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Another Animal

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by

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“A month puts a lot of things at a distance; a month is size, long fur, long leaps, ferocious eyes, an absolute difference.”

—Julio Cortázar, from *Letter to a Young Lady in Paris*

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The Animal

Thirty minutes, thought Claire. She put her car into reverse and almost hit a kid at the bottom of her driveway.

His name was Matteo. He lived on the other side of the street, a ways down. Or was it Matteo's brother, Juan? This was the younger one. Who was younger and who was older? She couldn't remember. He'd come out of nowhere, riding his bike into her driveway and stopping abruptly. She braked so late that all she could see through her rear window was the top of his blue plastic helmet. A second longer and she'd have run him over. Both brothers were small. Neither would have had a chance of survival.

She sat there and watched his helmet swivel back and forth. He seemed oblivious to what had almost happened. She knew she should get out of the car and say something to him. But what was there to say? *I almost killed you. But I didn't. I'm sorry, but I want you to know that it could have been worse.* She stayed in the car. After a few seconds, the kid pedaled away down the street.

It seemed like a sign to stay home. But she'd already made a deal with herself: thirty minutes. Half an hour at John's party, and then she would leave. She finished backing out of the driveway.

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John was her boss at the library. When he invited her to the party, she'd been crouching down to slide *C# For Dummies* into its place on the bottom shelf. He told her it would be a casual thing, not for the library employees but for his friends. She looked up at the patch of unshaven hair that hung beneath his chin, and told him she would think about it.

The only one of John's friends that Claire knew was Kenji, the library's assistant director. It seemed to her that Kenji basically wanted to be John. He wore the same kind of clothes and spoke in the same high drawl. He wanted John's job. He was already halfway there, Claire thought: he did most of John's work for him.

Kenji would be at the party. Claire found that she did not mind this.

Claire's only friend at the library was Tilly, a retiree who volunteered on Thursday afternoons. Tilly spoke loudly—she had been a radio DJ for most of her life. Now that she was losing her hearing, she spoke even louder. Claire was a mumbler, so their conversations were essentially one-sided. Tilly told Claire stories of being young in New York City: hookups and acid trips, mostly. She advised Claire to follow exactly in her footsteps.

"You have a boyfriend in the city!" she would half-shout. She still called it the city even though the nearest city of any size was Witchitaw. "He has an apartment! What are you doing here?"

"I'm getting experience working at a library," Claire said. "He's at a gallery. We might both go to grad school." By this, she meant to say that the future was uncertain, and that it was best to wait.

Tilly did not accept this. "You can shelve books when you're old like I am. Get out there! Live life!" This was her mantra, *live life.* Claire wasn't sure one could do anything but.

"The future's uncertain," she said.

"What?" asked Tilly. "You're mumbling again."

They shelved books together this way. Tilly would not be at the party.

***

Claire walked from her car towards John's apartment. A frigid wind hit her face. She hated the cold. Whenever the temperature dropped below forty, she put on a ridiculous blue coat that went down to her knees. It made her look like a popsicle. She lost things in its pockets.

John lived on the second story of an old brick building on the town's main road. There was light coming from the window, and she could hear soft music and the sound of voices. One of them was distinctively John's. He spoke high in the nose.

A flight of stairs led up to the apartments. It was blocked by a gate with an old-fashioned buzzer. One of the buttons was labeled "2C: J. Roemer." Claire did not press it. She looked at it and shivered.

She should not have come. She should have remained on her couch, her cat covering her legs, and called her boyfriend. He would have told her about the weirdos who had come into the gallery that day, while she drank from the bottle of wine she'd opened the weekend before. She would have told him that she missed him, and that she would visit him as soon as the library job quieted down. She'd have fallen asleep to a nature documentary. Her absence at the party might have been noticed. But then it would have been forgotten, as absences tend to be.

"Claire!" It was Kenji, coming down the sidewalk. He had on a long wool coat that shifted back and forth with each step. His black hair spilled over his shoulders. "You made it."

He turned to face the buzzer. "Did you buzz up?"

"Not yet," she told him. He extended a thin finger and pushed the brass button.

A second passed. "Hello?" said John.

"It's me," said Kenji. "And Claire's here, too."

There was a loud dry buzz and the latch clicked. Kenji held the gate open for Claire, then followed her up the stairs.

"Have you been to John's before?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"He's got a nice place. And he always makes these crazy hors d'oeuvres. It's an experience."

John opened the door and hugged Kenji. Then he hugged Claire, which he'd never done before. He smelled like a dozen different perfumes and colognes. "Thanks for coming," he told her before pulling away. He took their coats and hung them on a wooden stand by the door.

John's apartment was decorated not unlike Claire's boyfriend's gallery. Shitty abstract paintings hung from the walls. The living room rug looked like the pelt of a mythical giant poodle. A small wooden statue of an animal stood on the glass coffee table next to an unlit candle and a bowl of brown rocks. The music was technically jazz, but it sounded like someone had walked on stage and kicked the end of the saxophone in.

A few people sat in the living room, on a leather couch and two white armchairs. There was a woman Claire's age with the smallest set of bangs she'd ever seen. Next to her sat an older woman in a green pantsuit who looked like she was ready to parachute behind enemy lines. Another group stood in the kitchen. They encircled the marble island, eating something off of a tray.

"Let me take you on the rounds," said John. He put his hand on the small of Claire's back and guided her toward the kitchen.

"Everyone," he said, "this is Claire. She's a friend from the library."

The man in the yellow sweater was Ron. The woman next to him with the black lipstick was Emilia, and next to her Kat.

"Nice to meet you," said Claire, waving.

She saw what they were eating. Arranged on little crackers were tiny octopodes resting on pillows of cream cheese, covered in blankets of shaved cucumbers and red onions. There were three or four octopodes to a cracker. The tray was full of them.

"Help yourself," said John.

The weekend before, Claire had watched a documentary about octopodes. She learned that the word *octopus* is Greek (*októpus*) and not Latin, and so did not take the Latin plural -*i.* She learned, also, that some octopodes formed lifelong friendships with particular people, up until one of them, either the octopus, or the person, died.

"I already ate," she said.

"You've got to come to John's parties starving," said Ron, reaching down to his tiny paper plate and replacing a fallen octopus on its cracker.

John put his hand on Claire's back again and steered her towards the living room, where he introduced her the same way, as a friend from the library. The paratrooper woman was named Anabelle, the one with the tiny bangs was Ava, the man in a corduroy blazer, Patrick. Claire sat on the couch next to him.

"What do you want to drink?" asked John.

"Nothing, I'm okay."

"That's fine," said John. "I respect that." He took the free armchair.

"So, you work in the library?" It was Annabelle, the paratrooper.

"She does," said John. "With Kenji and I."

"That's incredible," Anabelle went on. "It's so important. I mean, in terms of serving the community, it's really all we have left. Everything else is—" She made a horizontal gesture with her hand, and a choking noise in her throat.

The truth was that Claire worked in the library because she wanted things to be neat. Systems of cataloging and classification appealed to her. But she found that people liked to think she was an altruist.

"Yes," she said. "I get a lot out of it."

"Building community is so rewarding," agreed Ava with the tiny bangs. "We try to do it at my café. But it's hard. We don't always know how to make people feel like the space is theirs."

"Free coffee?" said Claire. There was silence. Then John laughed, and everyone followed suit.

"You're killer," he said to Claire. "Isn't she?"

The conversation turned to other things. Claire looked at her watch. Ten minutes had gone by. Twenty more, only twenty, and then she could leave.

The buzzer went off. John stood, walked to the console on the wall, and buzzed them up. It was a couple in formless clothes and colorful glasses. They joined the circle in the kitchen. One fed the other an octopus cracker.

Claire found herself looking at Kenji. He stood with the group in the kitchen, talking. His back was turned to her, and his hands were in front of him. The only part of him she could see was his neck. There was a pale triangle of skin where his dark hair split apart.

"I got it in Oaxaca," John was saying. He'd returned to the living room and was pointing at the wooden animal on the table. "It's an indigenous thing, like a spirit animal. You could see them being made right there."

"I want to go to Oaxaca so bad," said the man in the blazer. "I've heard so much about the food."

"I took a cooking class," said John. "We learned how to make *mole*. It's so rich. The culture, I mean. And everything is cheap, because of the exchange rate. You feel like a king." The buzzer went off again, and John stood up, sighing. No one said anything until he sat back down.

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In five minutes the half-hour would be up. Claire would invent some excuse about the cat and go home. On Monday she'd return to the library. Routine would prevail.

She caught snippets of conversation, interrupted by the sound of the buzzer. People complimented each other's tops and bottoms and complained about work. They spoke of how dire and divisive the political climate was, politely avoiding the specifics. They traded recommendations: restaurants, books, countries in Europe.

Claire thought of a different conversation she'd had with Tilly, weeks before.

"This was when I had just moved to the city," Tilly began. "We heard that this famous rock star was playing a show up in Woodstock. It was during the week, but a bunch of my girlfriends and I decided to cut work. None of us had a car, so we took the train up to Poughkeepsie and hitchhiked the rest of the way. That was back when you could still do that kind of thing. I slept over with some guy that night, and didn't get back to the city until the next day. By then I'd missed two days of work and they fired me."

"How was the concert?" asked Claire. Tilly didn't hear her.

"That was one of the last shows he ever played. He died later that year. Imagine if I'd gone to work."

On remembering this conversation Claire was suddenly, inexplicably angry. She turned to John. "Could I have a martini?" she asked.

"Hell, yeah," he said, rising. She would stay. At least another half an hour.

***

Afterwards, when Claire tried to recall the rest of the party, it came back to her mixed-up. She hated the disorder. She worked for weeks to develop a chronology, to string her memories together in a way that would make clear not only what she'd done, but exactly why she'd done it. She wrote everything down, cut up the paper, and rearranged the pieces to see what looked right. It didn't work. The martini John made her had been strong, and the first of many.

All she was certain of was the beginning and the end. The last unbroken memory she had was of replacing her empty glass on the table. The most recent, where linear time returned, was waking the next morning and realizing that the weight on her legs was not the cat but Kenji's ankle.

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John stood in front of Claire. His face was very close. His breath reeked of liquor and octopus brine. "I'm so happy you could make it," he said. "You're so fun. And you're such a good employee."

"Thanks for having me."

"It's just so rare, for someone so smart to also be so—fun."

"I almost killed a kid today," said Claire. "On the way here. I almost ran over him with my car as I was coming out of the driveway. Would have crushed him like a bug. Just—" She made a squelching noise with her mouth.

John stared at her.

"I don't know his name," she told him. "I'm pretty sure it's Matteo but it could be Juan."

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Everyone else was in the kitchen, doing shots. Kenji took his coat from the coat stand, then found Claire's and handed it to her. She put it on.

The little red animal looked at her from the coffee table. It was covered in tiny white spots like stars. She heard Kenji open the door. She looked back at the animal.

***

Kenji and John sat across from each other in the white armchairs, talking intensely.

"We have too much staff doing too little," said John. "We have six part-timers when we could have two-full timers. And they're kids. They don't know what they're doing."

