. Sun, like in a kid’s book. For sure, Mr. Sun is poly.”

“All fruit pies are poly,” Adira says. “All that fruit curd and gelatin and meringue folding in on each other.”

I explain I want to use the resist technique, meaning I'd smear acrylic medium over printed photos, put them face down on heavy paper, and get a reversed, blurry image. I show her examples on my phone, and she nods, excited.

She texts someone. Pauses, asks me, "What did you say it was?"

"Resist technique." I eat five more balls of bread.

She goes back to her phone, bites her lip. "They might want me in a bikini. Any amount of skin."

"I can do strange and beautiful. I promise," I say to Adira. She pretends to eat. Fingers her vape.

"Did I tell you who DM'd me?" Adira opens her phone and shows me a nude photo of a slutty and well-hung comedian. I try not to hate her. I have no one.

"I'm seeing him tonight," Adira says. "You can see why."

On the train back to Portland, I open my phone to list my food.

1. Tuna (will it make me sick?)
2. Balls of bread (do they count?)
3. Lemon pie (will it give me cancer one day?)
4. Train fries (many – no salt tmw)
5. Altoids (many)
6. Train Coors Lite (desperate)
7. Train cheese and crackers plate (meh)
8. Train grapes (only the ones that weren't browned at the tip)

Adira texts me: "Great to see you. Wild, huh? My date? Can we meet? FaceTime? I got more info from Nils. Head of A&R, though you know that. Your NYE 'date.' 1990? Naughty! Lol. He needs the art ASAP."

I heart her message and text: "Bad connection. Will call ASAP from Portland." Out the train window pass rhythmic blurs of fir trees, bridges, water, factory buildings.

Eleven days of immobilization. Back in the den. Another beer. Everything screams that I need the job. No one from the industry's hired me for a couple of years. I have a bad rep. "Difficult." "Dated." All the recent design work is through my mom's friends. Yes, Republicans.

But I have no real ideas for Adira. Everything seems too stale for a collage.

Mom brings in printouts of messages on Adira's fan Reddit. It's a long list about her new release. Even about what her album art might be. They know more than I do?

I feed my anxiety beer, procrastination cheese, Words with Friends. I do jumping jacks. When I'm particularly low, I stalk Paul online. He's raising goats in Scappoose.

"Mom, I can read about Adira's fans on my own. On my phone."

"Trying to help, honey," she says.

I move to the chaise lounge outside. My parents' patio has been power washed. The bird feeders are empty. The rat has crept under the stairs, and my dad wants to poison it. The fox has eaten the chipmunks, and my son is hunting ducks. I don't know where. He has his guns. He'll have his feathered corpses. I list more food on my phone:

1. Haddock
2. Asparagus
3. Scotch with ice and a splash of water
4. Beer
5. Celery sticks with peanut butter
6. 2 grapes

Mom carries Sir Duke over to me. She holds his leg in my face.

"No, I do not want to look at the cyst."

"But I think it's infected."

"If it's infected, go to the vet. Gross." I see the lump on its leg like a bad omen. A defect. Proportional to a human cyst, it would protrude and hang down about four to five inches.

“It might be cancerous. Can you touch it?” Mom asks.

“God, no.”

“He has a name. He’s your brother.”

“He’s not my brother. I have a real brother. Sir Duke licks his butt. Can’t you see I’m trying to work?”

“You’re sitting. Lazy.”

“Artists sit. I’m waiting for inspiration.”

My notifications ping again. Still holding Sir Duke, Mom picks up my phone from the patio table. “You got a text from Adira! That’s great, honey.” She’s holding my phone above her head. I stand and try to take it back. She’s laughing, cackling.

“Mom, you’re crazy! Give me my phone! Boundaries!”

She hands the phone back. I read the texts. I skip over my son’s Glock photos. But holy shit, Adira’s sent a lot of them. The last one says she’s headed to Portland.

The doorbell rings. And rings. I push by my mom so I can open the door before she gets to it.

Adira walks in. Ripped jeans, padlock necklace and a choker and beads, white cropped shirt, heavy black eyeliner. I’m in pajamas. We sit in the kitchen and my mom hovers, offering her a smoothie, bragging about my winning art from high school.

“Mom, leave!” I sound like a teenager. I get Adira a bubbly water.

“The world doesn’t run on favors for nothing,” Adira says, sipping the water. “Mind if I vape?”

“Go ahead.”

“And I’m doing you a big one.”

“You keep saying that.”

“It’s offensive to me that you’re insinuating I’m pressuring you. I’m having a herpes outbreak, for fuck’s sake. I got it from that asshole. And I have a photo shoot soon and feel like utter crap. So, are you following through or what?”

I reassure her I can meet tomorrow’s deadline.

Then, when she’s relaxed, I hold her hand and draw all over her arm with a thin Sharpie. Roses, thorns, a snake.

That night I prowl over the Hawthorne Bridge from west to east and back again, taking photos. The dark water shudders and glimmers below. I wear baggy pants and steel-toed boots. I photograph the rippling water and the bridges north and south of me. I try not to get spooked by bicyclists coming too close to me, whizzing behind, or cars clanging over the metal grids.

Back home, I Air-Drop the night's images onto the computer and sort them into my favorites. I create double exposures of steel bridges with older photos of sparks from fire pits on the coast. I add winter tree branches and photos of cracked ice.

Over headphones, I listen to Adira's new release. She has a steel-guitar player on one track. Pedals bending the strings, a dance partner to her voice. A catch in her throat, and a full, husky sound. Fucking hell. She will get what she wants. This album will take her there.

They want to sell her as sex. Code: big tits. Tight ass. Young. Even if her songs suggest savvy. Pain. Soul.

A close-up photo of Adira from Seattle. That one's good. I crop out her eyes. Maybe use that?

I print out a collage of cracked ice overlaid with an abandoned cement factory by the railroads, adding it to the other variations.

On scrap paper, I draw blobby creatures. They're egg-shaped with one circle in the center and stick arms. Is it a mouth? An eye? Sensing. Underwater minions. Spacemen. I finish another beer.

It's after three in the morning. I turn the radio to a Spanish station. I don't understand the words, the quick patter of the DJs, but it's keeping me up.

I lay out the best collage printouts on newspapers. The fridge hums. Kneeling on the kitchen floor, I paint acrylic medium over the collages. Then I place each collage face-down on a sheet of heavy, all-cotton paper.

While the acrylic dries, I walk outside to the front porch. The

rain brings down leaves from the curly bark maple and oaks.

Finally, the acrylic has dried. I pick up each print and put it on the kitchen table. With a wet sponge, I methodically rub off the acrylic from the heavy paper. Slowly, the reversed image of my collages appears. The texture is rough, gritty. The images are blurred. Mysterious. I wash the residue off my hands.

In the center of muted bridge steel and fires, I glue on an image of Adira's eyes. It's six in the morning. I text photos of the collages to Adira. I text: "Okay? 💕." Out the window, gray squirrels chatter and drop acorn shells onto the wet yard.

Hours later, Adira texts back that she loves them. Sends approving screenshots from her management. But there are some problems. She sends me the photos of her in lingerie. Texts: "Can you work one of them in? Cut the creepy eyes. Love where this is going!"

"Can I get an extension?" I text.

"Two days. Max."

I put a photo of Adira's lingeried body on a collaged-in billboard in a decayed cityscape. I send drafts, make changes. Whatever will bring me money. My mom provides coffee, no side comments, only kindness. She knows I'm close.

Then, Adira calls. The suits love the revision. I send in the invoice and my bank account information for direct deposit, though the money seems flat. This project is no longer a path to an award or prestige. It's another job, exactly how I feel about pet portraits for my mom's right-wing friends.

Chili bubbles on the stove, and I smell cornbread from the oven. The blobby creatures are stacked on the kitchen counter. A mom stack. I fan the drawings on the table. They feel alive to me, sentient. They're minimal, and that simplicity is their allure. They code innocence, like Miffy the rabbit, or Hello Kitty. Maybe I can do something with them. Embroidery. Silhouettes. They could be decals. But big. Blown up. They need to be gigantic. Like their

alien muteness is a social critique.

On a whim, I photograph and text them to a college friend I follow online. She's started a pop-up gallery downtown, above an indie bookstore. I think she'll understand them. Maybe not me but the art. I eat the chili, feeling that anxiety, a panic. One more list, I tell myself. I type in my phone:

1. Beer
2. Barbecue chips
3. Cheese dip and crackers
4. Chocolate chip cookie, left on the porch by a church lady
5. Lentil soup and bagel from Panera
6. Meat loaf with ketchup
7. Chili
8. Cornbread
9. More beer

My art gallery friend texts and invites me to a party. I find the Hello Cuntly socks in the clothes hamper and wear them with platform shoes, white cropped pants and a blue eyelet shirt. I open my phone and delete all the food lists. Don't need them anymore. I hug Mom and Dad, pat the dog far from its cyst, and leave. I feel strange, not weighed down. Starting the car, I turn up a KC and the Sunshine Band disco hit. I know this feeling. I'm happy, and I scream it out the window.

DIAL-A-POEM

Raymond:

I DUNNO IF THE outdoor heaters work well, but I've got to smoke. I'm quitting. I didn't mean to be a shit the other night at the open mic. I wanted to make my buddy Jon laugh. He lives in an RV by the road headed out to the airport and sells pot. Back in the day, a couple of his regulars ended up in Soundgarden. True story. Are you cold out here?

[Bridget: "—"]

No, I won't introduce you at some future time that will never occur. He's an evil motherfucker. He steals my girlfriends, or did, I don't have one now. But you're a candidate! And I'm bigger than him. Don't laugh!

[Bridget: "—"]

I'm not a pervert. I've known him since I was a kid. Guys check each other out. Human curiosity.

So, I went up during intermission, not thinking about whether the mic was on or not. I mean, I assumed it was on. But my booming voice through the PA surprised me. The stage wasn't really a stage but a plywood structure in the corner of the room, only six or eight inches above the floor. But it signified something.

It meant people should look up when someone approaches the mic, and then they can go back to their phones. I'd eaten a spicy chicken burrito. Made me gaseous. Does that happen to you? And I'd smoked a lot of Jon's pot.

At the mic, stoned and gassy, I said, "Shut the fuck up." I regret being rude. And I regret telling the people my story. They didn't appreciate it. It was like this raccoon was staring at me before I even started.

[Bridget: "—"]

Not a real raccoon. There was a large photo of one above the bar. It got me spooked a bit. A raccoon has power. It's scrappy and can live anywhere. I was going to tell this insane story, and the motherfucker was glaring at me. A trickster.

Shit. I forgot to tip the bartender that night. I'll tip this one, though. I'll tip him good. I told the audience about a real miracle. But they jeered me. Do you want my coat? You're shivering. Here, have more nachos.

[Bridget: "—"]

Sure, I'll buy you a Diet Coke, too. If you stay. Ha ha. Are you sure you don't want a real drink? You look like you could use one. Not in a bad way.

But don't leave yet. Please. I want to hear more about you.

[Bridget: "—"]

Flight attendant? No shit. I don't fly anymore. Panic attacks.

Yeah, so at the open mic I told this story that happened when I was twenty-four. It was a miracle. It started out like any normal weekend. I was riding my Bonnie, a Triumph, out to the coast. I loved that ride. But it didn't have wind protection. Takes a toll on

the body. What I lacked in natural stamina I made up with snorting speed. I had a girl on my mind.

[Bridget: “—”]

No, you’re prettier. Seriously. When you’re riding, you gotta be careful about painted road markings. They can fuck you up. And the engine heat can wear you out.

By the time I got to the state park my hands were stiff. I walked toward the harbor, feeling shaky. I smoked a cigarette. It was windy, but I managed to light it.