"Inexperienced," said Kenji.

"The volunteers, too. These retired women with nothing else to do. It just slows everything down."

"Hard to manage," said Kenji.

"Just hire a few real librarians. Maybe with degrees, ever think of that? An M-L-I-S. But they're too cheap to do that."

"Penny pinchers," said Kenji.

***

Claire's boyfriend called.

"How's it going?" he asked her.

"I'm at a party," she said. She held out her phone so he could hear.

"Oh!" he said. "You didn't tell me you had a party."

"I'll call you later," she said. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't know you had a party."

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She held the cracker with all five fingers, the brine from the octopodes dripping onto her palm.

"Let me know what you think," said John.

She took a bite. The tentacles were salty and firm. They tickled the roof or her mouth.

She looked up at John. He was smiling, expectant. He was standing very close again.

"They're imported," he said. "From Porto."

She nodded, walked to the bathroom, and threw up. There were hands in her hair, holding it back—

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She slid out of Kenji's arms and off the bed. Her coat lay crumpled by the door. She reached into the pocket and took out the wooden animal.

Kenji sat up halfway. He looked at the animal and then up at her. His expression was one of total awe. "You're going to get fired. John'll fire you."

She pushed him back down. She placed the animal atop him, its red legs in the grassland of hair on his chest. It was a grazing animal, she thought—a horse, a donkey, a deer.

***

Paratrooper woman was demonstrating how to break the hold of an assailant. She told one of the men to grab on to the front of her jumpsuit.

"I take my arms and put them between his arms," she said. She did it.

"Then I bring my wrists together and thrust up." She demonstrated. The man lost his grip.

"But I wasn't really trying," he said. "If this was real that wouldn't work. Your best chance would be to kick me in the nuts."

"Again," she said. "Grab me for real." He grabbed the front of her jumpsuit again.

***

Claire sat at Kenji's kitchen table. She drank coffee and watched him. He was cooking eggs. She could see the back of his neck again, and, this time, the backs of his arms.

She felt hungry and hungover. There was a kind of dizziness, not from the alcohol but from the change of place. It was the first time in months she had woken up outside of her own bed.

Like John, Kenji lived on the second story of an old storefront, but their apartments looked nothing alike. Kenji's place was uncool and gloriously messy. There was a big old Persian rug and many potted plants. Sweaters hung off of the backs of chairs. Half-full glasses sat on every surface.

The wooden animal stood on the table in front of Claire. In the daylight coming through the window, it looked leaner than it had the night before. A coyote, she thought, or a fox.

Kenji walked over and set an omelette in front of her. It was perfectly yellow and covered with crystals of salt.

"I heard someone say somewhere," he said, "that if you can't even make an omelette for your lover, you should be ashamed of yourself." He took his own omelette and sat down.

They dug in. Kenji ate fast and took enormous bites.

"I still can't believe you took it," he said, looking at the animal between them.

"It was in front of me, and I already had my coat on. I just put it in my pocket. Everyone else was in the kitchen, I think."

Both their phones buzzed at once. It was an email from John, sent to everyone who'd been at the party:

Morning All,

I hope you enjoyed yourselves last night, and that you are not suffering the aftereffects too badly this morning. I love being able to host these get-togethers. It's always a joy to be in a room with so many classy people.

My little wooden horse is missing. It's not a horse, really. It's a Mexican craft that I picked up on my trip to Oaxaca last winter. But it looks like a horse. I couldn't find it anywhere this morning—and I've turned the place upside down. I'm concluding someone took it.

I'm issuing a period of amnesty for the thief. If that's you, let me know sometime this weekend and we can talk it out. If no one comes forward, I'll be forced to assume that you are all fine with taking my things. There will be no more parties until I get my horse back.

Best,

J

"I don't think it's a horse," said Claire, once they had both finished reading.

"Me neither," said Kenji. "It always looked more like a rabbit to me."

"Really? I was thinking fox."

"If you want to give it to me," said Kenji. "I can give it back to him."

"Well, you didn't take it."

Kenji worked his way through another giant bite.

"He won't be as upset at me. I'll tell him that I wanted to see how mad he'd get. Like a prank."

"Why do we have to give it back to him at all?"

"Well, it's his."

Claire had forgotten how loyal Kenji was to John. “He won’t miss it,” she said. “It’s just a conversation piece. ‘Where’d you get that?’ ‘Oaxaca.’ ‘What kind of animal is it?’ ‘Maybe a horse?’”

Kenji was in the midst of another giant bite of egg. It took him a while to swallow. Once he had, he was quiet for a few seconds more.

“You know John. He’ll make a big deal out of it. Stir shit in the circle of friends.”

Claire’s headache intensified. “I wouldn’t mind that,” she said.

Kenji stopped eating. “You don’t really know them,” he said. “I get that they’re a little much. But they can actually be really kind, once you know them. It’s a good community.”

“They’re not a community,” said Claire. “All of John’s friends are just people who want to be John.”

Kenji looked at her emptily.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he said, “but you sat on the couch and listened the whole time. Even once you got drunk, the only people you would talk to were John and I.” Kenji balanced his fork between his first finger and his thumb. “How do you know what they’re like?”

“They didn’t have anything to say to me either,” she said.

“That’s not the point. Do you remember anyone’s name?”

“Wasn’t there an Emma? Emily?” Kenji did not correct her.

They finished their omelettes in silence. Claire walked into the bedroom and retrieved her coat from the floor. She came back into the kitchen where Kenji was washing their plates and slid the wooden animal in one of the coat’s pockets. She draped it over the back of a chair and went to the bathroom.

There was a basket of magazines on the toilet. The top one was open to the crossword. While she peed, she wrote in one of the words. Zero was zilch.

***

Claire pulled into her driveway and got out of the car. It was still cold, but the sun had come out, and she found that she did not want to go inside. The hungry cat and two voicemails from her boyfriend were waiting for her within. A few minutes more.

She looked across the street to where she thought Matteo and Juan lived. The house seemed empty: the cars were gone. It was Sunday, she realized. Maybe they were at church. She didn't know if they were Christian, or what their parents' names were, or what they did for work. She decided that she would introduce herself. How does one meet one's neighbors? She did not know how to bake.

She put her hands into the pockets of her coat. The wooden animal was gone.

Eye

I think it was May. I'm sorry I can't remember more exactly. I know you're a very exact person (you were, at least, when we lived together), and typically so am I. But in the time since, the details have gotten away from me.

That winter was a long period of loneliness. At one point I met someone online. We both liked to rock-climb, and we decided on a rock-climbing date. Our work schedules were so busy that we could only find one free night between us. The day before, she told me something had come up, and we pushed it off a week. Then it was my turn to cancel. We did not reschedule again. I did not meet anyone else for months.

It must have been May because of the project we'd started at work. You know it's all secret and I can't get into the details. I can tell you that we were designing a drone, and that the drone had a camera. I can't tell you what the camera was meant to watch.

I was on the team that programmed the camera—we called it the eye. You will ask: how hard can it be to get something to look? You always had those types of questions for me. But it was a nightmare. The eye needed to be able to turn in every direction. All the motors had to be programmed just so. Once it found what it was watching, it had to be able to follow it, even if it was moving very fast (which things of that kind often do—but I've said too much). And it could not get confused. It could not mistake something else for what it was after. That was essential.

We were all working our asses off. Everyone on the team—Dennis, Kit, and I—put in seventy or eighty hours a week. We went in on the weekends, and stayed late into the night. But it made no difference. The eye was not learning to follow its target—it seemed interested in everything but. At one point, it started tracking Dennis's nose. He has a particular nose—you've

met him, you know. Then it got over that, and began instead to surveil the pigeons that flew past our office window.

The company knew we were stuck. They encouraged us to put in more hours, but we had reached our limit. Kit had a breakdown once. “Eight days!” he said. “I haven’t seen my kid in eight fucking days!” and he ran out of the room. It was Sunday, so we gave him a few hours before we called him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t handle that well. Me and the kid are playing badminton right now.”

“Take the day off,” we told him.

“No, no, I’ll come in after dinner,” he said.

(I know you will think it’s horrible that Kit came back to work that day. You will worry for his son and wife. But Kit is one of the top programmers in the company, and he got there through hard work. If he eased up, he might lose his job, and then his family really would have cause to worry. I’m sorry if that sounds harsh to you, but it’s the reality of the trade.)

After another futile week, the company decided we needed help. They found a specialist in machine learning, working at a different branch in an office across the city.

She shook our hands and told us her name was Stevie Arya, exactly like that: “My name is Stevie Arya.” She had long, strong hands—programmer’s hands. She was two inches taller than me.

Programming is a male-dominated profession. We—all men—were in awe. Dennis had a girlfriend then, and Kit had his wife, so there was no possibility of anything for either of them. Because I was single, I was filled with horrible anxiety.

(You know from the time when we were friends, before our relationship began, that I develop distant enamorations for people with whom I never have the courage to speak. You helped me weather several such crushes. The fact that I was able to ask you out so easily speaks to your warmth and approachability.)

Stevie dropped her leather bag on her desk and went over to the eye. We'd set it up on a card table in the middle of the room. Wires ran out of it from all sides, into different computers and outlets.

"Kind of messy," she said.

We turned everything on. Kit opened his desk and produced a wooden dowel. At the end of it was a replica of the thing that the eye was supposed to watch, the target object. He crossed the room and waved it in front of the eye. It did not react. Stevie watched from the corner with her arms folded on her chest.

Suddenly, the eye flipped to one side. It twitched around, frantically tracking something through the window. We looked. It was a pigeon with a potato chip in its beak.

"Does this happen every time a bird goes by?" Stevie asked.

"Only with pigeons," I said.

She nodded. "Well, at least it can tell them apart."

(You may not understand why I'm telling you that I met a beautiful and brilliant woman in the course of my work. But, as you said, we're friends now, well past the point of jealousy. You asked me how I've been, and this is how.)

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The eye learned on raw data. We fed thousands of images and videos into its neural net, waiting for a pattern to develop. To aid this process, we added our own rules and parameters concerning

size, shape, color, and pattern of movement. For most of the day, the eye sat in the middle of the office, digesting information in a digital slumber.

Stevie felt that this was not working. The images and videos were all too different, she said. And the rules we'd written were too specific, band-aid fixes. She removed them all.

Instead, she began to train the eye by hand. She moved the wooden dowel around the room in long arches. The target object sailed back and forth.

"It needs to learn on its own," she said. "It can't be forced." She spoke about the eye as if it were a child.

We were skeptical of her methods. But when she deleted our old code, the eye stopped watching pigeons. It hadn't started behaving correctly. This would take a while, Stevie agreed. But for the first time in months, progress began to seem possible.

I had been afraid that whoever the company brought in would be a drill sergeant. But Stevie came to work at nine and left at five. She told us all to do the same. I hadn't spent so much time at home since before grad school. I walked around my apartment in loops. I didn't know what to do. Insufficiently exhausted by the days, I lay awake at night and rose early.

Under my new schedule, I got to watch the school bus pull up to the stop below my window. All the children in the apartment complex, most of whom I had not seen before, formed a line and boarded it. They jostled each other and made a lot of noise.