Yeah, you can have one of mine. Sorry. I should’ve asked. Here, I’ll roll you one.

[Bridget: “—”]

Toward the ocean, I passed a concrete wall and saw words written on it in yellow chalk: “You have come this far, now say my name.” The only word that came to mind was *father*. He was a poet. That’s what his obituary said. First words after his name. Let me get us a couple of tequilas.

[Bridget: “—”]

Yeah, I hear you about your father. They can be pricks.

So, the wind picked up in the scrub oaks. No one else was around except a couple of beachcombers. Some gulls fighting over a crab. That kind of thing. The waves were rough, so lots of ions. I love that shit. I walked farther toward the shore and picked up a small gray rock. I held it to my temple like it was a gun, thinking of my grandfather.

[Bridget: “—”]

Yeah, my grandfather killed himself. They say he came back from World War II and put a bullet in his brain because his wife was screwing someone.

[Bridget: “—”]

Yeah, my closest male relatives in the paternal line didn’t live long. By choice. Sometimes I feel cursed. My dad offed himself, too. I was fifteen. He fell or jumped, I guess. He landed on a city sidewalk and didn’t even leave a note. Or no note I know about. Maybe he left one for my stepmother.

Can I sit by you? I need some body heat. You’re so cozy looking. Cute.

[Bridget: “—”]

Here, let me get that eyelash off your cheek.

[Bridget: “—”]

Storm clouds were forming, but I wanted to explore. I climbed on the breakwater wall and threw the gun-shaped piece of flint onto the cement. It shattered. It shattered like my father.

[Bridget: “—”]

Yeah, it’s heavy for a date. I always sabotage dates. Here, let me roll another cigarette for you. You need some quarters? Why don’t you choose something on the jukebox.

[Bridget: “—”]

Tom Petty? Okay. I prefer Tom Waits. No judgment. But hear me out. You are paying attention, right? I crossed the sand to

the shoreline, gulls scattering as I approached. And the sea and the sky seemed to fuse. The concept of “now” had no purpose. My eyes filled with tears, and it started to rain.

I headed home in a downpour and about a mile into it, I wiped out. The bike slipped from under me and I fell hard. My leg was scraped up bad. When I took off my helmet, it was flecked with blood. You’ll never believe what happened next.

[Bridget: “—”]

In the sky I saw a space creature! An alien covered in gold. They can move faster than light but can also seem still. It’s a torture and a gift to see aliens.

You seem different than those people at the open mic. Can I hug you? It’s hard for me to share this story. At the open mic, I was yelling at those assholes to listen to me. They were laughing. The bartender asked me to leave—demanded it. But you seem curious? Open-minded?

[Bridget: “—”]

Why are you getting up? I’m not crazy. They all think I’m crazy. But I’m not. If you drive with me, I can show you where I’ve seen aliens. No. Forget it. Forget I said anything.

Bridget:

My story happened the summer I was thirteen. I’d found a flyer at the library bulletin board that said “Dial-a-Poem,” and I loved poetry. I wrote it all the time. It was all drivel written in pink and purple markers and all about pining for boys. I even had a rhyming dictionary, looking up words that rhymed with *angst*.

[Raymond: “—”]

No, you can't read my poems! I don't write them anymore. I remember I was wearing terrycloth shorts, and they rode up my butt. I had scabs on my knees from soccer practice. It felt like a normal day, and I was normal teen girl.

[Raymond: "—"]

I don't have terrycloth shorts anymore. Maybe I should get a pair?

That day, I picked up the receiver and held it against my ear. I dialed the number on the flyer. My finger pressed into a plastic hole in the phone and rotated to the stopper. Release, whirr. It rang and rang, and I kept hanging up and trying again. I felt possessed and didn't stop dialing until someone answered.

The voice, which sounded robotic, knew my name. He sounded like he was far away 'cuz the connection was terrible. He said he'd expected me to call; it was uncanny. Like the whole Dial-a-Poem flyer was posted just for me. He guessed my favorite donut flavor. Crème filling and chocolate topped. He guessed which pop stars I'd postered to the wall. The Police. Duran Duran.

[Raymond: "—"]

Don't smirk. Gimme that lighter. My toes dug into the shag rug because I finally felt known. Shivers ran through my body. I still get them. Here, feel my goosebumps. And that night, I couldn't sleep. The sheets felt cool, but I couldn't relax. I knew something would shift.

And I was right, because I heard that same robotic voice in my room. The bedroom window was open, but I always locked it. Our dog growled but cowered in the corner. We both saw a creature, angular and glowing, but different than in any sci-fi movie. Its skin and protuberances were clammy and greasy. I scooted back on my bed, but it came forward. I didn't want it to hurt my dog, much

less my parents and sister, so I didn't scream. When it covered my mouth, I passed out.

[Raymond: "—"]

The creature took me out of the house, probably through my bedroom window. God, I feel sick. I might barf.

[Raymond: "—"]

Sorry. Guess too much tequila. I'm okay. But I'm dizzy. I'll finish the story. Then I really need to go. I have an early call for a flight to Cleveland in the morning.

[Raymond: "—"]

Yes, we're friends. Sure, we're buddies. After that creature took me, I woke in a cold room. I don't know how much time had passed. The ceiling was dripping a liquid that smelled terrible, like rotting meat.

I was stretched out naked on a slab high above Earth. I looked up at a concave mirror and saw part of my skull held open with metal spikes. My scalp was skinned at the crown, and my brain tissue pulsed under emerald lights.

The beings made strange noises, low trills, like reptiles or flying insects. Where there should be fear, I felt wonder. When they brought me back home, nothing was the same. I stopped having my period. I got bad eczema. And my sexual drive became insane until I started Prozac. Give me another ciggie, and I'll show it to you.

[Raymond: "—"]

No, dummy. I'll show you the implant.

WAY OF THE WORLD

YOU CAN GET USED to anything—like braces at age fifty-two—or that Frank, your daughter's drummer boyfriend, was missing half of his ring finger. They joked he'd lost it during the divorce, but the truth was, back in 1990, he was walking down a San Francisco street with some friends—a little buzzed after band practice and shots at the biker bar under the freeway overpass and a couple of lines of biker speed—and the MUNI bus drove by and sparked, stopped:

the trolley poles at the back had broken contact from the wires above, and someone stuck her head out the window; she had a shaved head with fringe bangs and wore dark eyeliner and purple lips, multiple piercings up one lobe, and she yelled, “Hey, Frank!” but he didn't recognize her:

then, he did—her name was Candy; his buddies—Mitch and Juice from the band and Dead Guy, who carried their amps for free and stapled flyers on all the fire-scarred telephone poles down Haight Street—had been teasing him just half an hour ago around a sticky bar table because she looked like a skinhead, and weren't they racist? and he was supposedly a peace punk, but maybe she was bald for fun?

Frank had made a pass at her on a rooftop that went horribly wrong because he thought she would think it was sexy if he put a cigarette out on his wrist like Darby Crash's sycophantic girl fans, but it hurt like hell and she laughed

at him and went into the bathroom to do some crank; and that night, a little buzzed, not too much, he was supposed to be thinking about his new bride, her body dripping wet after a shower at a hotel that smelled like Lysol, and the hotel sheets had felt a little gritty, but not after a six-pack, but on the bright side there were whales to watch (I mean, I researched it, there were SUPPOSED to be whales that time of year, too bad for them), but she didn't like to give blow jobs, which was kind of a problem, like would she "grow into it," or maybe he should have found out *before* their honeymoon?

Yeah, he should have his bride's body in his mind and not be lusting over Candy, this bald chick, who smelled like cheap incense and who was now whistling at him, she did have a bad-ass figure, and now waving that hand with the nasty rope bracelet (she probably gives head; she has a tongue piercing); and a crazy motherfucker in another row, HE stuck his head out the window and catcalled him, too, so Frank ran to the end of the block away from his buddies, away from the bus, away from the place he'd gotten shat on by a pigeon on another bad night, toward a stop sign; he didn't have a plan per se, but when he saw the back of the sign he leapt and hit it, not sure if his buddies were watching, hooting, mocking him:

he was up in the air with five fingers outstretched and he slapped the metal. OH SHIT! OH, FUCKING SHITTING HELL!

His wedding ring snagged on the bolt and a scorch shot through his hand; the nerves snapped and a hot melting happened down his arm and, oddly, his face:

the skin shredded on the sign had an echo pain along his cheeks, and he bit his tongue, and his mouth filled with blood, and he cracked his head against the pavement and blacked out. His finger:

filleted.

His finger that night:

half-amputated at SF General. His finger:

a stub, the skin pulled over and puckered in the center.

His wedding ring:

bloodied.

He wore the ring on a chain around his neck until he did hook up with Candy; she twisted the chain around his cock, and by God, he liked it.

I got braces, like I said, and stayed out of Frank's way, except when he brought me bubble tea. I sat and wrote a poem in a Saturday class for lonely people. We met above a dog grooming salon, a constant barking ache coming up from the floor. No one liked me in the class, but did it matter at my age? I read when it was my turn, and they knocked on the wooden table. That was supposed to mean something, but I'm no poet. This is my poem:

HOTEL SHEETS

If you're under the hotel sheets with someone you
just met,

you will miss the news from Athens, Georgia,

about the girl whose collarbone

got burned by a radiator,

or crushed by a boulder,

or maybe she fell off the truck or maybe she was
pushed.

She rolled onto gravel.

The snap of her collarbone. Sparks.

A new adult feeling.

If you're under the hotel sheets,

you won't see the green numbers on the clock.

But you might smell something new.

The armpit. Old Spice.

Or the armpit with no deodorant. Onion soup.

Or the feet, if that's how your bodies move.

You notice they smell like cheese

left in your lunchbox

Or pulled out from the sandwich.

Because you wanted junk food.

DUTCH TILT

BROOKE WOKE UP GROGGY in the wrong hotel. Not the band hotel. No “Shave and a Haircut” rhythmic knock on the door. She’d turned seventeen yesterday. Not even a day off. Sheet cake in a dressing room with her dad and the band: eh. So, she found fun. The AC shuddered the beige drapes. Blackout curtain behind them. Mini-fridge electric buzz. The black alarm clock blinked 12:00. She blinked. It blinked. Did the power go off overnight? 12:00. Taunting her. Shit, the pager? Where? On vibrate. She felt around on the sheets. On the bedside table. Nothing. She pressed on the light switch beside her and wiped her nose on her shirt.

TV cartoons seeped in from the room next door. A child screeched. Brooke heard other people’s showers. There was a phone number written on her arm in smeared Sharpie. She licked her finger and wiped off hash marks tracking her drinks.

Seems like a mid-level hotel room. She should shower. Put in her contacts. Or were they still in? She couldn’t focus. She feared other people’s hair on the shower wall. She feared the man next to her. She didn’t want to interact with him. Didn’t remember his name. Dave? Dale?

The satin comforter, twisted. She pulled up the sheets to look at her legs. Her own underwear. A plus. But sticky. She pulled them down, pushed them with her feet to the bottom of the bed. Her head throbbed. Her throat, thrashed. Hurt to swallow. She

leaned over by the side of the bed. Her Army surplus bag. Her guitar case. Sneakers. Jeans skirt. She slept like a runaway with her things close to her.

She sat up. Her armpits smelled like a rusty nail. Dave-Dale sat beside her, his legs on the carpet, his back to her. Hulking. Hairy back.

He turned to show her what was in his hands, her pager.

“Looks like some people are looking for you,” he said.

“What time is it?”

“Um, and good morning to you.”

“Goddamn it, what time is it?”

“Noon? Noon-ish? And a kiss?”