I began to indoor rock-climb again and found that my muscles had atrophied. Routes that would have been easy a year ago almost killed me. The morning after a climb, every part of my body was sore.

Slowly, I regained my strength. The eternal pinch in my neck softened. I began to sleep the whole night through.

***

I remember the day it worked. Stevie had spent the morning adding a patch to the neural net, designed to help the eye differentiate between shadows and real objects. Kit, Dennis, and I checked her code for bugs. It was flawless, as it always was.

We ate lunch in a circle around the eye.

"Let's run a test," I said. "Really quick."

"We're on break," said Stevie. She was looking at it. None of us could look anywhere else.

"We can run it while we eat," I said. "I'll just hit start."

Stevie nodded once and put her bowl on her desk.

I walked to the eye and hit the switch. Its aperture widened with a hum. Dennis pressed a button on his computer. Then he reached over and passed me the dowel. I lowered the object above the eye. It trembled at the end of the stick.

The eye, shakily, looked up. I moved the object to the right. The eye paused, then turned right.

We yelled and grabbed each other. I embraced Stevie. "You're a genius," I said into her shoulder.

"We need to do more trials," she said. "Somewhere else. It needs a change of scene."

Management agreed to provide accommodations in the desert by the city. We'd go the following week to run more tests. They moved Stevie up to the next level of security clearance. Now, she knew not only what it was we were watching, but why.

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We went out to the desert on Monday. As we drove, the buildings got bigger and further apart. The highway narrowed to two lanes. All around, golden rocks piled atop each other, spilling over onto the dry land. I cannot tell you what direction we went in or for how long we drove, for security reasons. I can tell you that it was beautiful.

The company had rented a rectangular bungalow made of corrugated metal. As the sun set, we carried our computers in and unpacked. Kit and Dennis agreed to share a room. Stevie got the second bedroom. I took the couch.

Work began the next day. “What it needs now,” said Stevie, “is constant, sustained, one-on-one attention. We’ll divide it up between the four of us.”

We made a schedule with rotating shifts. Someone would be with the eye from morning to night. The rest of us would look at code, cook, and rest. We would stay out there until the eye could track the object faultlessly.

I had the first shift that morning. “Be unpredictable,” Stevie told me. “Don’t go easy on it. Make it lose track and then pick up the thread.”

I carried the eye out into the shrubs and rocks. It had a battery now, and a satellite connection to a server back in the city. I placed it at the base of a boulder and turned it on.

I readied the dowel with the object at the end. I waved it one way, then the other. The eye traced its movements. I raised it high above, then concealed it behind a rock. When my shift ended, after three hours, the eye was faster than before.

“How did it go?” Stevie asked me when I returned to the house.

“It’s learning,” I said. “I could see it improving in real time.”

“We might be out of here sooner than I thought,” she said.

"That's a shame," I said. "I'm enjoying myself."

I handed her the eye. Her long fingers wrapped around it.

***

Next to the house was a cluster of boulders, propped against each other. I walked up to them and touched the cool, porous granite. It was the kind of rock that climbers go wild for. I found myself looking for cracks and protrusions where I might put my feet and hands. I wedged my fingers into a gap and pulled myself upward—I made it a few feet before jumping back down.

(You will say that this was dangerous, with no pad to fall on, no climbing shoes or hand chalk. Ordinarily I would agree. I never climb outside. But I was feeling differently then. I wanted to ascend, or, as the climbers say, to send. To project the boulder, as they say, or to project up its face. I spent the rest of the morning trying to climb it. While I did this, my mind was completely blank.)

That night, Kit made cocktails to celebrate how quickly the eye was learning. Stevie said that it was on target to be fully trained in just two days. We drank more. Dennis got very excited about the idea of roasting hot dogs. He dragged us all outside and we watched as he made a fire. The desert sky was enormous and full of stars. We took sticks from the ground and put hot dogs on the ends of them, and held them over the flame. I cannot remember anything ever having tasted better.

Eventually, Kit and Dennis went to bed. Stevie and I stayed up and continued to talk.

"Why did you get into programming?" she asked me.

"For the money," I told her. "And you?"

"Well, it's a rush," she said. "To figure out a project you've been fighting with forever. To see it finally fall in line."

"I know."

"And then it surprises you. And then it's *you* that doesn't understand *it*."

"I know exactly the feeling."

"I'm addicted to it. I think, if I wasn't doing this, I'd be hooked on blow or skydiving, something to that effect."

(I've heard you are a Christian now, so I will not describe our sex. Imagine, rather, that you are in church. You're sitting, listening to the hymns, singing the hymns yourself. The feeling of connection, of absolute joy, fills your body. You feel that you could rise to the top of the church and stay up there until the song is done. Now imagine that the priest, a tall, muscular man, comes down from the pulpit, walks to your row, and bends you over the pew. I apologize. That may have been more offensive. But there are no good metaphors for sex.)

"Why are we watching it?" I whispered to her. "What we're watching."

"I can't tell you. You don't have the security clearance."

"Why?" I asked again.

She murmured it into my ear.

Stevie kept the eye in her room, on top of her dresser. We lay next to each other and looked at it. In the semi-darkness it seemed to give off light.

Strive crossed the room and took it in her arms, cradling it.

"It saw everything," I said. "Maybe we should have put a sheet over it."

Stevie did not seem to hear me. She was looking into the glass bubble of the eye. She stayed this way for a while. Then she set it back down on the dresser and returned to the bed. She fell asleep. Her breathing was quick and regular like the turning of a motor.

***

When I woke, Stevie was already gone. She had the first shift that day. As she worked, I had breakfast and returned to my boulder.

I found that by stretching my left leg as far as it could go, I could reach a foothold that allowed me to make it halfway up. Above me, I could see further handholds, more places for my feet. I felt sure that I could reach the top of this boulder, and probably all the other boulders around me. What had never before happened had happened. The object of my unspeakable desire desired me. Anything was possible. I worked on the boulder for hours. My fingers began to bleed.

I was halfway up the rock face when I saw Stevie approaching me. She held the eye in one hand and the object in the other.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked.

I jumped down from the boulder. I told her I liked to rock-climb but that I wasn't very good.

She appraised me. "I see it," she said.

"I've never bouldered outdoors before."

"The other night," she cut in. "I just want to make sure we're on the same wavelength."

She told me that it had been a one-time thing, not-to-be-repeated. She did not regret it, but she had been drunk, and made the decision in the heat of the moment. She kept her work and her personal life separate, she told me, and she was concerned that I would not be able to do the same, and therefore it would be better if our relationship returned to being a solely professional one.

"It was pretty fun," she said again. "Don't get me wrong."

She handed me the eye and the object, and went into the house. I stood there, holding our project.

(You will say that I shouldn't have expected anything different, that people hook up all the time. But you were not there. No one whispered classified information in your ear. Moreover, what do you know about hooking up? You're a Christian now, but even before you were a Christian, before our relationship, you did not hook up with anyone.)

I stood there for a while. Then I turned around and walked into the house. I went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

"Going out?" called Dennis.

"Yes," I said. "I'm grabbing a snack."

"Good plan," he said. "Three hours is a long time."

I took a hot dog from its package and slid it into my pocket. It was cold against my leg.

I walked for a while before setting the eye down in a dry riverbed. I pulled the target object off of the dowel, took the weiner out of my pocket, and impaled it on the end of the stick. I lowered it in front of the eye. I moved it to one side, then the other.

***

The next day, Stevie returned from her shift looking upset. "It regressed," she said. "I don't know what's wrong. I couldn't get it to focus."

Dennis had noticed this too, during his turn with the eye the evening before. "I thought I was imagining it," he said. Kit agreed.

They looked at me. "Well, I don't remember anything too dramatic. But now that you say that, it didn't seem as sharp, no. Definitely duller."

Stevie put the eye on the kitchen counter and sat down. "What the hell," she said.

"It's just a matter of time," I said. "It might have to get worse before it gets better. That's how these neural networks are. They form pathways naturalistically. It's not a linear process."

"That's not how they are," said Stevie. "They just improve."

It was my shift again. After three more hours, the eye had begun to track the hot dog in earnest. It could watch two different things now, something it had never been designed to do. I wondered what it saw in its neural-net mind. Did the object become the hot dog, or the hot dog the object? Or had they combined to form a third thing with characteristics of both?

(You will say this was unethical, miseducating the eye. To that I would say that I was not behaving logically, according to the rules of professional conduct. I was hurt and I wanted to destroy the project.)

After returning from the woods, I handed the eye off to Kit and went back to my boulder. I found that I could climb almost to the very top, but that the last hand-hold was out of reach. My fingers started to bleed again. Sweat ran down from my armpits to my waist. My body shook. Scaling the final foot was impossible.

***

Kit brought the eye back that night looking grim. "It's worse," he said. "Significantly."

Stevie ran a test in the living room. The eye jerked around like a drunk insect, leaping at shadows and sudden movements. When it at last found the object, it followed it slowly, fearfully.

"It'll be alright." I said to Stevie. "You're understandably anxious about this. But I'm sure it can be solved."

She did not look at me. “I’m going out again,” she said to Dennis and Kit. “Check the code. Really make sure. I’ll have a look at it too, when I get back.”

She took the eye from the table and walked out the door.

I stood idly in the kitchen. The only light came from Kit and Dennis’s computers, a blue glow that made them look like ghosts. They scrolled through thousands of lines of code.

“Are you going to help?” Dennis asked me after a while. He chewed the arm of his glasses.

“I think I should go and find Stevie,” I said. “She seemed upset.”

Kit looked up from his computer. “Yes,” he said. He sounded exhausted. “The project isn’t working. She’s upset.”

***

She hadn’t gone far, it turned out, just to the gathering of boulders. Three electric lanterns stood in a triangle, creating a well of blue light. She was waving the tracking object around the eye quickly, desperately.

“Stupid piece of shit,” I heard her say as I walked over.

“Come back inside,” I said.

She looked at me. “Its brain is broken,” she said. “The pathways are falling apart.”

“So, we take another day out here,” I said. “So what?”

“We said we’d be back tomorrow. The company will be on my ass.”

“We’re working really hard,” I said. “We’re doing what we can.”

She pointed the object in my direction. Hesitantly, the camera turned to face me. Its glass dome reflected the light of the lanterns.

“You know why it isn’t working,” Stevie said.

"Why would I know that? I have no idea."

"You're doing something to it." Her expression seemed off to me. She wasn't nearly angry enough. Half the anger, or more, had been substituted by resignation. It was not the first time a project of hers had been killed, I realized. A horrible feeling came into my head.

I did not say anything. Stevie picked up the eye and walked back inside.

Not sure what else to do, I climbed the boulder in the pale electric light. The final foot, impossible that afternoon, was simple then. I sat up there on top of it and listened. It was dusk—the frogs had started up. Could it have been March? The frogs start in early spring, so maybe it was March instead of May. I always get the two confused.

It was a huge, deep sound. I'll always associate it with visiting your parents in Kansas, all the frogs in the stream by their place. I still don't understand how there were so many of them in that one creek. Other than that, of course, the visit was boring. You're from a slow and boring place, it's why you moved to the city. Why you moved back out there after we split up is something I still don't understand.