She shook her head and took the pager. The right arrow was flashing. She kept pressing the button to read messages. “911,” the LCD screen read. And another. And another. Her eyes were blurry. An urgency to call. She picked up the hotel phone and dialed through to the pager’s call center. Yes, she’d slept through the wakeup call. Duh. She sorted it out in a series of phone calls and learned that a van would be coming for her soon. She’d done this before.

I’m fucked. Her heart racing, she put her contacts in and got dressed. “I have to go,” she said, and opened the door.

In the hall, she put on one Converse, then another. Carrying her bag and guitar case, she hurried down the hallway, past potted plants, an EXIT sign, the ice machine. Running, though the case was heavy. Felted wallpaper. Room after room, closed. And a maid’s cart far ahead.

“Wait up!” Dave-Dale yelled. She could hear his footsteps. She ran faster. But he caught up with her at the elevator. He wore jeans, but he was topless. He leaned in to kiss her. Freckles sprinkled his nose. A nose ring. A deep crease between his eyes. He’d seemed younger the night before.

She squinched her eyes, trying not to scream. She had to pee so badly. She pressed her legs together. And hungry.

A family waited, their matching plaid suitcases lined up on a luggage cart. Two daughters, a teen and a toddler, and their parents. The little girl held a Beanie Baby, her thumb in her mouth. The mother pulled the girl's thumb out of her mouth. "Not now," she hissed.

Brooke's name was stenciled across the guitar case in silver.

"Are you?" the teen girl asked. "You're Brooke!"

Brooke didn't answer.

"Can I have your autograph?" she begged.

"Sure," Brooke said. "But I don't have anything to write on."

"Call me," Dave-Dale said. She winced.

"Can you go back to the room? You're missing half of your clothes," Brooke said. The teen girl giggled.

"Whatever," Dave-Dale said.

Brooke pretended to be in a plastic snow globe. A Tinkerbell with glitter fluttering around her. Better yet a fairy in a snow globe behind a waterfall. Can't hear! She willed the floor lights above the elevator to hurry to their floor. Her life was waiting for elevators.

Finally, a ding and the doors opened. She entered before the family, put her case across the opening to block them, and pressed the door close button.

About twenty minutes later, she carried her bag and guitar to a rental van. It was a four-hour drive to the gig in Sonoma County, a fairground, probably hot as fuck.

"Get in," the driver said. He was part of the crew.

She poked her head into the open van door before climbing in. She recognized a photographer seated on the back bench. They'd made out a couple of nights ago at another hotel bar.

"Oh, you," she said to him. "Barrett?"

"Bennett," he said, and slowly dragged on his cigarette. He flicked it out the open van window.

Old, she thought. They were all older. He had decent teeth. A soul patch streaked with gray. Brown, spiky hair. Brown eyes in a

face that crinkled when he smiled. He had a sardonic look, like she was a joke. But her face, her body, meant easy photography cash to him. Was he working for the band? She couldn't remember. Or *Billboard*, freelance?

To the driver, she said, "I feel like shit. I need to crash in the back." She ducked in and ignored Bennett.

There were no seats in the back, only a filthy liner rug. She put her feet on her guitar case and rested her head on her Army bag.

"Mind?" Bennett asked. He crawled to the back.

"Yeah, but I need to crash. I don't feel well." She checked her pager. Nothing new.

He sat next to her, elbowed her in the side. "Here, this will knock you out." He handed her a bottle of Robitussin DM from his photo bag. She took a full mouthful and coughed.

"It's got codeine in it." He leaned over and played with her hair, ran his hand down her neck.

She pushed him away. "Stop it," she said. I'm his puppy, she thought. Fuck if I'll fall asleep. I can't.

They pulled onto the highway. The driver kept his window down—he said the AC was broken—and he was smoking. She was carsick, but if she lay against her bag, her body away from Bennett, she could reach a drone state, lulled by the road noise.

Three male voices in the front of the van rose, arguing. She didn't know who was talking.

"The Red Rocker turned Van Halen around."

"Bullshit. Hagar doesn't have the fucking flash of David Lee Roth. Roth swims with sharks—punches them—and leaps back on the yacht deck to make sweet, sweet love to a nubile bikini girl."

"Like the one in the back?"

"Shut up. Her dad's paying us."

The words blurred into a backdrop. She put a cassette in her Walkman and set the headphones over her ears. Turned up the music. Her last boyfriend had set up the sequence on the mix tape

like she was entering one dark room after another, him holding her hand. And a sudden light, a courtyard of songbirds: it was “Lorelei” by the Cocteau Twins.

She drifted off. Then woke, startled. Bennett’s hand was under her skirt, like her privates were a claw game prize.

“What the fuck!” she said. “Get the fuck off me.” He moved back quickly.

“I thought you’d like it,” he said.

She scrambled forward to the bench seat and buckled in.

“Everything okay back there?” asked the driver.

“No one talk to me,” Brooke said. She curled her legs up, surrounded by dirty socks and crumpled fast-food bags. She woke up groggy. Felt dirty. The van door was open.

She saw the back of Bennett, walking toward the fairground entrance.

“Asshole,” she muttered. She stepped out with her gear to the fairground’s back parking lot, reserved for talent. Her dad was waiting by the van. He wore his tour lanyard, his rock business smile, his shiny tour jacket with all the cities they’d gone to and still had to go to. He was balding and wore a baseball cap, tight jeans, cowboy boots, t-shirt. Same every day. Stuck in the seventies.

“Glad you felt like showing up,” he said. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“You want to pick a fight now? I’m here. I’m sick.”

She insisted on carrying her bag and guitar case but stumbled, threw up, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. When she stood, her dad slapped her.

She stepped back. Felt her face. “Dad! I told you I’m sick!”

“You have to stop this unprofessional shit.”

Crying, Brooke followed her dad past band trailers and tour buses to her own dressing room, the trailer door up two metal steps.

“You missed soundcheck,” he told her. “Again.” And left.

“Daiquiri,” she said to Lenora, and Lenora, her friend and assistant, made a strong one.

Brooke sat on the dressing room table and kicked her bare legs. Stage clothes hung across a metal rack across from her. Next to it was a long card table of deli snacks and candy. Bottled water. A tub of generic beer. No wine. She hated wine. Rum. Daiquiri mix. Ice. She held her cheek with one hand.

“At least no one slaps you when you can’t find me,” Brooke said to Lenora.

“He’d fire you if he could. He was so pissed. So was my dad,” Lenora said. Her dad was the drummer.

“Well, he can’t, can he? And you have job security, too. This prison.”

“Stop the hysterics,” Lenora said. “This has been a shit morning.”

Brooke dried her sweat under a portable fan. “People keep whispering to me to go solo,” Brooke said. She yawned. “Should I?”

“But the tour is extended,” Lenora said to Brooke.

“I know. I was there, too. Right? With the cake?”

“The video’s picking up on MTV.”

“My video.”

“Yes, YOUR video. Can we change the topic? Sick of it.”

“Sure, if you call me Boss,” Brooke drank the last of the daiquiri and threw the cup toward a plastic trash can. Missed.

“Boss Bitch.” Lenora laughed and picked up the cup. “You know I can’t stand trash.”

Brooke walked to the clothes rack and pulled a jeans jacket off the hanger. “What about this one?”

“Santa Fe.”

“This?” a flowery dress.

“Denver.”

Lenora flipped through Polaroids she’d taken from the wings and fanned them out on a table. “You look good in this halter top. This says California. Virginal.”

“That ship’s sailed,” Brooke said. “You’re so pretty,” she said, holding up a Polaroid of Lenora and herself backstage. The beauty ranking hung around them, a sour perfume. Lenora had a heart-shaped face, short, gelled hair, and dark brown eyes. Pixie maelstrom. Unlike Brooke, Lenora never sucked in her stomach, had a zit, or fussed over lipstick choice. Didn’t want fame.

“Shut up,” Lenora said. “Here,” she handed Brooke a halter top.

Brooke put it on and pushed the jeans skirt lower on her torso, hanging off her hip bones. “God, I need panties.”

“I do NOT want to know.”

“I need my suitcase.”

“It’s on the bus.” Lenora sighed and said, “Hold on,” and pulled off her jeans and underwear. Left them in a pile. Pulled on a skirt from the rack over her bare legs. “Wear mine.”

“Uh, gross, but okay.” She hugged Lenora. “I love you so much. What about shoes?”

“Barefoot.”

Brooke tilted her head back so Lenora could apply eyeshadow and lipstick. Brooke wanted to be babied. Her mom never did it enough.

Someone brought her the set list. She nodded. A song by Neil Young as the encore. “Helpless.” She was sure her dad had chosen it as an apology.

The blanket fog of the codeine cough syrup had worn off. Brooke drank another daiquiri. Sonoma County Fairgrounds needed her numb, or she’d get pissed. Her skin felt raw between her legs. The ice in the daiquiri slapped her fillings. She put the drink down, close to her.

Brooke sang scales to loosen up.

Lenora read aloud parts of a review, and they laughed. A writer said Brooke’s voice was clear. But red, like a flare. Dangerous. Brooke could whisper-seduce or wail-vengeance.

Brooke had a secret name for the voice: Money.

People walked in and out. First, the manager, her dad’s, which

meant her manager, too, and she didn't like him. Didn't trust him. Not how he looked at Lenora. Perv. Married guys were the worst. Someone took her guitar to tune and set up for the stage. Kerry popped his head in. Her favorite sound guy. She insisted he do her stage mix.

"Anything you need?"

"I'm good. Love you." She blew him a kiss.

A DJ from the local station knocked and came in, had her do some station IDs, sign some promo photos and LPs. He had tribal tattoos on his legs, and Brooke wondered, while eating a granola bar, if he was embarrassed by coming in here. Obviously, not his scene. But it was his job. She laughed at nothing. He ate it up. He asked if her dad was jealous.

"Next question," she said.

Another dude, more tribal tattoos. He had a walkie-talkie and a big set of keys. A knife sheath in his belt loop.

"Where's your lanyard?" he asked.

Shit, Brooke thought. She must've left it at the hotel or somewhere.

"I don't need it," she said. "They know who I am."

He nodded. "Sure. But I'll get you another one, sweetheart," and led her from the trailer to the stage.

The band always did a few songs before her: their old hits, the ones with Dad singing. She stood in the wings, swaying to the songs.

Hot, flat California sun. And the crowd had its own weather. Murmurings and occasional shouts. A bra tied to a helium balloon, loose, rising. The crowd's need to press forward. No one started that need. But it compressed like an octopus against aquarium glass. They'd paid to see her, not her dad. Something about her age, a girl on the verge of woman, a girl testing her sexuality, made fans, the rock press, the DJs, assume she was fragile. Fragile with a grenade attached. Dewy. Breakable. Desirable.

The crowd had paid for a day out, a day in the dust. The fan girls wanted their guy behind them so they could sway as one, and the guys set claims on their girl's waist, like a starfish pulling apart a

mollusk. They all desired to sing loudly, unabashed, and feel transformed, briefly, during the choruses.

The sun glowed, brilliant and harsh, and Brooke worried her hands would be too slick with sweat and heat to play right. She wiped them on her skirt.

She saw the crowd as a group of wild animals. Could turn on her. Day eighty-nine of the tour.

The drummer, Lenora's dad, winked at her and held up his drumsticks. She walked out, feeling exposed in the halter top and skirt. And bare feet. A whistle from the crowd, like whistling for a dog.

She took a breath, walked to the mic, in the center. A guitar tech brought out the guitar, a silver sparkle Gretsch, and plugged it in for her. She made a drink shape with her hand and held it to toward her mouth, the global gesture for "You better fucking get me something to drink."

Dad had told her to hold the guitar with respect. It'll never be your friend until you write songs on it. And even then, it might betray you. If you stop practicing, your fingers will grow soft. The guitar will punish you. Her calluses were tough whorls at the tips of her fingers as the skin wore off.

Another whistle. Fuck. Her halter must be see-through. It was white. She didn't check.

She wobbled. All that alcohol. And a couple of low-fat yogurts. A granola bar. That's all she'd had today.

Fuck. What town was this.

She saw some greasers. Some freaks. One had an Iron Maiden shirt on. And that asshole from the van. What did he do? What did he photograph? Her skin felt dirty.

Time. She strummed the first song as it segued into her vocal part, what the crowd desired. Cheers. Her dad smiled at her. Grinning. He knows I'm Money, Brooke thought.

Brooke harmonized easily, hearing the hidden notes, fleshing out the melody and the rhythm, being a pulse and support, a bird

soaring above the main groove. It felt right, locked in, her voice a bell, her voice, an icicle before it shattered.

But Brooke knew the crowd could flip. Especially if the woman onstage was young. She could be louder than the men in the crowd, and some people didn't like that.

Brooke shimmied and posed with her legs outstretched, then a leg on the monitor, and no one could touch her. Not even the DJ, earlier in the trailer, who'd asked how she felt being a sex symbol in a band with her dad, and if she was a bad example. She floated.

The band blew through the songs with her on vocals and guitar until it was almost time for her hit song. Critics called her dad's music second-rate Tom Petty. Except for her. They liked her songs. They were obsessed with her voice, her sex appeal.

She finished a beer, started another. She yawned, squinted her eyes. So bright onstage. She looked up at the rigging.

Ten feet above the crowd. Eighty-four-foot across. Sixty-four-foot deep. An expanse. Everything she'd dreamt about. Planned for.

Her dad stood by the mic next to Brooke's, about five feet away. He looked at her and nodded. A guitar tech switched her guitars. She played a ukulele on this hit. Like a toy. Someone threw a teddy bear onto the stage. It almost beamed her.

She wrote the hit song, and the money went to Dad. They came to see her, and the money went to her account, controlled by Dad. She glanced stage right, to Kerry, her monitor guy. She couldn't hear herself. She did a thumbs-up sign. Needed more of her voice in the monitor speaker.

Staring at the faces across the barricade, Brooke spotted Bennett, up front, in the press area, with his camera pointed at her crotch. He paused and swiped his finger slowly under his nose, then pointed at her.

She stomped her foot. Acted like she was counting out the song, but the drummer had started it already. She stomped on the

offbeat, staring at Bennett. And he stuck his finger in his mouth, slowly, and pulled it out.

“That guy there,” Brooke said, pointing at him. She held the ukulele, not playing. “You, yeah, you. I’m going to beat the fuck out of you if you make that gesture again.”

Her dad put his guitar on a stand, rushed across the stage, and held her to him, like an embrace, but it was too tight. “Play the damn song,” he said into her ear. The bassist, rhythm guitarist, and keyboard player stopped playing.

“La la,” she sang. “Is that good, Daddy?” she said into the mic, “So, you can milk more money out of me? What are you going to do? Hit me again?”

The drummer counted off the song again, a little faster. 6/4. She wrote the song in 6/4, quiet-loud. She’d learned from the Pixies. Learned from grunge. Trapped in second-rate Tom Petty. Southern boogie. Party hits. And there was that asshole in the press area.

“Get him out of here,” she said, pointing to Bennett. A guy next to him elbowed him in the side. Laughed.

Her rage filled her head, emptied her, and time sped up. She needed the crowd to know her anger, to hear this twin, this visitation, the fury behind the voice they craved. The voice that held them through their private shit.

She said into the mic, “My dad’s making another ten grand off me today. Cheer if you approve.”

But people yelled to hear the summer hit, wanting to sing along. At every town, across America, they shouted her misery like they sang Radiohead’s “Creep,” that year’s hit. They sang it like they sang Nirvana’s “Smells Like,” from the year before. Vampires. Kurt knew. She was sure of it.

She heard her words flow toward her across the field, and from her dad and the bassist singing backup, everyone singing, “Burn the snake between my legs.”

They didn’t get the irony.

“Stop!” she turned from the crowd toward the band. But they wouldn’t stop.

“I’m not your summer fun,” she said through the mic. “I’m not your subversive flavor of the day, your forgettable cotton candy. This is true shit, I’m telling you. I’m still being abused.”

The band kept playing, and she screamed, “Fuck all of you.”

But the words weren’t heard by anyone. Kerry had cut her sound. She turned and yelled at him to turn on her mic.

Brooke threw down her ukulele and stomped on the neck. Shit. Barefoot. That hurt. Stupid. She picked it up and threw it toward Kerry. She kicked the teddy bear. The crowd was booing. Bennett, still there, still laughing and taking photographs of her.

Her dad, the pro, launched into “Helpless,” and the crowd stopped booing.

Thick heat. Wet heat. Brooke ran behind her dad, across the stage, stumbling, crying. A nightmare. Her heart pounded and she felt a rush in her ears. Sour acid taste in her throat.

The sun looked indifferent, almost murky, a white hole, done with this place, waiting for sunset and Helios to pull it in a chariot to the other side of the planet, where maybe it would look down on better foods, lavender, robins, blue jays.

Brooke, back in the trailer, wrapped herself in Lenora’s arms, shaking. They laughed, rippling, floating on a lake, fearing what their fathers would say.

“When I turn eighteen, things will change,” Brooke said. They opened the trailer door and sat on the steps, smoking, waiting. The pine trees, outside the fairground, seemed to wait for night, too. Their tops too tall to see. Terminal buds, edging upward.

A NATION OF BOMBS

THE MARRIED COUPLE HAVE vestiges of good sex, like when a phantom limb feels pain. He is her man, and she pledged him her devotion, but she mispronounced *troth* at the altar, so does her pledge of fidelity count? Like, forever?

If the couple wished, they could angle their gold-framed mirror against the living room wall. They would have to move the couch first and sweep the dog hair and dust.

The wife completes this angling on a Wednesday but not the sweeping. She bakes a pan of fudge brownies and eats half of them. The husband doesn't notice the mirror or moved couch when he gets home, but he eats the rest of the brownies. He leaves the soapy pan in the sink for her to scrub. She puts it under their bed.

To make their phantom limb appear, they need another mirror, the wife decides, at a right angle to the first. She would have to take down the closet mirror from their daughter's room and hope it doesn't come loose from the cardboard frame.

The wife moves the closet mirror on Thursday. She finds a baggie of pot at the back of the daughter's closet and smokes some from a carved apple. Her husband says she is more agreeable when stoned.

Her husband hasn't bothered to offer up good sex since the bombing in Oklahoma. A coincidence?

At her publishing house, the wife flips through obsolete American history textbooks from the recycling box. She is

dismayed that the paragraph devoted to that bombing, with its requisite vocabulary words in blue type, such as *terrorist*, *heartland*, and *commitment*, and its comprehension skill focus of making inferences have been deleted in recent editions. The event still appears in the timeline at the start of the chapter: *Oklahoma City bombing, April 19, 1995*, but so many bombings have happened since that the textbook publishers believe the one at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building adds no marketable value. It isn't part of the Common Core.

Timothy McVeigh—death by lethal injection—and Terry Nichols—161 sentences of life imprisonment—are in the factoid reject pile with anarchist Leon Czolgosz, slayer of William McKinley—death by electrocution. They join Charles Guiteau, thwarted, self-appointed ambassador to France and slayer of James Garfield—death by hanging—and numerous failed presidential assassins, including Manson girl Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme and political radical Sara Jane Moore, causing their target, President Ford, to wear a bulletproof trenchcoat.

The wife fantasizes in the shower, lying in the bathtub after the hot water drains, and the soap scum she is too lazy to scrub is a dreamy echo of single life: bathing in strangers' homes, getting fucked hard against tile mold. Staring at bottles of cheap shampoo and scary slivers of Ivory soap.

Or a dark room. Someone says, “I am going to fuck you.” It's quite cause-effect. They pull the quilt to the floor. Arched back. Thrusting. Legs open. Grinding into the black. Sucked and twisted nipples. Why stay in one room? Stuck on a cock on the edge of the stairs, gripping a banister. Stuck on a cock, hands down on the stairs. No eye contact. No eyes. Eyes shut.

Her husband could undress her, and she, him, and they could stand by the mirrors so that the missing limb, their good sex life, is visible. They schedule a date night for Thursday. Thursday is the new Friday.

But he calls her at the restaurant that he's working late. The waiter had set out a glass of water and menu for him. The wife fingers the salad dressing in its ceramic dish and licks it clean. A woman in the next booth stares at her over a menu. A black headband with cat ears holds back her curls, and the lady is wearing skeleton earrings. The wife has forgotten about Halloween. Or is all of October Halloween now? She slips over many things, though not odd things people tell her, like when an old roommate had sex with a woman who licked his hairy armpit, right across his white deodorant strip.

The wife nods at the Halloween lady.

"Stood up?" the stranger asks.

"Only by my husband."

The next week the couple flip a coin, and the husband decides they should go to a reading of his co-worker, who'd signed up for a memoir class to write about his dental troubles.

The wife sometimes dreams her teeth fall out in her mouth. Or two in the front are missing and no one told her. A gummy expanse. Where are all her milk teeth?

The husband makes an excuse to not show up. Hives. He sends a photo, large red welts on his neck and down his chest. "Itchy," he texts. Then he sends a photo of the brownie pan under the bed.

Wearing a black dress and high heels, the wife goes to the reading alone. She slices her index finger on a flyer posted on the bathroom door. Blood oozes out. Is this enough of an excuse to leave? Biohazard?

She sits among strangers, sucking the gash. She heard that's what you're supposed to do. It's okay to drift. This is not a textbook. You will not be graded.

empty > Start with his nipples.

empty > Then he moves to hers.

empty > Need to store dirty laundry separate from the clean.

empty > The man at the podium is wearing a black polo shirt buttoned completely. He has a large Adam's apple and is talking in a monotone about his depression.

empty > Then they go to the toes,

empty > Then they end with him, or her, blindfolded, on the green upholstered couch, and he's playing with her, all over, and fucking her, all over.

empty > The couple beside her share alcohol. She buys another glass of wine.

empty > The man at the podium won't stop reading, and she's sure this special polo shirt was purchased for this night. He talks about his victimhood. She tries to swallow the wine in her mouth slowly.

empty > Someone turns and glares at her because she is too loud with her plastic cup.

empty > She wants joy.

empty > The man at the podium says, "My personality enabled my persecution." Everyone claps except her.

The wife learns that Lee Harvey Oswald has snuck into the eleventh grade U.S. history teacher guide, Texas edition, because the state wants its doomed man to shine—death by gunshot wound to the abdomen. John Wilkes Booth appears in two of the three approved textbooks—death by gunshot wound to the neck. Booth won his own "Bad Guys We Still Love" sidebar, with an optional personal response prompt, because the Secretary of Education is distantly related to him.

Female bombers are rare in the United States. But two New York women have been arrested for planning a terrorist attack against military and police targets. Their asses are now lodged in fetid cells. Their homes, now vacuumed and scrubbed, held tools for mass harm, blood-stained sidewalks, and the carnage of exploded flesh. They'd bought propane gas tanks, found instructions on how to make car bombs, and collected knives, machetes, and soldering

equipment. Methodical. Learning chemistry basics and watching how-to YouTube guides on electrical wiring. The women studied the bombings in Oklahoma, at the Boston Marathon, and at the World Trade Center in 1993. Posing as a convert, an undercover female cop caught them in a sting. They pled guilty. The women will now rot in prison for up to two decades, most likely despised because ignorant people will conflate their religion with their hate. Asia Siddiqui and Noelle Velentzas will not be in a textbook. Maybe they'll end up on a Netflix series: *Jihadists of Queens*. One hopes to go to heaven.