Eventually it got cold and I climbed back down. The next morning Stevie had us pack up and leave. She took the eye home that weekend and by Monday it was working perfectly. We passed it off to the drone team and ordered pizza to celebrate. Stevie didn't speak to me. Then she was gone, back to her usual office across the city. Kit, Dennis, and I started writing the code for the drone's user interface. We went back to seventy-hour weeks. I stopped climbing. I tried to get things going again on the dating app, but that went nowhere.

And how are you? It was good to hear from you. Do you see your parents often now that you live so close to them? I remember you were getting interested in watching birds. Is that any good out there?

Run For Hunger

The mountain lion ate an inner tube filled with foam. “She must have thought it was a snake,” one of the park rangers said.

When they did the autopsy, they found that the foam had expanded and blocked off the mountain lion’s esophagus. No food could reach its stomach. No matter how much it ate, it was still hungry. This was why it ate Susana’s hand, though she didn’t know it then.

***

She was walking in the canyon by their house, as she did every morning. She went early. When Jerry woke up, she was already gone. She left a depression on her side of the bed.

It was a Sunday. He graded essays at the kitchen table. He taught history to tenth graders, and this year they were the stupidest yet. Overdependence on technology, that was the problem, that and basic laziness, and parents God knew where. He’d liked the job at thirty. He was no longer thirty. He could almost be retired, but they were still paying off the mortgage, and would be for another several years. They’d bought the house to be further from the city and closer to nature.

An hour passed and then he got a call. It was Susana. Her voice sounded faint and slurred. “I’m at the hospital,” she said. “I’m okay, I’m going to be alright.”

He asked her what had happened.

“It’s okay,” she said again. “Just get here.”

When he got there, she held up her arm. It ended at the wrist. It was covered in so much gauze that it looked like a cloud.

“Mountain lion,” she said. She didn’t sound upset. “It just got my hand and took off.”

***

Susana was discharged after two weeks. On the drive home from the hospital, they stopped at the pharmacy to pick up her painkillers. She waited in the car while Jerry went inside.

"Montagne," he told the kid behind the desk. "M-O-N-T-A-G-N-E."

"Okay," the pharmacist said. He went back into the endless shelves of drugs and returned with two bottles of fat white pills. Their labels said *Percocet, 30mg, for twice daily use*.

"Sign here, please," the pharmacist told Jerry. He held out a clipboard and a pen.

"They're not for me," Jerry said, signing. "They're for my wife."

"Yeah," said the pharmacist, taking back the form and the pen.

"She got a tooth removed," said Jerry.

The pharmacist looked at him. "Ouch," he said.

***

Jerry stayed at home for the rest of the week. He cooked food for Susana and made sure she took the pills. They made her loopy. Sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, she'd go somewhere. He could see her eyes slip off their axes.

"If I don't go in next week, they're going to be upset," he told her over dinner.

"I'll be fine," she said. "I can muddle through." She raised a deliberate spoonful of curry to her mouth. It had been her left hand, and she was left-handed.

"It's ridiculous," Jerry said. "I tell them, 'My wife got her hand bitten off by a mountain lion,' and they still want me back on Monday."

"The physical therapist starts coming tomorrow," she said. "If I really need anything, I'm sure he can help."

"He? I thought it was that girl who checked up on you over the phone."

"That was the nurse," said Susana. "He's the physical therapist." A bit of curry slid off her spoon and landed on her white skirt. "Ah, God," she said.

Jerry ran a washcloth under warm water. He knelt down next to Susana and dabbed at the bright yellow stain. Below the cotton he could feel the muscle of her leg.

"See, if I were retired, this wouldn't be an issue," he said. "I wouldn't have to stay home. I'd just be home."

"I'm sorry," she said. "What was that?"

He saw her eyes sliding back into place. "Never mind," he said. He rubbed harder at the stain.

***

The physical therapist was a tall man with no hair on his head.

"We're going to do everything we can to make sure that arm stays in use," he told Susana and Jerry, bouncing a little on the heels of his running shoes. "Keep the circulation up, everything like that. And then, for the other arm, we're going to focus on coordination. So you can write and eat, do what you need to do, with that hand."

He reached out and touched Susana on the right shoulder. "Coordination," he said. Then he touched her left shoulder, below which hung the stump. "Strength," he said. "This is a beautiful place," he added, looking at Jerry. "You're so in nature."

"She's a big nature lover," Jerry said, looking at Susana. "And it's quiet."

"Well, I'm jealous," said the physical therapist, looking out the window.

***

Jerry returned to work on Monday. That week they were doing a unit on the French Revolution. He lectured, as he did every year, about the Tennis Court Oath, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Robespierrre and the Reign of Terror. His heart wasn't in it. His descriptions of public beheadings by guillotine were met with slack faces.

Between classes, he Googled "mountain lion attack." He learned that mountain lions rarely hurt people. When they did, it was normally very small children, moving very quickly. They were almost always motivated by fear, or extreme hunger. Their territorial ranges had once covered the continent. Now they were cleaved by highways and encroached on by suburbs. Food was scarce, and people were everywhere. They were hunted for sport, hundreds every year, a horrible tragedy.

Stories of mountain lion attacks have generated immense negative sentiment towards the species, read one website. *As with all predators in North America, threats to their mobility, territory, and food sources have made encounters with humans all but inevitable. Instead of focusing on the rare instances when these encounters have turned violent, we would do well to remember that we have posed an existential threat to mountain lions for generations.*

Jerry reached out and slammed the computer shut.

***

In the middle of the night, when the Percocet wore off, Susana felt phantom pains at the end of her arm. It was as though her hand was still here, or still in the process of being eaten. She woke up holding her arm to her stomach and swearing softly.

"I dreamt that I was walking out of an elevator, and the door closed on my hand," she told Jerry one morning. "I was trying to yank it out, but it was stuck. Then the elevator

started going up. Through the gap in the door where my hand was, I could see a man with these freaky yellow eyes. Mountain lion eyes."

"Terrifying," said Jerry.

"The funny thing was, I was just happy to have my hand back. Even when it was getting ripped off by the elevator. I thought, 'I didn't lose it, after all.'"

***

Jerry was in the teacher's lounge, microwaving his plastic container of leftover curry. The only other teacher in the room was new this year. She taught English, Jerry thought. She was probably the same age he'd been when he started, walking up on thirty. The rookie gleam had not yet been removed from her. She was wearing a knit sweater of all colors.

She looked up from her lunch and waved at him. It seemed as though she wanted to say something, but did not know how. Jerry's curry rotated.

Eventually, the English teacher said, "I heard your wife was in an accident."

"It's true," said Jerry.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You teach English, right?"

She nodded. "Ninth grade. I was supposed to do tenth, but then Ross came back. Mr. Miller. I would have had class right after you."

"I don't know why he came back," said Jerry.

"Anyway, maybe it's strange, but I wanted to give you this." She reached into her bag and produced a single red mitten.

"Well, thank you," he said, taking it automatically. "Did you knit it?"

"I was working on a pair for myself, actually, but it ended up too big."

"It's impressive," said Jerry. "But I'm worried it might be too small for me."

"I meant for your wife. If it's not too strange."

Jerry looked up at her. The microwave dinged.

"If it's the wrong side, she can flip it around."

***

When Jerry got home, he found Susana in the living room, doing exercises with the physical therapist. She was working her handless arm with a giant elastic band, bending and straightening it slowly. She had on the same exercise clothes she wore for her morning walks. They were the clothes she'd been bitten in.

"One more," said the physical therapist. Susana let out a short, loud breath and pushed her arm straight.

"We were just wrapping up here," said the physical therapist to Jerry. "She's doing really well." He took the elastic band from Susana and touched her on the shoulder. His bald head was completely smooth. His arms and legs were corded with muscles.

Jerry had developed a pain in his lower back last year, intermittent but very strong. As a result, he'd started to hunch. The skin sagged off his arms. Next to the physical therapist, he felt like a shriveled berry.

"She looks good," he said.

While Susana was in the shower, he sat on the bed and examined the mitten. It was made of thin, soft yarn. The cuff was decorated with an intricate braid. He pictured the English teacher alone in her home, knitting for hours—though of course he had no idea if she lived alone. She and the physical therapist would be perfect for each other, he thought. Two young, attractive people with too much time. He could show her how to do exercises with his elastic band. She

could knit things for him, a new pair of running shorts and a muscle shirt made entirely out of yarn.

Susana got out of the shower and walked into the bedroom. Watching her put on clothes, Jerry felt depleted. There was nothing he could do for her that she would not rather do for herself. Since the beginning of their relationship it had been like this. When he met her, she was doing biotech research and teaching yoga to the elderly. She ran a half-marathon, and then a full marathon. When they got married, she planned their honeymoon: they hiked in the Pyrenees. *Why am* I *here?* he'd thought, walking behind her up the mountain paths. He'd thought it often since, and again now, watching her slide her arm through the sleeve of her shirt.

"What's that?" she asked, taking the mitten from him.

"One of the teachers made it. She said it was for you."

Susana examined it. "Where's the other?" she asked

"Well," said Jerry. "She figured you'd only need one."

Susana burst out laughing. It was an attention-attracting laugh, more snort than not. When Jerry heard it, he felt a residual embarrassment at the memory of heads turning their way, and a kind of secret happiness.

"That's thoughtful of her," said Susana after she stopped laughing. "Who did you say it was from, again?"

***

After a few weeks, Susana was ready to tell the story. She had some friends over for dinner: Erika, Barbra M., Barbra C., Naomi, Carol. Afterward, over coffee in the living room, she explained exactly what happened.

“I was doing my normal loop around here. I go every morning. It’s maybe three miles. Towards the end, there's a section where the trail runs next to a river. There are a lot more trees there, they kind of make a tunnel. So I didn't see it right away. But at some point I looked over and there was the mountain lion standing by the riverbed.”

They couldn’t look away. It wasn’t that she was the object of tragedy. This crowd was used to tragic stories: divorces, wayward sons and daughters, and the inevitable ulcers, kidney stones, and cancers of the breast, lung, and skin that descended on them now. No, it wasn’t the accident. It was Susana herself. The loss of her hand had shifted something in her core. She seemed even sharper, even more vital. There was a kind of extra-human grace to the way she walked and turned her head.

“I just sort of stared,” she went on. “I’d never seen one in the flesh before. They’re so big. That’s something you don’t understand when you see pictures. They’re bigger than you. And it looked at me, totally still. And then it started walking towards me.”

“Oh, my God.” It was Barbra M., one of Susana’s oldest friends. The other women looked at her sharply and she fell silent.

“I shouted and waved my hands, like they tell you to do. At some point, I guess I turned to run. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t move my arm. I looked back and I saw that it had my whole hand in its mouth. I saw that, and I thought, ‘That’s funny—just the hand.’”

Everyone was silent. After a while Barbra M. leaned forward. “So have they got it yet?” she asked.

“Who?” said Susana.

“I don’t know—the park rangers? I mean, it’s obviously rabid or something.”

Susana shook her head. “I think it was starved. You could see its ribs. Its hair was falling out.”