The next Thursday the wife and her husband stand in front of the angled mirrors, naked, but her husband wears a vintage tie. The outside has embroidered emblems of vice: a die, a martini glass, a racing horse.

“Open it,” he says.

Inside the fold is a voluptuous blonde woman, nude, her legs crossed. The wife nods in approval. “You dog,” she says, and smiles.

His hives have faded, and the husband sucks in his paunch and cups his hand over the wife's ass. A tall man, he spreads his legs like a *V* so he can reach her more easily to kiss. This is a new posture. She wonders. Doesn't ask. He smells like lemongrass soap, like he could be her; his skin, hers. Mirrored glass: the cold infinity view of their joined selves, their faded vanity, the opposite of blast heat.

ROCK WIDOW

THE DOORBELL RANG, BUT Marie didn't answer it. She was relaxing on her Malibu deck, her toes dipped in a cedar and Epsom salt bath. Magenta- and orange-throated hummingbirds darted to and from glass feeders. She'd had a bad morning due to wasps in her late husband's den. How the hell were they getting inside? She'd emptied most of a can of Raid. On her phone she texted her psychic. Maybe she needed a clearing.

The doorbell rang again, and Marie knew, from the text notification, that Teddy was waiting. An aspiring rock biographer, Teddy desired Marie, a rock widow, for her access, her stories. Marie intended to win at the game of staying relevant. Her late husband was *the* Roger Conrad of the hard-rock sensation the Evermores. As famous as Keith Moon. Or more like Neil Peart of Rush, because, like Neil, Roger had written most of Evermores' lyrics. That meant publishing rights. That meant power, even after Roger's death. Marie dried her feet and slipped on mules. Smoked a cigarette.

The doorbell rang again. Marie crossed from the balcony through the kitchen and headed toward the front door. Glancing in the hallway mirror, she refolded the collar of her leopard print turtleneck.

Marie made most people wait. Vampire Black hair dye covered her grays. A discrete and madly expensive plastic surgeon had injected and reorganized Marie's facial structure, and her aesthetician had tattooed Marie's lips dark red. She was tucked tight at seventy-nine.

Teddy knocked. Sharp raps, insistent.

Marie opened the door quickly and welcomed him into the foyer. “Teddy! Sorry to keep you waiting! My manager, my agent. Constant.” She tilted her head and smiled.

Teddy assured her it was fine. He wore a button-down shirt with the collar up—the shirt looked ironed—with new Levi’s and Docksidiers, sockless. He carried a backpack.

Marie smoothed her zip-up black leather skirt.

Guiding Teddy to the kitchen, an expanse of Italian marble, Marie poured them both glasses of chilled chardonnay. She noticed Teddy’s nervousness at the door evaporated in a cloud of mutual chatter as they walked to Roger’s sanctuary.

The south end of the house held Roger’s den and practice space. Teddy set his backpack on the couch, retrieved a camera, and explored the large room as Marie drank her wine, watching him.

On one shelf sat a waterless aquarium holding used guitar strings, tied in circles, as if the dead strings held the notes, the bended wail. Next to the aquarium, Roger’s splintered drumsticks emerged from a Chinese vase.

Teddy touched Roger’s drum stool as if it were a saint’s relic. Marie smiled to herself, marveling that he didn’t smell his fingers. The room cast a spell on fans, even in magazine photographs. Teddy studied the guitars and basses mounted on the walls and photographed the gold records, the Grammys, the Emmys, and other trophies.

Marie finished the wine and lit and waved a stick of incense, hoping it would cover the lingering odor of insecticide. She glanced at the ceiling. No wasps. “Sorry about the smell,” Marie laughed. “Damn wasp infestation. Only in here!”

Teddy settled cross-legged on a shag rug, but he left his wine untouched on the coffee table. It was cluttered with half-melted candles, incense burners, and guitar picks. Roger’s passport. Legal papers. Even Roger’s death certificate, though he’d died several years ago.

Marie sat across from Teddy on a couch, her legs curled up. Nervous, Marie sipped more wine. I'm attracted to him. Damn it, Marie thought. I need to control the story.

From his backpack, Teddy brought out a digital recorder, baggy, and a pipe. He held up a small piece of hash. "I heard you liked?" Without waiting for an answer, he pressed the hash in the bowl, lit it, and offered it to her. She brushed back her hair and took a hit.

"Nice," she said.

"I'm going to start recording now. I have your permission?"

"Why, of course."

"This is where Roger passed, I read." Teddy asked. "My condolences."

"His final moments, yes," Marie said. "Heart attack. It was messy. He cracked his head on the coffee table. How old are you?"

"Forty-one," Teddy said, smiling. A dead wasp lay on the rug beside him. He picked it up and put it in the trash.

"Forty-one. The age Roger finally got his Oscar."

"When he captured the EGOT, the grand slam. Overdue," Teddy said. "Want another hit?"

Marie lit the pipe with Teddy's lighter and inhaled deeply. She coughed into a closed fist. "Who's your source?" Marie asked.

Teddy laughed and flipped through the papers on the table. "Show me something you haven't shown another writer. Something sick."

"Sick?"

"Cool."

"What do I get in return?"

"Netflix deal from the Roger book? The Roger and Marie story?"

"People set up meetings, and they come to nothing. That's why my manager called, actually. Lots of people want my story." Marie viewed her exaggerations as poker moves.

"I'm confused about the chronology of Roger's last days, his meetings with his lawyers, etcetera," Teddy said.

“The estate, if you must know, is in contested probate litigation. There might be other heirs. A potential bastard. I can’t talk about his last days.”

Teddy paused the recorder, rewound it, and checked the volume to make sure it was picking up her voice. “Tell me how you two met.”

“We first hooked up at a commune in Laurel Canyon. He wasn’t drumming seriously with anyone. He was jamming with whoever. I’d hang out in the yard with the other girls, by the manzanita trees and a creek,” Marie said. “I dated Gary before Roger. Gary, the future guitarist, as everyone knows, of the Evermores. He’s been belligerent ever since he was kicked out. The real talent was Roger. But you know all this. You obviously love this era. What did you study in college?”

“I got a master’s degree.”

“Yes, but what was it in?” Marie smiled.

“Popular music history.”

“And how is that for your income bracket?”

“I do okay.”

“Do you, really?”

“Selling hash helps,” Teddy said.

“They smoke hash with tobacco in France,” Marie said. “Idiots. The French accent makes them seem smart, but nah.” Marie lit a cigarette and waved the smoke away.

“What makes you a Franco-hater?”

“Their pop music.”

“Serge Gainsbourg?” Teddy asked. “He’s a genius.”

“Seriously?” Marie rolled her eyes. “France Gall, whom I met more than once, never spoke to Serge again when she found out she was singing his lyrics about blow jobs.”

“He was broadening minds,” Teddy took a hit, coughed, and continued, “He brought in jazz, reggae, funk, and yé-yé into pop.”

“He gave perverts a baggy-eyed hero.”

“Like Roger didn’t?”

“Excuse me?” Marie asked.

“Joke!”

Marie shut her eyes. So drowsy. Even with the hormone replacement meds, she struggled to have energy, appear vital.

“You met Roger young,” Teddy said. “Weren’t you barely out of your teens?”

“I was older for my years. I knew what giving head was,” Marie said, willing herself to be alert. The wine. The hash. She wasn’t a party girl anymore. “I’m not a square,” she added.

“Square?” Teddy asked.

“Prude.”

Teddy got up from the floor and sat by Marie on the couch. She scooched closer to him and stretched her legs on the coffee table. No varicose veins. They looked firm. Tan. She flexed her toes.

“Let’s get back to you,” Teddy said. “You were at Montreux?”

“Of course,” Marie said. “Nina Simone loved my earrings, so I gave them to her. I’ll prove it.”

Marie stood, adjusting her miniskirt, and pulled a photo album from a bookshelf. She returned to the couch, this time pressed next to Teddy. She could feel his body heat. They flipped through pages of faded prints until they reached the photo of Simone in a headscarf, a disc earring hanging off her lobe. “Mine,” Marie said.

Teddy took a photo of it. “Fantastic,” he muttered.

“People shared everything. Things got lost. You’d lose people, too.”

Marie coughed again. “My doctor tells me I might get emphysema. If my lungs had arms, they’d punch me in the face.” She looked at the ceiling. “That buzzing again.” She pointed up. “They’re back. Horrible wasps.”

One flew down and landed on the coffee table. Marie flicked a magazine at it.

“Don’t wave your arms,” Teddy said. “They remember faces through their pheromones. They’re territorial. There’s so much to go

through.” He flipped through a pile of tour postcards. “Incredible.” He checked the time on his Apple Watch. “I have another appointment, but I’d love to come back. You’re a lot cooler than I expected.”

She wanted him to stay longer. She was so lonely. But she gained her composure and led him out.

“Until next time,” Teddy said.

She hugged him goodbye, maybe too firmly.

All next week, Marie felt on edge. She hadn’t been sleeping well. Too many lawyer meetings. Finally, Thursday, and Teddy called to say he’d arrive soon. Marie changed her clothes several times, landing on thin green slacks and a silk shirt. She had set a large drum case full of mementos in front of the drum kit. This time, she brought out a carafe of red.

“When Roger went on tour I opened his mail,” Marie said to Teddy. “Here.” She handed him a Polaroid of a topless woman. Marie sipped her wine.

“I put it on the fridge,” she told Teddy. “The week Roger died. Dumb fool never took it down.”

“I’m sorry you suffered,” Teddy said. He patted her leg. “You deserve better. So, what’s in the case?”

“You’ll like it,” Marie said. “You seem special. Not a creepy rock hack.” She paused, looking at him. “You probably heard about the lawsuits?”

“Only gossip. I’m going to record you again, if you’re fine with it.” He set up the digital voice recorder again.

“Yes, yes. Record away. The lawsuits are Gary’s fault. He’s claiming that I’m leveraging the band’s legacy for my own sake. He should never have gotten fifty percent of the publishing rights. Roger was the real songwriter. Gary is accusing me of diluting the trademark because I invested and lost money in those airport restaurants. A slam dunk in profits for everyone. How was I to predict COVID would shut down the airports?”

“I completely agree,” Teddy said. “But Gary did contribute a lot to the band. His new solo album is good.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “Gary claims that I’m the vain one. But I’m the embodiment of their best songs. People dance at weddings to songs about me!”

“Let’s look at what you’ve got in the drum case,” Teddy said. “Forget I brought up Gary.”

Together, they emptied the case of practice cassettes, slim boxes holding eight-track tapes, and shoeboxes sealed with gaffer tape. They piled everything on the floor, like Christmas gifts.

Marie gave Teddy a box cutter to open the shoeboxes. They were stuffed with restaurant and hotel bills, set lists, matchbooks, and plane tickets. Teddy gasped when he found a signed concert photo of Mick Jagger wearing a red cape.

“Altamont!” Teddy said.

“But that’s not all.”

From the bottom of the case, Teddy lifted out a pair of purple leather pants.

Marie clapped. “I told you I had a surprise!”

Teddy stood and held them to his waist. The pants were scuffed and stained. Fringe rimmed the edges, and metal rivets lined the crotch.

“This can’t be possible. Roger’s outfit from Altamont,” Teddy said. “Can I ... try them on?”

“Of course,” Marie said.

He dropped his jeans and pulled them over his slim hips.