“Well, whatever,” said Barbra. She looked around at the other women. “It’s a danger to people. They should find it and put it down.”

“Well, we’re as much of a danger to it,” said Susana. “We shouldn’t even be there.”

Barbra let out a sigh. “You’re such a hippy,” she said. “If it were me, I’d want that thing shot. I’d get my husband to go out and shoot it and put its head on the wall.” Jerry had met Barbra’s husband a few times. He seemed like the kind of man who wouldn’t need a reason to go shoot and stuff something.

“God’s sakes,” said Susana.

“But they know, right?” asked the other Barbra, Barbra R.. “The park rangers, someone in government?”

Jerry, who was standing in the kitchen, spoke. “I think the hospital called to report the attack. I think you have to.”

The six women turned their heads towards him.

“Right now, we’re just focusing on recovery,” he said, to no one particularly.

***

The physical therapist had his last session.

“You’ve recovered amazingly well,” he told Susana, folding up his elastic band. “Given your age and how severe it was, it’s just incredible.”

“She’s always been a very active person,” Jerry said.

The physical therapist shouldered his bag. “If something comes up, which I don’t foresee, give me a call.” He looked at Jerry. “I also do personal fitness training,” he said. “If you’re interested.”

They watched him drive away silently in his black electric car.

“Personal fitness,” said Jerry. “Get real.”

“He’s a nice guy,” said Susana. “He means it. He wants to help.”

“You’ve got a thing for him, that’s what it is. He’s all active like you. He knows about ligaments and all that stuff. And that little nylon suit.”

They looked at each other for a second and began to laugh.

***

Jerry came downstairs that Saturday and found Susana sitting at the table in her workout clothes. She was having a cup of yogurt. She’d become adept at eating one-handed.

“Doing your exercises?” he asked her, pouring himself coffee.

“I just got back from a walk.”

Jerry put his coffee down. “A walk?” he asked. She’d said that. “Where?” he said. He knew where.

“Just my usual loop. Down through the canyon.”

It was her favorite place in the world, the only real reason they’d bought the house. If anything, it was notable she hadn’t gone back sooner. She must have been really dragging, from the healing process and from the drugs, to abandon it for as long as she had. Though Jerry understood all this, what came out was an angry rant.

“That’s where the mountain lion is,” he was half-shouting. “They have ranges. I searched it up. When they feel like their range is being encroached on, they attack. Our house is probably in that one’s territory.”

“Oh, good Lord,” she told him.

“Mountain lion,” siad Jerry, sounding out the name. “A mountain lion attacked you.”

“It was suffering,” said Susana. “It wouldn’t have done something like that if it wasn’t.”

There wasn’t anything to be done. The next morning, Jerry awoke and found Susana gone, out on her hike. He stood in the kitchen for a while, looking through the sliding glass door at the shrubland. The river, the snatch of trees where Susana had lost her hand. The red rocks in the distance.

Abruptly he put on a sweater and tennis shoes and walked outside. The trail started a few blocks down, in a fenced-off gap between two houses. He reached the trailhead and went East. He would go the opposite way and intercept her.

He made it to the stand of trees where the attack had happened. It was the middle of August and the riverbed was almost dry. Algae clung to the gold stones.

A little further down was Susana, standing on a slab by the river.

Jerry walked up behind her. “What the hell are you thinking? Hanging out right where it happened.”

She pointed. “It was actually further down.”

“Susana, just think about it. Please. If there’s a mountain lion that’s really freaked out or really hungry, really suffering, none of us should be out here. They should close the trail.”

“Listen,” she said. “Listen.”

There was the weak trickle of water being handed from rock to rock.

"This sort of thing happens. This is the risk we take. I've been going outside since I was little, I know what I'm doing. You can't stop me from going outside."

***

In the morning, Jerry sat at the kitchen table and graded essays. *In this essay, I will explore the causes and effects of the French Revolution*, he read over and over, correctional pen poised above.

The students' words didn't make any sense. In the time between when he awoke and when Susana returned from her walk, he couldn't focus. He kept thinking she'd been gone for too long, that he should go search for her. But she always returned, sweating and cheerful.

Soon after they married, Susana ran her second marathon. It was some kind of charity event, for (or, really, against) youth hunger. The loop was about five miles long—the runners were to do five laps. Jerry sat in a lawn chair next to the start and waited. He handed her food and water each time she ran past.

Every lap, a part of him thought she would not come back. The roads had been closed—the runners could only go one way. Susana had trained for the marathon for months. Spotters lined every street in case of an injury. And, still, he thought she might disappear: onto a bus, down a storm drain, into the asphalt itself. Then she'd come into view again and he'd stand up, cheering.

She was approaching the end of the fourth lap. He got up and walked to the barrier, holding out a bottle of water.

She ran right past him without looking up.

It happened, he remembered thinking. *She's gone*.

When she finished the marathon they embraced. He covered her with a towel. She'd come in fifth.

He did not ask her about the last lap. She'd passed inches from his hand. He could have reached out and touched her. But he'd been sure then, and was still sure now, thirty years later, that she hadn't seen him at all. This was what Jerry thought of as he sat waiting for her with the essays.

***

A park ranger found the carcass of a mountain lion by the riverbed. It had been tagged: it was a female who had lived in the park for years. The rangers called in specialists to perform an autopsy. The contents of it's esophagus, stomach, intestines, and colon were examined. This was how they found the innertube. Some numbnuts with their dirt bike.

"There's something there," said one of the autopsists, moving a fold of tissue aside.

The other leaned forward. "And there, too. Look."

***

An envelope showed up in their mailbox from the State Parks department. It contained a letter and a plastic bag. In the bag was a wedding ring and an engagement ring.

Jerry went into the living room. Susana was reading.

"Look," he said. He held up the bag. She set her book down and stood up.

"They said the mountain lion's stomach was blocked off somehow. Everything it ate got stuck."

He opened the bag and dropped the two rings into her hand. They hit each other and made a sound.

The Loss of an Estate

Martha hadn't even been in the country an hour before she was robbed. It happened the way most robberies of tourists happen. Her plane landed in the evening. She took the Metro towards her hotel. The train car was absolutely full of people, most coming from the airport like her. She stabilized her suitcase with her legs and held on to the rubber loop above her with both hands. On her right was a thin youth with his headphones on—on her left, a family of five she remembered from the flight. The train reached the city center and everyone stepped forward at once.

Two young men stood on either side of the train doors. It seemed like the doors were broken, and the men were holding them open. Martha would realize later that this was part of the shakedown—there was only enough space between the men for one person to pass at a time. In the crush, Martha could not walk forward. Bodies pressed against her back. Immobilized, she felt a hand slip into her pocket.

Her response was to reach into her pocket, too. She turned and looked at the man, his trim beard and formal shirt. His hand felt smooth and soft. Then it was gone.

"Go ahead," the man told her, waving her out of the train and smiling. "Excuse me." His accomplices smiled at her too, still pretending to struggle against the doors. They smelled of perfume.

He'd left her wallet where it was. She checked and found that she still had her passport and her phone, too. She hadn't really been robbed. But she felt that she had. The men had identified her, out of everyone on that train, as clueless, easy-to-dupe. Sans the inconvenience of canceling her cards, and the loss of almost a hundred euros cash, it was the same thing.

The next morning she bought a shoulder bag from a stand on the street. As she clipped it on, she had the metallic thought that the Barcelona street vendors were in cahoots with the Barcelona train pickpockets. It was a kind of symbiosis, like the crocodiles and the birds that clean their teeth. A stupid American almost (but not quite) gets robbed on the train. They buy the first bag they see. It is built to fail, with a loose seam or an extraneous zipper. That evening, as they return to their hotel, their neck sore from a day of sightseeing, another pickpocket rips the hidden seam or unzips the secret zipper and makes off with the bag, not just the wallet but the phone and the passport too. They give the street vendors a cut of the money in thanks.

The xenophobia of this thought occurred to her. If she was traveling with someone, she would have told them her stupid theory and forgotten it. But she was alone, and so the idea grew inside her head unchecked. She could not shake the feeling that everything and everyone she encountered was a part of some elaborate scam, staged over days or weeks, in hundreds of microscopic steps, that would eventually rob her of everything she owned.

***

It wasn't as though she'd never been out of the country before. In college, she spent a semester in London. She remembered being proud of all the ways she disproved the European assumptions about Americans. She'd been skinny. She brought up writers. She said that the tube after midnight was Dickensian, and that the price of a pint was Faustian. These comments were met with blank expressions from her new friends, all of whom were also American exchange students, and Al, her husband, now.

Then there was her honeymoon in Guatemala. It was Al's idea to go—he'd taken a semester of Spanish in college. Martha agreed because it was cheap, and because Al seemed so excited about it, more excited than she was about any destination she could think of. By that

point in her life, Martha knew she was not adventurous. She could admit to herself that her ideal honeymoon destination would be their apartment in Kansas City, or ambitiously, Wyoming. Guatemala was a trainwreck. Despite his class, Al couldn't really understand anyone. Martha got food poisoning and had to stay in bed for two days. They'd remained in America since. But it wasn't like she'd never been out of the country.

***

She was in Barcelona on a business trip. After almost ten years at an architectural firm she found herself somehow in a senior position. In an effort to make contacts abroad, the firm had sent her to attend the International Conference on Architectural and Civil Engineering. She tried to get out of it. But her co-workers were mostly men with premature hunches in their backs. They knew she would make the best impression. Besides, she was not tied up designing any buildings. Her job was to communicate between the customers and the architects. She smoothed over the social ineptitude of the hunched men. She translated the corporate mulch of the clients. She was good at her job, but they could spare her for a week.

Martha decided to visit La Sagrada Familia, the giant cathedral which was sure to dominate small talk at the conference the next day. She rode the Metro five stops north from her hotel, cradling her new bag in one arm. She found herself scanning the train car for possible scammers and thieves. Maybe the old woman with a collection of plastic shopping bags was running a con. Or the three boys who stood in a triangle, laughing. They were of the age when people get into crime.

She exited the underground and saw the cathedral immediately. It took up a whole city block and loomed above every other building. It was surrounded by scaffolding and cranes. Martha walked towards it, her neck bent up in a small *u*.

It was obviously impressive, but she wouldn't have called it beautiful. It had half-a-dozen towers, a cathedral hall, and additions spilling out the sides, and still, each wall and column, each alcove and archway, was crammed with detail. There were honeycombs, dripping stalagmites, serrated leaves. Giant, wonky letters ran across its front, and statues of angels and people crouched in every corner. It was too much, she thought. Much too much.

Her phone vibrated. She took it out and read the text from Al:

We got into the basement.

The picture he sent looked a lot like the facade of the cathedral. There were suitcases, lamps, pewter statues of horses, rolling pins, colanders, a shop fan, a birdcage, a coil of plastic tubing, a table made from a tree stump. Behind the cascade of junk was a cliff-face of cardboard boxes, which Martha knew contained files from fifty years of her in-laws' lives. There was a miniature green tractor for kids to ride on. There was a glass mosaic of a chicken.

Martha typed her response—

great!