Marie squinted. “You like wearing pants worn a stage’s length from that poor man’s murder?”

“It’s rock history. The concert that ended the sixties.”

“Turn around for me,” Marie said.

Marie admired the leather, tight across Teddy’s ass.

“Do I move like Mick?” Teddy asked, smiling, and he shook his hips. Marie put the Stones on the stereo, and she danced, too, not touching Teddy, but mimicking his moves.

The song ended. Teddy crossed the room and took Marie in his arms. Marie shut her eyes and put his hand over her chest. “I know you love Mick,” she said, “but drummers control their bandmates’ heartbeats without even trying. You can take that photo of Mick. Take the Oscar. The Grammy. The Tony. The Emmy. Take them all.”

“Baby,” Teddy said, “I know what Roger saw in you.” He kissed Marie, his tongue heavy inside Marie’s mouth. Teddy kissed her cheek and neck.

On the couch, Teddy rubbed his body on top of Marie’s. She could feel he was hard, but he left the pants on.

A wasp circled by the light fixture. Marie’s back hurt. The wasp flew toward her. She wanted to wave it away but feared Teddy would end his caresses. If he stopped, he might leave.

Teddy pulled Marie’s arms over her head and kissed her neck again. His eyes were shut.

Then the wasp stung her cheek. She cried out and struggled to sit up. Teddy’s breathing became jagged and his grinding increased in rhythm and intensity. She tried to push him off and get up. She wanted ice on her face. But he kept rubbing against her, heavy and insistent. Then he stopped and collapsed his face on the sofa pillow.

“Oh, shit,” he said. He sat up.

“Did you?”

“Yes.” Teddy had come inside the pants.

Bastard. She exhaled sharply, a half-laugh. But he’d whispered she was lovely. She thought that was what he’d said. “You’ll come back, right?” she asked. “If I give you the pants? You like me?”

WHERE THE ONE-EYED MAN IS KING

THE MISSING SANDAL WAS behind a lackluster pine tree near the bay, but no one remembered putting it there. Frito barked and carried it over. Dropped it in front of Sharon, sitting on a plaid blanket. Sharon took that as a good sign. She was on meds. So were her mother, her sisters, and nieces, but not the men in the family. Well, they took statins that ruined their erections, a rare side effect, and too bad for them. They didn't take anything for the anxiety that resulted from being on statins and losing their erections. But if they weren't on statins they might keel over, like when moving rocks or taking down storm windows. They drooled on their pillows. They told good jokes.

Every time they started joking that afternoon Sharon vowed not to laugh, but it was this genuine enjoyment in their voices that forced her to smile or made her nose itchy, and it was easier to laugh than sneeze.

Picnics made her nervous. What if she ran out of things to say, or if she put too much mayo in the egg salad, or if the bread was too dry, or if an apple was bruised? What if the cookies were too hard, too runny? What if someone noticed she'd spent too much on imported olives and feta cheese? She'd be called bougie.

The picnic tables were on a rocky beach, and she felt responsible for the old ones tripping, the bathroom being too far away, for waving away the cigarette smoke, or being chunky in the wrong places.

On a trip to her sister's car, she noticed a man winking at her. A man she'd seen before. About her height and stocky, well built. Sturdy. He worked at her son's soccer club. Or maybe he worked at the grocery store. But it was a real wink. It wasn't dust. Because he accompanied it with a wave. A man stood next to him, close, like friends. People called men like him developmentally disadvantaged, or delayed, or wait, mentally challenged. No, she was mentally challenged. Disabled. She was mentally disabled, being on meds, and this guy was developmentally disabled. The man looked like he had Down syndrome, the wide forehead and rounded body and eyes a little wide. He was wearing loose pants and a sweatshirt from a mall store. And he was waving but not winking. She walked toward them, stopping to pick up a blue rock, iridescent and smooth, which she put in her dress pocket.

She asked the man with the wide eyes if he liked cats. He said, "Not really."

And the man who looked familiar said, "I like your dress. Unusual."

She'd sewn it herself because she wanted a dress with Siamese cat fabric and ricrac on the hem. It was so odd that strangers often commented on it. They told her their names: James, the one who looked familiar, and Conrad, James's older brother. He'd been a stranger a moment ago and was now telling her about his favorite types of sushi.

James was wearing a raincoat, even though it was the beach. He looked about a decade younger than she. And James said, "May I?" and reached into her dress pocket. Sharon laughed, shocked but went with it. Her self-actualization podcast was always telling her to grasp the present. He was her present.

James pulled out the blue rock, and she felt warm where his hand had been, the loose fabric pressed against her skin. He put it behind his back, and said, choose one.

Conrad said, "Right side."

"Let's see what Sharon says."

Sharon pointed to the right hand, and when James opened it, he revealed the rock and a silver dollar. Conrad and Sharon clapped.

And she was still warm from the pressure of James's hand, and she noticed his teeth were crooked and she liked that.

The cabanas and washing stations lined a concrete meridian separating two sides of a long parking lot. You could rent a cabana if you got your name in the lottery soon enough. Sharon never had.

During off-season, the lot was empty except for seagulls diving for stale popcorn. Some children with pails, and their parents trailing them. She followed the men to a cabana, hoping they would have something in a beach bag to help with her anxiety. She was sure she had sand in her underwear and in her armpits, and the scratchy feeling in her throat meant a cold, maybe bronchitis.

Beach bags were full of surprises, and if James had a silver dollar on him, who knew what he'd have in a beach bag.

Maybe he knew someone with a good job lead. Her son pitied her. She kept those thoughts to herself and asked if James knew a joke.

He knew an Irish proverb about the land of the blind.

"How did you know I was Irish?" Sharon asked.

"Your green eyes," James said. He said his grandmother lived in a mental institution. He said, "You remind me of her. It's your laugh."

Last year, Sharon had met a man on the apps, and they held hands and looked at the remains of a smallpox asylum. Skyscrapers circled the island across from them, and she couldn't think of a joke or an anecdote, knowing he'd rather talk about himself. They both wore coats and put their hands in each other's pockets when they turned to each other.

If she had been in that city when she was younger, maybe sweating more but with more enamel on her teeth, she wouldn't have put up with that man. At the end, their relationship worn and sour, he said to her, "Fuck you." She'd changed her meds but still had trouble focusing on Excel charts at work, even when she shaded the columns green and pink.

James had snacks in the cabana, as a mom would. The beach bag had a pack of cards, too. She texted her sister Angi, writing she was sick, and left. They got into James's car, and she took the front seat, putting her feet on the dash so her bare legs showed. She sang as they headed to town, and Conrad sang in the backseat. He sang, "I hate myself," louder and louder, and he hit his head against the headrest and wailed.

She tried to turn Conrad's mood around. She tried to rhyme *hate* with *date* and *Kate*, but James said, "It's okay. Just a pop song. He's getting it out of his system."

"This seems worse than a pop song," she said to James.

She turned to Conrad. "We're almost there."

And maybe Sharon made a mistake about taking the front seat. She almost unbuckled to climb in the backseat. Instead, she pinched her index finger into her thumb hard. Nothing seemed to go right until they pulled into a parking lot by a strip mall to get sushi.

Bento boxes. A waitress who admired the Siamese cat dress. James and Conrad were regulars. The walls, metallic wallpaper. The bathroom, clean enough. Stained sink, but the toilet paper wasn't wet. Conrad ordered seconds and James paid.

James—her new friend—cleared a space, shuffled his deck, and dealt cards for them all to play Go Fish. She winked at the brothers and drank all the warm sake.

SMITH-CORONA

THE SOUND OF A typewriter is father. Smith-Corona. At five years old, I visit Daddy in downtown DC in the National Press Club building, the AP wire churning out copy in a high-pitched whine. The newsroom machines link to need and sorrow, ambition and adrenaline. On Daddy's lap, in this cigarette-filled room, I press a key hard to get the lever to snap. The letters imprint, and I spell my name.

The typewriter is labor. The metal key snaps forward. Certain vowels eventually wear out. The sentence rhythm tattoos the page. Black on white. Ding and SWISH, the next line starts. The snap of locking a sheet in place. Rip it out when done.

The typewriter is silent. Daddy's gone. We fill the house with the transistor radio, sibling bickering, singing, parakeets, Walter Cronkite, a barking dog. Daddy's in Vietnam, the *Times-Union* hometown reporter sent to the front lines. He comes back tan, bringing me a doll. He has documented foot soldiers' accounts, one man with "Hell Platoon" scrawled across the camouflage cover of his steel helmet. Daddy has death behind his eyes.

When he leaves on trips or even out to dinner with my mom, I panic, begging him to wear a seatbelt, a magic protection. He drives toward the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island when everyone else is fleeing. On 9/11 he runs to World Trade Center victims who'd crossed the river to Jersey City, listening to their stories. Dark-gray smoke across downtown Manhattan drifts upward.

The next day he impersonates electricians and enters Ground Zero. The Venetian blinds of World Trade Center offices flap in the broken glass. He keeps the mask he wore that day and never forgets the smell, the four-story-tall pile of debris, or the groups of different-colored factions—firemen, electricians, police, meds—with nothing to do. His typed words fill the pages of the *Washington Post*.

Dad doesn't tell me for many years. He must have felt I needed to know: There will always be more talented writers, but he hasn't met anyone who's worked harder. Because to him, it isn't work.

My dad now has eyebrows like white caterpillars. Still working. Still typing. He tries to get my mom to guffaw every day. Maybe a dropped pan, a Charlie Chaplin maneuver. The typewriter is now a laptop, but the same clicking, concentration. A whistle, a hum when done.

THE FOURTH DIMENSION

Celestial Clock: 1990

I FIRST SAW EDDIE trying to fit all this shit in his arms, cradling a honeydew melon while balancing a loaf of bread and a few tomatoes. He held the melon like it was a newborn. Later, I realized, he treated it like a football. We'd met in a natural food store, the one near my apartment in the Mission. He looked over six-feet tall. Muscular and bulky, wearing a red satin 49ers jacket. He had a mullet. I smiled, thinking how wrong it felt to have an instant crush on a jock.

"Don't you want a cart? A basket?" I asked.

"I don't want to take up space," he said, taking up space. "I'm Eddie. New here." He moved down the aisles, adding tofu and probiotic drinks to his grocery pile. I followed him, hopeful.

Natural food stores made even an average-sized person feel awkward—all those goateed and hennaed yoga customers hogging the space in front of bulk food bins and fumbling as they wrote bin numbers on the skinny tags. I dawdled by the chia seeds as Eddie filled a huge bag with flax seeds.

Then, in the produce aisle, he dropped a grapefruit. On purpose? He glanced at me and smiled.

I picked it up and said, "Catch." I tossed it to him. And he balanced it on the tofu.

"You can put your stuff in my cart," I said. "I'm getting only a

couple of things.” I gestured to a space in my basket by the almond milk, tomato sauce, and fake cheese.

“How do you like that?” he asked, pointing to the fake cheese.

“I miss the real thing. Melted cheddar cheese sandwiches. Gouda slices on rosemary crackers.”

“Even that chemically absurd nacho cheese?”

“Sure. But cows’ bleeding nipples make me sadder. Cheese is coagulated mucus, produced under duress. But it’s hard to find a fake cheese that has any flavor.” Shit, I talk too much. Mucus is not a good flirt move.

“That’s a nice dress,” he said, smiling down at me. He could see my cleavage.

“Thrift,” I said.

“Thrift?”

“You know, second-hand. Like vintage but rips easily.”

“Ah, I see. Clothing that can rip, huh? You a sports fan?”

“I don’t, um.” I stuttered.