—and pressed the crosswalk button.

It was good that Al was in the basement. The key to it had been lost in the years leading up to his mother's death. After looking around the house for a while, Al and his brother Joe hired a locksmith to break in. They were both there now, going through everything.

Viola, Martha's mother-in-law, had finally died that February. She'd had purple, swollen legs that couldn't support her. Because of this, she spent all day rotating in her office chair, telling her daughter (who had never quite moved out) to bring her food and glasses of crushed ice. After Al's father died, Viola began to gather things and people close to her. Already the owner of two rental properties in Wichita, she'd bought another, a guest house in a farm town.

She built an addition on her own house for her daughter and her daughter's teenaged son. She adopted three dogs.

Then her health took a turn. She stopped paying taxes. The properties went unrented, and she descended into debt. She did not trust anyone to help her manage the estate. She did not update her will. Martha had wondered many times if Viola believed that, by surrounding herself with things, people, and animals which she could control, she would never be able to die. Now, she was dead, and it was, emotionally and legally, everyone else's problem.

The house and the other properties had to be put through probate. The taxes and the credit cards had to be paid off. They had to find new homes for Carlo, Girly, and Elmo, the dogs, and figure out what to do with Viola's thousands of other possessions. These tasks took all of Al and Joe's spare time and showed no signs of ending. Al calculated feverishly one night that Viola's estate was losing seven thousand dollars every month. It was eating itself.

Martha looked around. People walked towards the cathedral from every direction. Some were going to pray, she figured. Others were probably architectural aficionados like the men at her firm. Most were there to see it because it was something people saw. "Barcelona?" someone would ask them, back home. "Did you go to that cathedral?" And they would be able to say that they had, and show a picture to prove it.

People collected experience like they collected things. Accumulation. That was the problem, Martha thought. The walk signal turned. She crossed with the other visitors, looking back and forth among them suspiciously.

***

The outside hadn't prepared her for the inside at all. Enormous bone-white pillars branched towards the ceiling, connecting in a latticed canopy above. Ornamented alcoves on the walls

reminded her of bird's nests. Stained glass of every color surrounded her. And there he was, the Son, suspended from the ceiling by wires. Martha thought he looked worse than usual. He was skinny and very obviously bleeding.

Download our app and get the free self-guided audio tour, said a sign by the door. People stood with their phones to their ears, listening.

As she stood in the pews, Martha experienced a sensation of shrinking. She was the size of an ant, looking up at blades of grass, seed pods, other insects perched above. She was a germ, surrounded by cellular membrane, mitochondria, a net of proteins. The sound of the self-guided audio tour, playing in a dozen languages at once, became the chatter of quarks.

Martha felt a tap on her shoulder. It was a sun-spotted elderly man. He was unshaven, and had on a long-sleeve silk shirt. He looked unmarried: through divorce, widowing, or perpetual solitude, she didn't know.

"Excuse me," he said. He spoke with an Australian accent. "Do you think you could help me with this audio thing?" He held up his phone. His hand was crossed with blue veins.

Automatically, Martha took it. "Of course," she said. He smiled at her.

Martha navigated to the La Sagrada Familia website, which forced her to download the La Sagrada Familia app. She felt sweat pricking in her armpits. She didn't think the old man looked like a scammer, or a thief. Then again, maybe that was his hustle, impersonating a geezer in need of technological help and then robbing people blind.

"It's incredible what they can do with these, isn't it?" he asked her, gesturing to his phone.

She nodded. "I remember when we didn't have any of this," she said. If he was thinking about robbing her, she wanted him to know they had something in common.

“My son made all his money on computers,” the man went on. “He invested in some kind of virtual asset, something like that. And then he put everything he made off of that into solar panels in Italy.” He burst out laughing. His laugh reverberated through the cathedral.

The audio guide was ready to download. It was available in English (U.S.), English (U.K.) and English (Australia). Martha almost selected the Australian guide, then wondered if that would be offensive. Was the British guide the standard? No, that seemed somehow worse. He probably didn’t want an American talking in his ear for the next hour. Finally she chose the Australian one and gave him back his phone.

“You’re a lifesaver,” he said.

“Where are you from?” she asked him. She surprised herself. She’d been trying to exit every conversation as quickly as she could ever since she’d left America.

“Melbourne,” he said. “But I live in London now.”

“I studied in London during college,” said Martha. “A long time ago.”

“For the whole time?”

“No, just a semester.”

“Well, that’s good,” he said. “It’d be better not to go at all, but at least you got out after a semester.”

“You don’t like it?” she asked.

“I moved there when I retired. I thought I’d get really into art, travel around Europe and go to museums.”

“There are so many great ones,” she said.

“So I’ve heard. I mostly stayed in my flat. I had my cat to take care of. But then last month she died. I thought, now what’s stopping me? So I’m here.”

"I'm sorry," said Martha.

"She had worms," he said. "She was suffering."

If he was going to rob her, this would be the time to do it. He'd charmed her completely. They stood next to each other, looking up at the cathedral roof. The man held his phone up to his ear. "Bienvenidos," it said, in an Australian woman's voice. "Welcome to the La Sagrada Familia Cathedral self-guided audio tour. Construction on this historic site began over one hundred and twenty-five years ago."

The man looked over at her. "You think they ever thought about giving up?" he asked. "If it were me, I'd have given up."

***

At some point Martha realized that the security guard could only be walking towards her. She tried to prepare herself, but she couldn't think what rule she'd broken.

"No shoulders in the church," he told her, gesturing at her arms.

"Oh," she said. All of her other shirts were dressy blouses that she hadn't wanted to get dirty before the conference. This one had no arms.

"You need to cover your shoulders or leave."

Martha could see dozens of other people in violation of the church's dress code. Pointing this out to the guard seemed useless.

"Do you have something for me to cover them with?" she asked. "A shawl or something?"

"No shoulders," he said again.

Martha stood still.

Suddenly the old Australian appeared from behind a pillar. “What’s going on?” he asked Martha. He tilted his head toward the guard significantly.

“I’m breaking their dress code.”

“How so?” he asked. He turned to face the security guard. “She looks great to me.”

“You cannot have exposed shoulders in the cathedral,” he said.

The old man unbuttoned the top button of his silk shirt. He unbuttoned the next. Underneath, he wore a sweat-stained undershirt that did nothing to conceal his chest.

“Sir,” said the guard.

He kept undoing his buttons. He pulled his shirt off and draped it over Martha’s shoulders, staring at the security guard.

“Is she decent?” he asked, seeming to take pleasure in the man’s expression. “Guess you’ll have to kick me out now, right? Now that I’ve got my shoulders out?”

“Sir, that is inappropriate. Cover yourself.”

“Too late,” he said. “I’m already in violation.”

The guard looked exhausted. “Come with me,” he said, taking the old man by the arm.

***

The shirt was incomprehensibly soft and light. Martha stood still in the middle of the aisle. She needed to find the man and give it back to him. She headed for the exit, passing underneath an alcove for the Virgin Mary on her way out.

The doors led to a raised stone plaza. She looked around it, then scanned the sidewalk, and the park across the street.

The man was gone. He had given his shirt to a stranger in a foreign country and disappeared. It was the kind of behavior Martha had come to associate with the very young or the

very old, a trust born of either naivety or senility. Martha figured she'd lost it a while ago, but she wasn't sure when. Was it there in London that year? Did she have it when she left her parents at the airport for college? Could you pinpoint the moment you lost it, as you might the day you lost your last tooth?

Her phone buzzed again. She waited a few seconds, then pulled it out of her pocket.

Progress. Call me?

And a picture of an empty dumpster, the kind you rent. She called him.

"So Joe and I decided that we needed to clear it out," Al told her. She heard a metal thud in the background. "There's too much shit, Martha. She was even more of a hoarder—I mean, where'd she get it all?"

"Years of accumulation."

"Yeah, more than accumulation. Anyway, we don't want to go through it one thing at a time. It's too much. We're tossing it all. Just keeping you in the loop."

Marisa wanted to say, somehow, that they should wait. There might be something good in there. They might accidentally throw out an important form, or a toy one of the kids would like. She could not think of a way to say this that did not sound like a betrayal.

It occurred to her that it was still morning back home. Her husband must have gotten up early to be at Viola's house by now. She imagined him driving, the sun in his eyes, his mind set on discarding. It scared her.

"Go for it," she told him after a second. "The faster we clear the place out and get it on the market, the better."

"How is Barcelona? How are you?"

"I almost got robbed."

"Robbed?"

"I mean, I almost got pickpocketed. I was on the train."

"Oh, Jesus. You have to be careful. There are guys who just wait for tourists—I mean, not to say you're a tourist, you're there on business. But you have to watch out."

"I know," she said. "I got a fanny pack."

"That's good," he said. "Be careful."

"I will."

"What are you up to now?"

"I'm visiting La Sagrada Familia. The cathedral."

"Oh, yeah. Gaudí." He really put the accent on the "i".

"Yes. It's overwhelming."

"I have to go help Joe," said her husband. "I love you."

"Yes. Say hi to Joe," she said. She hung up.

***

Underneath the cathedral there was a museum about the cathedral. Martha walked slowly, looking at the little scale models of the building in different stages of past and future construction. Gaudí designed things that weren't possible, one plaque said, not with the materials and techniques of his time. Later, sometimes well after his death, someone would figure out how to build them. He'd had faith. He was run over by a trolley car.

Martha milled around the museum for a while and ended up in the gift shop. She kept thinking she saw the Australian man. She'd finally slid her arms through the armholes of his shirt. It smelled of sweat, of rosewater and cigarette smoke.

By the racks of postcards was a souvenir coin machine. She fed a one cent Euro coin and a fifty cent Euro coin into the machine and turned the crank. The image of the church was pressed into the metal oval. She put it in her pocket.

As Martha left the museum and walked back towards the Metro station, she remembered an article she'd read, in a period of anger at Viola, a year before her death. The article said that hoarding was the manifestation of an overabundance of empathy. The thought of getting rid of something that someone might like, that was special in some way, was unbearable to some people.

At the time, she thought it was new-age bullshit. Now, she believed it. She wanted to gather everything and everyone she saw close to her. Each tree seemed notable. Each passing child was an interesting person with whom she'd like to speak. She stopped to take a picture of a trash truck, because it was so much smaller than the ones at home. She stopped to take a picture of a group of pigeons clustered around someone's spilled lunch.

She passed a tourist shop, covered floor to roof with Barcelona merchandise. Hanging from hooks that protruded into the street were white underwear with *I (Heart) Barcelona* written on them, the heart a little red symbol. She reached up and touched one.

"Twenty euro," said the man who ran the shop. "But for you: fifteen."

They got me, she thought as she handed him the money. She thought how ridiculous this was, how the underwear would never be worn, or even taken out of their plastic bag. How much of a rip off, how embarrassing for New York, for Barcelona, for the Spanish, for the tourists. How she would never get rid of them. How, when she died, one of her own children would find them in a cardboard box.

She held the underwear tightly in her hand as she waited to cross the street.

Her phone buzzed once more.

Jesus Christ—

And a picture of an open cardboard box filled with ceramic frogs.

She wrote back—*Have faith*—and a bus pulled up to the curb in front of her, six inches from her bent head.

Security

Tony sat in his car with his headlights off. In front of him, in the middle of the courtyard, was a statue of the school's previous president. “Five Decades,” the plaque said. He passed away the year before. The statue of the president had his hands deep in the pockets of his coat. His head was bowed a little. He looked like he was walking through a strong, cold wind.

Undoubtedly, the president had overstayed his welcome. When he first assumed the post, he was barely out of school himself. After ten years, his ideas began to seem out-of-touch. After ten more, the kids were calling him a fascist. Towards the end of his term, the gulf between him and the student body was so wide that it was more funny than anything. He wore long black coats and strode around like a Puritan. Who could take that seriously? But the animosity continued. It was handed down from one generation of students to the next, and persisted even after he was dead. This was why Tony was there, sitting in his car, at three in the morning. Someone had spray-painted on the statue.

***

He remembered being put on the night shift the way he remembered getting his wisdom teeth pulled. He wasn’t sure how it had happened. He only knew what came before, and what came after. Carl, Tony’s direct higher-up, had called him into his office. He told him about the vandalism.

“It happened at maybe two in the morning. Maybe closer to three. They might return. We need someone there, twenty-four seven.”

“What’d they write?” Tony remembered asking. Carl told him.

At some point Carl must have explained the details. Tony was to sit in his car from ten in the evening till six in the morning, facing the statue. He’d keep his headlights on, to scare people

away. He would be ready to act. There would not be time-and-a-half. The post would continue indefinitely.

Carl was hired externally as head of campus security a few years before. A favorite of the school's administration, he was uniformly hated by the rest of security for his constant attempts to connect with the student body. He'd put up a suggestion box last winter, which was promptly filled with responses detailing what exactly the guards should go do, and where. Most recently, he'd thrown the Security Spring Fling, which had to be ended early due to a verbal altercation. Tony figured that having him guard the president's statue was more of the same—a way to waste time and money while endearing himself to the administration.

Carl felt his hesitance. "You shouldn't have to catch anyone," he said. "You're just going to sit there with your headlights on. It's more of a deterrent, until all the negative sentiment dies down."

"I mean, it's a statue," said Tony. "People write on statues."

Carl leaned back and laid all ten fingers along the edge of his desk. "Look. You're obviously a dependable guy," he said. "I know this isn't a glamorous job. But you seem like the man for it."

***

What was it about him, Tony wondered, sitting in the car, that made him seem like the man for the job? He was tall and skinny, a little prematurely hunched, with a scrawl of a beard and tiny oval glasses that bent to fit his crooked ears. *Deterrent* didn't describe him at all. Next to the rest of security, weathered men and women who came down from the woods for work, he looked papery and weak.

Maybe he'd been asked to work the night shift, he thought, because Carl knew he wouldn't put up a fight. He hadn't. Now he was in the car.

His new schedule exhausted him. He struggled to sleep during the day. He would wake up to the sounds of cars or dogs outside, and stay awake for hours, staring at the eclipsed rectangle of daylight around the bedroom curtain.

When Ella returned from work, at around seven in the evening, he was just waking up. When he came home, she was leaving. They saw each other only in transition now, at dawn and at dusk. They stopped having sex. They stopped looking for a shelter dog. Most of their conversations took place as one of them was about to leave the room.

The night shift itself was deeply boring. The courtyard was next to the history building, in the middle of the woods. No one had a reason to go out there at night. Occasionally, the walkie-talkie sitting in Tony's cup-holder would spit out some piece of information. These transmissions made it worse. They reminded him that, somewhere else, in another part of campus, something was happening. He tried to read or listen to the radio, but found that he could only focus for an hour or two. Then his mind would go blank, and he would simply stare out the windshield at the statue of the president.

A few weeks in, he stopped turning on his headlights. He didn't want to deter anymore. If someone was going to vandalize the statue, then he would catch them.

***

In the car that night, he thought of an evening in the springtime, maybe three or four years ago, before the president's death. This was a memory he often returned to on the clock.

Ella was standing in the living room, her hands on her hips. She was telling him how ineffective her co-workers were. They were trying to plan some kind of event, and it wasn't going well. She was upset.

"Come on, people." she said to Tony, as though he were the other employees. "It doesn't take that much. Maybe one of those vegetable platters. And we don't need to rent a bartender. You put the drinks on a folding table."

Tony walked up behind her. "Say that again," he said into the back of her neck.

"What on earth, Anthony," she said.

"What you just said." He slid his arms under hers, through the gaps created by the bend of her elbows with her hands against her hips. His face was pressed into her neck, right at the place where her hair stopped. She had cut it short that winter.

"A vegetable platter, maybe. And just bottles on a table. People can mix their own drinks. You don't need a bartender."

Tony gestured with his arms, as though they were hers. He pointed one way, then another, then spread his palms apart in exasperation.

"The reception can happen outside," she said, and he pointed towards the door. "And let's be done already!" He punctuated this by banging his fist into his palm. Ella laughed. He tried to pull his arms out from under hers, but she pinched her elbows in and held him there.

He looked up and swore softly. The statue of the president was looking at him through the windshield of his car.

***

Tony had met the president in his second week on the job. He'd been told to drive between parking lots, waiting in each for half an hour. It was raining a little. Students walked quickly underneath small umbrellas.

He heard a knock on the passenger-side window. It was the president.

His hand was wiry with muscles and veins. He had a head of perfectly cut silver hair, big silver eyebrows, and sharp eyes. His face and chest were sunken in: the rumor was that he'd had polio as a child, and this alone made him seem ancient. Who got polio now? But there was something hearty and alive about him too.

Tony rolled down the window.

"I don't think I've seen you before," said the president. "I like to know my staff."

Tony told him his name, first and last.

The president repeated his surname. "Could that be German?" he asked. "There are lots of Germans here. There was a big influx in the late eighteen-hundreds."

"Well, I'm from Kansas," said Tony. "But I think there might be some German in me."

"Kansas," said the president, as though it were Vienna, or Atlantas. "Germans there, too. Mennonites. Land-grant workers. Ah, well."

Tony nodded.

The president continued. "My name's Thomas. I'm the president of the college." He said this as though this were news, as though his face was not on every webpage and bathroom stall. He stuck his hand through the window of the car. Tony shook it.

"Any activity?" the president asked, his eyes leaping around the parking lot. "Any strangeness?"

"Nothing so far."

"And how long have you been working here?"

"I started on the eighteenth, so, two weeks ago. Two weeks."

"I'm going to tell you what I tell all the employees," said the president. He hung his hand on the lip of the open window. "It might not have happened yet, but you'll see things, things which aren't illegal, but which might worry or confuse you. There's not going to be a whole lot you can do, aside from watch. If you can live with that, it's a wonderful place to work."

He raised his hand and walked away. Tony rolled up the window and brushed a few drops of rain off the passenger seat. Outside, the president opened a black umbrella.

That was five years ago. The president had greeted Tony by name every time they saw each other until his death. He knew the names of all his employees, all the professors, cooks, and janitors. This could have been friendly. But no one mistook the president for friendly. The names were just pieces of knowledge in the head of a man whose job it was to know.

***

Someone was walking across the courtyard. Older, for a student, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three. She stopped in front of the statue and put one of her boots up on the concrete pedestal. Her coat fell in such a way that Tony could not see what she was doing.

He flipped his headlights on and the courtyard materialized. The girl straightened up and looked at him, shielding her face with a thin hand. Tony opened the door and stepped out onto the pavement.

"Excuse me," he called. He walked towards her. "If I could just see your I.D." After five years, the words came automatically.

"Sorry—what's this for?" she asked.

"You're not in trouble. I just need to see your campus identification," he told her.

"This is about the graffiti, right?" said the girl. "I was tying my shoe." She pointed to her left boot. The laces trailed behind.

"There's nothing wrong with what you're doing. I just need to copy down your name and your I.D. number and then you'll be free to go."

The girl looked mostly put together. She had on some sensible makeup, and her hair was cut short at the neck. What gave her away was her coat. Tony never knew what was in fashion, but he knew the coat was out. It had deflated shoulder pads and crumpled tails. There were three pockets on each side, and more, Tony suspected, within. It might have belonged to her grandfather, or her great-grandfather. The school was crawling with money, with the children of executives. This wasn't one.

She gave him her I.D. He walked to the car, took his notebook and pen from the passenger-side seat, and wrote down her information.

"Am I being written up?" she asked. She looked afraid. Tony was familiar with the look.

"You're not breaking any rules. But this statue was recently vandalized. You were saying, you know. We're just taking precautions."

She stared him down. She was afraid, of course. But in front of the fear was an expression of confidence. She did not want to look afraid.

"Could you turn out your pockets for me, please?" he asked.

She reached into a coat pocket and pulled out the frayed satin lining. A few coins fell to the concrete. She went to reach for them, then stopped and straightened up.

"I swear I wasn't vandalizing." Fear and confidence—but there was something else there too, behind.

"We're just being extra vigilant."

They stared at each other.

"Could I see your next pocket?"

She turned it inside out. A marker slid into her hand. It was big with a silver body, the kind that stank of alcohol.

"I'm going to need to take that," said Tony. She gave him the marker handle-first, like it was a knife.

"I swear I wasn't going to write anything," she said. "I'm an artist. I carry that around all the time."

"We'll get in touch with you," said Tony. Now that he'd caught a would-be vandal, he wasn't sure what to say. "Because I didn't see you do anything, I can't write you up. But I'm going to let my boss know and we'll get in touch." He thought it sounded good.

She stood in the illuminated courtyard, barely moving. Tony suddenly wanted her to leave. He wanted to get back into the car and stay there for the rest of the night.

"You're free to go," he said.

She looked at him for a second more. Then she turned and continued across the courtyard. The laces of her untied boot trailed behind her as she passed between the buildings.

Tony bent down and picked up the coins she'd dropped. He straightened and stood in front of the statue. On the president's chest, he saw the afterimage of the word the vandals had written. Someone had tried to buff it out, but it was still visible on the metal.

He walked back to his car, closed the door, and put the silver marker in the cup-holder next to his walkie-talkie. He turned the headlights off and the courtyard disappeared.

***

As he tried to fall asleep that morning, the look on the girl's face kept returning to him. She hadn't been about to write anything, he thought. Then, he thought he'd caught her in the act. He wasn't sure what difference it made. He slept horribly and woke up feeling worse than when he'd gone to bed.

That evening, he found Ella sitting on the couch. Her sock-feet were resting on the coffee table. She had her eyes closed and her head tipped back. He turned the hand-crank of the coffee grinder slowly so as not to bother her.

She stirred, raising her head from the couch cushion.

"How was the night watch?" She liked to call it that, the night watch. It was a painting by Rhembrandt, she'd told him. He liked how old and glamorous it sounded, like he was going to catch robbers by lantern-light instead of sitting in an SUV.

"Something actually happened," he said. "One of the kids came up to the statue."

"Really?" She raised her head.

"Yeah, some girl. She had a marker."

"What'd she write?"