I hadn’t expected to flirt with him so easily, but there I was. It must be his bulk. Eddie seemed like an alien, dropped into a store filled with half-starved white artists and musicians; Korean American filmmakers and record store owners. I made up back stories for the customers. A few black punk rockers in their twenties. Gay activists with ACT UP buttons. But almost no children. Few kids lived in San Francisco, even before the dot-com boom. In the Mission, the Central American kids shopped with their moms at the bodegas or Safeway or the corner stores run by Palestinian immigrants. Not this store.

A couple of employees stared at Eddie as we got the rest of his groceries. It felt intimate, really, to share a food basket with a stranger. All the while, he smiled and did a half-wave when people greeted him. All my musician friends were emaciated. His size seemed absurd. Defiant. And we liked the same brand of fake butter.

I felt shy in the checkout line, like I was dating Eddie already. It always took forever because the checkout people commented

on people's purchases. Sure enough, when we got to the front, the checkout person, a woman with white-lady dreads and a large nose ring, picked up the bag of chia seeds with her thumb and index finger and placed it on the scale as if it were poison.

She sniffed.

"What's the matter?"

"Plastic?" she said. "You can't be bothered to bring in your own container?"

I rattled off my co-op number. She rolled her eyes at the bananas. "Can you put those on the scale?" she muttered.

"What?"

"Oppression," she said. "We shouldn't carry them. I signed the petition. They're picked underripe. You can't trust organic labels. Contamination. Pesticides and cancer."

"It's a banana," Eddie said.

She looked up at him. And I mean, Up. She was shorter than I was. Probably five-foot. Even feminists were indoctrinated to pay attention to height. She shut up.

When Eddie said, "Here. This should cover it all," she had a coughing fit. He had a lot of cash. Not only twenties, but fifties, too.

Eddie walked me home, a couple of blocks away. We passed band flyers stapled to telephone poles, curtained Irish bars, bodegas, taquerias, cheap furniture stores, and record stores whose owners were pulling down metal grates for the night. Not a safe place to live.

I knew a woman who'd gotten raped. A friend of a friend was mugged at gunpoint. A couple left town after being attacked by gang members. But I didn't tell Eddie those grim stories. The street seemed different with him. Like a buzz floated up from the sidewalks, glittering with mica. Even the addicts selling stolen clothes and votive candles seemed quaint in this electric time.

I hadn't been on a date since hooking up with a mohawked guy who loved The Fall and lived with an older haircutter. They shared the same bed, and she paid his rent. After sex in my single

bed, covered with flannel sheets, he borrowed a rare Cure LP and never returned it. Gave me scabies.

Compared to that guy, Eddie seemed like a die-cut man. An absurd meteor. He carried all our groceries.

I opened the metal gate that covered the entrance to a rundown Edwardian. The gate clanged shut behind us. We headed up the concrete steps one flight, and I felt awkward, him following me. His sense of personal space, he told me later, was altered permanently from trying to do people extreme bodily harm for a living.

The couches looked rattier than usual, and he sunk into the one opposite the television. Around the ceiling hung Christmas lights and Mardi Gras beads, and the inset cabinetry had jars of dried psychedelic mushrooms, Raggedy Ann dolls, hot sauce bottles, and postcards of bleak hotels.

I made Eddie peppermint tea in a chipped mug. No honey. And when Annie came out, the owner of the Raggedy Ann dolls, she said to me, “Rebecca, well, well. No way. Eddie Langston?”

And out it came. He played pro football. My thighs were as big as his biceps, and he had huge biceps. Defensive lineman. Pro. NFL.

Annie winked at me and returned to her room with a Mason jar of red wine. She had company too. Eddie and I cooked pasta together, and he grated and chopped a carrot with basil to blend the flavors with the tomato sauce. Added chopped garlic. The sauce simmered on the enamel stove and steamed the windows.

We bonded in part because we were both vegans. That wasn’t as big of a trend in 1990. Even people I knew, the deviant ones who read Derrida, who claimed a friendship with the Church of Satan’s Anton LaVey and the flame-throwing, robotic princes of chaos, AKA the Survival Research Lab guys, didn’t trust vegans.

Eddie and I ate our meal on the living room couch, both deciding the fake cheese was vile. He rifled through the LPs stacked by the stereo. He could kneel easily, even at that size. Held up one, “Okay?”

I hadn't heard it, but said, "Sure." Another roommate worked at a record store and must've brought it home. "Some Velvet Morning" by Lee Hazlewood and Nancy Sinatra filled the room, though sirens and car alarms occasionally cut through. A seduction, of sorts, to choose something obscure and romantic. He was an anomaly for me: his politeness, lack of pretension, and quiet sense of humor.

We had sex that shocked me into a trembling mess, and when I put my hands in his they disappeared. His hands spanned nine inches across. Football measures everything. He weighed two-sixty. Both of us naked in my room, my window covered by an iron grate, we learned we'd had the same hallucinogenic insight driving up I-5 N. Only days apart, we'd driven past a truck full of chickens. Their feathers released into the wind and flew against our passenger side windows, and they changed into strange fractal shapes against the glass, before whisking away.

"The chickens were communicating with me," I said.

"Me, too," Eddie said, his hand covering most of my stomach. "Like, no one would believe me, but it was like the chickens' thoughts were entering my brain. And on the other side I saw huge pens full of cows waiting for the slaughterhouse. I felt doomed. All those cows in the field would soon enter the conveyor belt and be shot in the forehead," he said. "Right here," and he kissed my temple.

He felt connected to the cows because he'd had a few concussions. Violence. Then he turned the aggression off, washed it down the drain in postgame showers. Had to.

"Do you like it? Football?" I traced the scars on his arms.

"'Not for long' is the joke for NFL. The body can't tolerate the injuries. You know, I can go all game not touching the ball. I'm never on a highlights reel. My career is hitting other people as hard as possible."

One night, we were cooking stir-fry at his house. All domestic. I confessed I'd never been in love before. Eddie kissed me and said,

“Things are better now. This is a first for me. You. Our connection. Once in a lifetime.”

Funny how gentle he was with me. Mostly. Our smells mixed. He sliced me pieces of melon with his Leatherman knife. His ancient gray cat purred by our legs. I felt like I was sleeping by a huge mutton pillow. Firm.

We kept dating, and I went to games at Candlestick. I wore his Niners jacket. Watching from the stands, I stood when people stood and sat when people sat. Like a church service. I hated seeing Eddie knocked down, his body always marked in bruises and cuts. Back then, there were lots of cheap shots. One guy got spiked headfirst into the turf. Once, an offensive lineman gave Eddie a knockout forearm hit to the back of his neck. I watched, horrified, as ER guys with a stretcher removed him from the field. Even if Eddie knew a team would play dirty, that came with the NFL paycheck.

At his place by Ocean Beach, I'd run to tackle him, skidding on my socks, and head right toward his huge middle. And he'd pick me up and lift me over his shoulders. Upside-down, helpless, I laughed, escaping gravity, my entire body resting on one shoulder. Then he'd drop me on the bed, lift my legs, pull off my underwear, and go down on me. Stick his fingers inside me and fuck hard. I laughed and writhed and arced my back.

Eddie and I liked to have sex to rented zombie movies. The fake blood turned us on. We liked to see ghouls biting into the flesh of someone else.

At twenty-five I thought about sex all the time, remembering how mediocre it was as a teen, and now, in San Francisco, it seemed everywhere. Friends danced at the Lusty Lady and the Mitchell Brothers. They did lap dances at Market Street Cinema and performed in burlesque shows. They forgot to wear underwear. They got STIs, abortions, and broken hearts. Men made out with each other in Castro bars and put up flyers to warn away straight tourists.

Every morning, Eddie told me, “I think I’m falling for you.”
I said, “You think?”
“I know.”

We stayed together for three years. I kept my job as a paralegal, and he encouraged me to take writing classes. Then, he started having mental health struggles. He forgot to remove his handgun from his carry-on bag at SFO and was arrested. That made the news. Then he drove erratically through red lights and sped through the Presidio, crashing his car. He mouthed off at the traffic cop. Eventually, he was dropped from the team. He took off. Left the country. I couldn’t find him and was heartbroken—my friends assured me it was better that way. He’d become a liability. I was losing my hair and sleepwalking, so worried he’d hurt someone or die.

A month after he left, I got a letter from him, postmarked from Thailand. Eddie drew a seagull on it and wrote, “I had a spiritual awakening. My old body peeled off, like how a spider or snake sheds. A wound opened up, and I pulled my old self through it and spread my neck as if I had a turtle’s neck. God is good. Sorry for everything.” I burned the letter in the backyard.

Celestial Clock: 1977

When I was twelve, my older cousin had an attempt, which was called just that, with no further delineation, as if to say “suicide” would bring bad luck, would lead him to a more “successful” attempt.

That morning I’d stubbed my toe, running to get the ringing phone. But it was never for me. My aunt was sobbing when I picked up the receiver.

My mom didn’t shoo me away when I handed the phone to her. Her fingers smelled like tobacco. I dawdled at the kitchen table, hooking my feet around the chair legs. And my mom straightened the kitchen as she talked, wiping off the counter with the counter

sponge. My brother, sister, and I weren't supposed to mix that one up with the dish sponge or, heaven forbid, the floor sponge.

As my mom talked to my aunt, I filled out a word search book with a blue-tip pen, and our parakeet chirped from its cage by the kitchen window. We stopped having fish when the last goldfish jumped into the trash. We didn't know it lacked oxygen.

If I kept doing my word search, smearing blue ink on cheap paper, I could eavesdrop: BEACH, CHERRIES, STOVETOP, OCTOPUS.

My brother was running around outside somewhere, and my sister was upstairs, playing with dolls. I couldn't talk to them about what I was hearing. They were too young to understand. TOPIARY, RASPBERRY, REBOUND.

My aunt had married an NBA star. He had to retire when he blew out his knee. At first, I pictured an evil wind blowing off the knee cap. If my aunt had stayed single, she wouldn't have given birth to my cousin, and he wouldn't have made my aunt sob today and my mom pace the kitchen, wiping off counters she'd cleaned seconds before. The long phone cord attached Mom to her sister. I was invisible.

I gave up on the word search and wrote words I'd overheard in the margins. Crossing them out afterward: ~~TERRIBLE, EMERGENCY, HOSPITAL.~~

Frightened, I scooted my chair out from the table. It fell backward with a crash, and my mom snapped at me. "Becky, pick it up!" she said.

I got out a bowl and a box of cereal. My mom must know I was listening in. I interrupted her phone conversation. "We're out of milk."

She pointed to her purse, on a chair opposite to the one I'd been sitting on. It had a metal clasp that snapped open, like jaws. It smelled like a certain mom mood, a privacy apart from the kids, though it held Juicy-Fruit gum and butterscotch Lifesavers. The private mom was the handkerchief, stained with her lipstick,

though she often kissed us habitually on our heads and pulled us in for hugs.

I took out her wallet from the clutter of bus passes and bank pens, a checkbook, keys, and a toy car. The wallet had a rough surface and bulged with colorful credit cards. I moved my photo in front of my siblings' and removed a ten-dollar bill, smoothing it.

"Don't tell Dad," my mom hissed.

"About what?" I asked.

"The ten-er," she said. "He doesn't want me to be giving you kids money all the time."

She paused and said into the phone, "Sorry. What did you say?" and wiped her nose on her sleeve.

My mom repeated what my aunt said, her voice, incredulous. I learned my cousin was taken by ambulance to get his stomach pumped. I pictured a small plunger and a lot of vomit, like from a stomach bug. Gross.

My cousin's roommate had found him. "Trash," my mom called this roommate. She felt he had lured my cousin into a "dangerous lifestyle."

I slipped on sneakers and left the house, skipping, instantly forgetting my concerns for my cousin. The corner store was four blocks away. A shift into being more grownup, spending money, getting change. On the way home, I took a longer route so I could eat all the candy. Then, by a stoop, I found a kitten, gray with white stripes. Its eyes were still shut.

I picked him up and carried him home in my shirt. I believed the mewling, helpless kitten might've died without me. I was his savior. But the kitten knew how to survive. He got healthier, and we got him dewormed and applied flea medicine.

He didn't die the first or second night, and not a year later. He didn't die for many years.

He burrowed on my neck, like I was a cat. And who's to deny him his feline beliefs? Not me.

A year later, no one talked about my cousin. My mom said,

“Respect the dead.” Because the second time, he’d succeeded. He hung himself in his parents’ garage. And my mom became more clingy, more suspicious of letting us out on our own. And I became afraid of staying alone in the house, even with the cat.

Celestial Clock: 2015

I raked the leaves behind my home in Portland, Oregon. Oaks, maples, walnuts, plums. The decay mingled in the damp grass. I’d buried two cats by the back fence, rocks marking each grave. The first grave was dug by me. The second grave was dug by Eddie.

In 2010, Eddie and I had reunited through an article I’d written about him. Someone sent it to him, and he got in touch with me.

“I’m still attracted to you,” he wrote. “I was then, and I am now.” I forgave him.

But he never got better. He had chronic traumatic encephalopathy. His symptoms worsened: slurred speech, mood swings, and an unsteady walk.

We married each other and moved to Oregon for the right to die by suicide, but we had to do it underground, as it turned out. He got dementia too quickly. I washed his pee-stained blankets and towels. I swabbed his mouth and fed him morphine.

We stayed timeless in our photos, the ones I placed around his dying body. His tongue, licking my cheek. His hand, cupping my ass.

I read that aboriginal people had no word for time, and a thousand genes woke when a mouse died. They remained active for four days, blurring what being alive meant. For me, all time forward from Eddie’s death meant numbness.

After raking, I ran around the trails on Mt. Tabor, an extinct volcano turned into a city park. I was tired. My heart had been through a lot. Mist crowned the evergreens. I’d walked here with Eddie, my hand buried in his, and I’d poured some of his ashes by his favorite tree.

“RIP,” I said under my breath.

A tree had had buckled the sidewalk. Its roots and xylem sucked up water and nutrients from the dirt to the stems and leaves. Trees flourished apart from the rules of streets, sidewalks, or electrical wires.

Jogging downhill, I caught my foot on the broken sidewalk. I tried to break my fall, putting my arms straight out, but the momentum was too great. I was stupid. I was gravity's unavoidable joke.

If Eddie were alive, he'd tell me the risk was too great. I could break my wrists. I needed to roll, land on my meat: my hips or ass. I didn't protect my hands or my head. I followed instinct, and it fucked me over. I fell with thousands of pounds of force.

I dropped to the ground with my arms out. My temple hit the ground, and I bruised my hip. Rotating or lifting my wrists caused shooting pain. I cried and stood up, shakily. A woman walking a Corgi stopped and asked if I was okay.

"I'm fine," I said, embarrassed.

But she brought me into her house. I sat in her clean kitchen, which smelled fragrant. "I make lavender tinctures," she said. "Here, let me clean your forehead."

She was a Portland craftsperson. But she had a good first-aid kit. Her name was Melissa, and her touch was warm and confident. She was one of those prepared people. Not a prepper for the apocalypse, but the liberal version: for the big earthquake. Cascadia.

Melissa ministered to me, and I scratched her Corgi behind his ears. "I'm Rebecca," I told her.

Trees don't do well in isolation. Humans don't, either. A man once hugged his basement pole for comfort. He was that lonely. I had no one to hug, and I felt more robot than human most days.

I went into her bathroom to pee, but I couldn't twist my wrist to wipe. I drip dried, like the old days in clubs with no toilet paper. Like on camping trips with Eddie.

My days now: untouched. I remembered Eddie's warmth, a particular heaven. When that evaporated with Eddie's death, it was like our passion had never existed. Like my aunt's grief long ago,

she got stuck in time, too, never changing the sheets in her son's room, never emptying his dresser.

The word *widow* comes from the old English word *widew*, meaning “be empty,” and from the Latin *viduus*, “bereft.” *Be empty*, an intransitive phrase. It requires no direct object to complete its meaning. For me, the widow sensation was fullness. A weight, muddy and wet. That burden lifted in Melissa's kitchen, her Corgi by my feet. I reeked of running sweat. She didn't seem to mind.

Melissa shared her new age beliefs, but I told her I didn't believe in soul contracts. I said we must feel calm in being forgotten. This was the dead time.

I told Melissa about my cat, who snored by me every night. We discussed lavender, waterfalls, and indie rock. Turned out she'd dated Elliott Smith, one of my favorite singers. He'd died too young, too. Knifed himself in the stomach—or murder. No one knew for sure. Had I made a new friend? It might be the promiscuousness of female oversharing, performative intimacy.

Melissa offered to walk me home. I said, “I'll be okay.”

She'd given me an Advil PM and I was pleasantly groggy.

My family wanted me to get better. My sister emailed me pamphlets about the stages of grief, like windows in an advent calendar. I existed as a reproach to friends' cheerful updates, their posts of margaritas on beaches and hand-knitted tea cozies.

Eddie's death: I didn't hear or witness it. I didn't want to hear his last breath. After crushing opiates in water and squirting them in his mouth, I walked around the block in a daze, returned, and he was gone.

The chlorophyll broke down every October. I returned home, injured, on quiet streets that raged in crimson, gold, caramel, and candy yellow.

Celestial Clock: 2028

Time forms the fourth dimension. At sixty-three, I bent time,

like gravity could, in a Portland bar. The room was done up with wooden paneling and dark wooden booths, lion and unicorn murals: well lit, part of a chain. Safe. Forgettable. Not like the clubs of my youth, like the Chameleon in the Mission, with black velvet paintings of topless women and bathrooms with no working toilets.

That night in Portland, it was not that I understood gravity as the curvature of space-time by the planets but that I was gravity.

The crowd for the Clash cover band were all white, almost all middle-aged, and wore athletic clothing. I wore jeans, striped sneakers, and a cowboy shirt with snaps. I shared a table with a woman who'd put her coat on the chair next to her, saving it. I took a tater tot off her plate. The woman gave me a dirty look. I took another one. She moved the plate closer to her.

The cover band played "I'm So Bored in the U.S.A" on a low stage. The singer enunciated every yelp and growl Joe Strummer had assigned to vinyl. But the drummer played perfunctorily, not learning any of Topper Headon's fills. They had to play two hours of Clash songs before getting paid. My friend from that running accident, Melissa, promised she'd join me. I'd texted but no response.

I wanted another tater tot. What would the woman across from me do? I wanted a fight, something that matched my sour mood.

Then, a young man joined us and shook my hand, introduced himself between songs. He was the woman's son. Much friendlier. He had black hair, a thin nose, and a sardonic mouth. He tapped the bar table and jiggled his shoulders. Like Ritalin hadn't helped.

I wanted to be dramatic, fake a seizure. Something to shift the predictability Onstage, the fake Joe Strummer counted in to "White Riot" and sang, "I wanna riot of my own."

I slapped my face. The smack happened faster than the drummer's downbeat. It shifted time, like the descent of a body into a wet grip.

A public slap is a hello to a stranger, inviting repulsion or curiosity. The sexy guy across from me reached over to hold my hand. He turned it gently and pretended to read my palm.

He cupped his hand to my ear so I could hear him. “This line means you need a glass of water,” he said. “But don’t hit yourself. I’ll spank you if you do.” He winked at me, and I tried not to cry. The room darkened, and we turned to watch the band.

SWEET, LIKE COOKIE AND A WALRUS

I WANT A LULLABY, sweet, like a ginger cookie. Cookie Mueller, with her stretched face and big teeth, eye-slit joy. In Nan Goldin's world, she's laughing, the femme fatale with split ends, her panties by her feet at the Mudd Club toilet. John Waters put her in his movies. She's any bad girl, any heroine with ripped tights at the crotch.

I want a Cookie in the Arctic. She's trying to quit heroin and has shackled up with a Russian, a marine biologist. He looks gray. He drinks dirt. They are in an unheated shack, and they shake out tobacco from butts onto rolling paper to be frugal, to have a smoke, because it's Siberia. She's more into women than men, but she'll sleep with him to stay warm and be sociable, to forget about the dry heaves and junk sick.

They eat sardines from a can and can't talk for the grunts, the bells, the barks and gargles, the holy stench and bulbosity out the window, an open hole. It's a haul out of walruses, ninety-six thousand, floundering and, if startled, stampeding. Half-starved. Then gone, gored and fucked, leaving corpses that boulder the sand.

Cookie and the Russian find an orphan cuddled by its mother, stilled. "Dead," he says, and pokes the orphan with a stick.

I step across the tundra and bring Cookie hairspray and a silver spoon. I cook up Asian white and inject her so she's a happy Cookie. She won't die of AIDS at forty and she won't leave an orphan, Max.

Instead, she'll tell her grandkids about one baby walrus. It dove into the waves. Not dead at all. The beach was foggy. It was bones. It was skulls.

GRIEF STICK

VOICE MEMO: CHRIS, DID you think you were so smart, lining things up? What did you see when you were high? Why'd you end up in a mental hospital for that?

Voice memo: In high school, my friends and I parked on this dead-end street to smoke pot. A guy saw us partying and blocked us in. Crewcut. Redneck. He said he'd come from a wedding, and he had a rifle on the truck. He wanted to shoot us for being druggies, but Kevin talked him out of it. What would it have been like if I'd been shot here? My last view would've been an oak tree.

Voice memo: I stood in this room, and I was so high. I thought, How do I know how to stand without falling? How do I know how to breathe?

Voice memo: We know what happened in our sex caves and what we said to each other as you were dying. Today I saw crows eating a dead rat. I threw out expired ground beef in the fridge. One day there won't be anything that smells like you anymore, and one day there won't be anything that smells like me.

Voice memo: I'm alone in my sorrow and maintaining it in a little box inside my skin.

Voice memo: I dreamt my eyelids were completely red, like my skin had been peeled. It was from grief. Dark magenta red all the way to my eyebrows.

Voice memo: Chris, I emailed with your son. They're parting out your Triumph, and they don't want a memorial for you.

Voice memo: Chris, did you exist? Your family is chipping you away. They're taking you from below me, and they're taking you from above me. I have only half a jar of honey we bought at the gas station, and your saltshaker, and those frozen peas.

Voice memo: Chris, this guy walking ahead of me is skinnier than you. There's a grief stick. No one wants to touch it. If you get stuck holding it, you're going to be fucked up. When your dad killed himself, that was your grief stick. Mine, I got mine.

Voice memo: At Sauvie Island, you kept looking for places in the woods where we could have sex. I lifted my pink dress and laughed.

Voice memo: If you were alive, we could drive cross-country together in Eli's Monte, and you could smooth my wrinkles. We could be nice to each other, and we could eat grapes.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Behr is the author of *Animal Kingdom*, *Planet Grim*, and *Grief Stick*. Her writing has been published in *Tin House*, *Utne Reader*, *Salon*, *Oregon Humanities*, *The Rumpus*, *Buckman Journal*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, in anthologies, and others. Her multimedia website and film projects have been supported by grants from the Regional Arts and Culture Council. She holds a BA in humanities from UC Berkeley and an MFA in creative writing from Portland State University. Behr lives in Portland, Oregon, where she is a senior academic designer for a global education company, teaches creative writing workshops, and plays piano and bass guitar.

7.13BOOKS