"Nothing. But I'm sure she was about to." He walked over and sat down on the couch next to her. She was still wearing her skirt and blouse from work.

"How do you know?" she asked.

He put his hand on her leg, below the hem of the skirt.

"She looked freaked out. It's that look all the kids do when they see security." He opened his mouth and his eyes wide. "They know they're in trouble."

Ella said, "Maybe they're just afraid of you."

"Well, sure. They're afraid of getting caught. It's guilt."

"No, I mean, they're afraid of *you*, particularly. She might have been afraid of you."

He took his hand away.

"You're tall. You're a man." She reached up and pushed his oval glasses up the bridge of his nose. "And those glasses kind of make you look like a hawk."

***

He had worked at the school for half a decade, as his plaque would say if he had a plaque. Still, the kids confused him. Mostly they did what he expected them to do. They partied and drank, fought and had sex and took drugs. "Security! Security!" they shouted to each other. They scattered into the trees.

But they did other things, too. Not illegal, but secret and strange. It was these things that the president had warned him about through the car window.

There was a boy who stood in front of a particular dorm every morning, looking at someone's window with a pair of binoculars. Tony assumed that he was trying to see a girl change, something like that. But it turned out that he had been watching a bird's nest that was tucked below the windowsill. He handed Tony the binoculars and showed him where to look.

"It's a purple finch," the boy had him. "It's really rare to see them, let alone a nest."

"Right," said Tony. "Of course, a purple finch. Very rare."

Another time, he caught a girl knee-deep in the river that ran behind the waste treatment plant. Students were not allowed to swim there. It was a liability. He told her this.

"Okay," she said to him. "I'm coming out. Just one second." And suddenly she crouched and plunged her arm into the water. When she straightened up there was a snake in her hand. She clamped her thumb down on the top of its head to keep its mouth closed.

"I'm coming out," she said again, wading towards him with the snake. "Sorry."

The president had been right. There was nothing he could do but watch.

***

The new president was making big changes. The school needed to expand or it would go broke, he said. In the past year, the student population had increased by a quarter. Ten new dorms were to be built. He'd secured funding from some art-world fat cats who were, it seemed, his friends. Tony hadn't met him yet—he rarely left his office.

"He's making moves," said Carl to Tony once, before the night shift. "Not everyone's going to be happy. Not everyone likes change. But he's doing what needs to be done." He put on an affected Spanish accent. "*En mí opinión."*

"Yes," said Tony, hating him.

***

He sat in the car again, a few nights later. His headlights were on—deterrent. The statue cast a huge, distorted shadow onto the wall of the history building.

In his passenger seat was the piece of paper with the girl's name and I.D. number. Next to it was the confiscated marker. He stared at them and let out a long, slow breath.

He still hadn't reported her. It would be easy to do. But he hadn't done it.

It wasn't as though she would be expelled. They'd make her do community service, at the worst. Carl might reward Tony by putting him back on the nine-to-five. He would see Ella in the morning again, and go to bed with her at night. But whenever he thought of turning the girl in, he saw her face, full of fear and fake confidence. He thought of how it must have looked to her: the lights roaring to life, a silhouetted figure stepping out of the car. Ella was right. She had been afraid of him, of what he might do.

He tried to guide himself gently back to that night in the spring, when he'd acted as Ella's arms. But instead of her short-cut hair against his face, he saw the horizontal line of the girl's hair. Instead of her sweater, it was the girl's ancient brown coat.

"Fuck," he said to the empty car.

It was early in the night. Carl might still be on duty. He could report the girl and be done with it. He picked up the walkie-talkie and sat there with his thumb against the "talk" button.

It started to snow. Tiny flakes fell, glittering in the lights of the car.

He took the marker from the seat, opened the car door, and stepped out onto the concrete. He walked towards the statue of the president. Snowflakes landed on his cheeks and in his beard. They landed on the backs of his hands and melted away. In one hand he held the marker—in the other he clutched the walkie-talkie.

Again, he looked up and met the eyes of the president. What color had they been in life? He only remembered their sharpness, like two box cutters.

He raised the walkie-talkie to his ear. The marker hung, uncapped, beside him.

***

Tony drove home as the sun was rising. Everything was pink and yellow. There was mist over the world.

He took the highway east. He drove past small groups of deer in the grass knolls on the sides of the road, their heads bowed or raised up, looking around alertly. He kept the radio off. In the silence, the transmission hummed like another animal.

He parked his car and got out, closing the door silently behind him. There she was: Ella. He could see her through the glass of their little kitchen window, pacing back and forth, preparing a thermos of coffee. Her hair was braided down. She had grown it out in the last few

years. She still moved with the same stability, the same goat-like assurance of the feet, shoulders squared, sleeves rolled up to the elbow. She did not see him standing in the driveway. She was not looking up. He watched her for a while.

To The Dump

They drove through the bare trees towards the bridge. Frank sat forward in his seat. He had his hands tight on the wheel, at ten o'clock and two o'clock. Reed watched him from the passenger side.

Reed guessed that Frank was a little past thirty. He had a bald patch and a beard that looked ready to jump his mouth. He smelled of body odor and the iced coffee that he drank without end. His orange shirt bore small black stains and dots of paint.

Frank was the lead carpenter at the theater, in charge of building sets. He moved through the shop gracefully, pulling tools from the walls without looking. He shit-talked fluently and often. In Reed's year working with him, he'd never seen Frank yell at anyone or break down, a rarity. But when he drove the truck, he was unmistakably nervous. It made Reed strangely happy to see Frank like this. It was how he himself felt at all times.

There was a couch in the bed of the pickup. Frank had picked it up, three weeks before, at an estate sale. It had been a prop in their last show. Now, they were taking it to the dump across the river.

Everyone thought the couch was horrible. It had clawed feet, like a dog. There was a nauseating pattern of white birds and yellow flowers embroidered into the faded blue upholstery. The seat cushions were frayed. There were stains of no clear origin.

Brent, the boss, had been upset with Frank. "You should've got a bean bag," he said. But the budget was gone. They had no choice but to keep the couch.

The cast hated it too. It became a superstition among them that, if you looked at it by accident, you'd forget your next line. Once, during a tech rehearsal, the leading man ran straight into it and fell. He had been looking away, across the stage.

***

The play ran for two weeks. There was one show Friday, one show Saturday, and two on Sunday. Reed and Frank had been tasked to carry the couch on and off stage whenever there was a change of scene. They moved it six times each show: three times on, three times off. This, times eight shows, came to forty-eight. Reed always took the leading end of the couch. He had to shuffle backward, his knees banging into the golden arms. He ended each weekend with dozens of blue marks on his shins.

Carrying something heavy with someone is an exercise in trust. Both people must be sure that the other will not suddenly let go. It is also a practice of communication. You cannot rush your partner, and you cannot lag behind them. You must set the thing down and pick it up at basically the same time. When you are doing this in a theater, between scenes, you do it in silence and in darkness. You feel the person on the other side of the thing. You see their silhouette tense and waver. Reed found himself waiting for the lights to go down, the cue to move the couch. Carrying it, he and Frank were as close to friends as it got.

***

They reached the bridge. By the entrance was a digital sign that said “HELP IS HERE.” It switched to a phone number, then switched back. It was there because people kept jumping off the bridge. On a similar excursion a few months before, Frank told Reed apropos of nothing that a kid from his high school had done it. Reed hadn’t known what to say, but then Frank began talking about some historical novel and the conversation was over. Frank said what he was going to say, in whatever order he was going to say it, reactions notwithstanding.

The traffic slowed. Behind them, a black Mercedes crept forward. The protruding end of the couch hung above its windshield, its clawed foot seeming to caress the driver's bald head through the glass.

"Back off, dipshit," said Frank to the rearview mirror.

"He's really close."

"It's what we get for going at rush hour." Frank seemed to tense even more as they drove out over the river.

"We could throw it off the bridge," said Reed.

"What?"

"The couch. Just dump it off and turn around." He thought it was the kind of dismal joke Frank would make.

Frank didn't laugh. "Well, then we'd have to go back to work," he said, inching the truck forward.

"Brent doesn't care how long this takes us," said Reed. "We could be gone all day and he wouldn't notice." He thought abusing their boss would be familiar territory.

Again, Frank didn't bite. "His memory's going," he said, and sounded genuinely worried. "Last week he told me that he wanted the paint cans organized. I had to tell him we did it the week before."

Brent struck Reed as the intended audience for the "HELP IS HERE" sign. He did not have a family, or any apparent hobbies. He had a shed full of old props in his weed-encrusted yard, and a limp.

"He really might be senile," said Reed. "He's been here so long it's like the theater ate his mind."

"It'll do that," said Frank. "Whatever it can get, it'll take."

They reached the apex of the bridge. Through the passenger-side window, Reed could see the river stretching north, a hundred feet below. There was a bald eagle above the far shore. He pointed it out to Frank, who turned his head unseeingly before snapping back to the road.

"Are you afraid of heights?" Reed asked him.

"No," he said. His knuckles were bone white. "Are you?"

"It just seems like you are."

"I don't like driving over bridges."

"What does that mean?"

"Okay," said Frank, risking a look towards Reed. "Think about what would happen if you fell into the water in your car. Assuming you survived the impact. Which we wouldn't from up here. But if we did survive the impact, we'd be stuck in there. The water pressure would keep the doors shut. We'd sink to the bottom of the river and suffocate."

"There's no way that's how that works," said Reed. "There's no way you couldn't open the doors."

"I saw a thing on TV about it," said Frank. "You really can't get out, unless you've got your windows open to relieve the pressure. Actually," he added, and he opened each of their windows a crack. Cold air blew in. Reed's eyes watered.

***

They'd done *Death of a Salesman*: the couch had been for the Lowmans' living room. They built a cutout of the entire house, with four rooms and a pitched roof. It almost killed them. "Oh, Pop, you didn't see my sneakers!" Frank kept saying in a mocking voice, holding up his paint-anointed boots. He'd hated the play. At first Reed assumed this was a part of his whole

schtick, the way he skewered the *theatre artistes*. Now, seeing how tight Frank's arms were, how hawkishly he watched the road, he wondered if Frank had simply been freaked out by all of the driving and that final, fatal crash.

***

They reached the end of the bridge. The road split into two lanes, and the traffic started to pick up. The black Mercedes roared past them on the left.

"Yeah, go for it," said Frank. "Dumbass."

Now that he was off the bridge, Frank seemed to relax a little. They passed gas stations and old diners. They passed houses. Some looked empty and new—others were rotting and bursting with things, wooden sheds and rusted-out boats lying in the grass beside them.

Passing these houses, Reed began to think of other houses, places he had seen as a child in California. He remembered the mansions that lined the beach, always dirty from the sand and wind. There had been many, many condominiums, and little apartments in the crooks of highways with houseplants on their balconies.

It occurred to him that, as far as he was concerned, most of the houses he'd ever seen had been empty. There could have been exceptional things going on inside at the moment he passed by, and he'd have no idea. Deaths, births, conceptions. Big life changes. It gave him chills to think about it. He had been near so many people, but they had not existed to him—nor had he to them.

"I've been really getting into this Ken Burns documentary," said Frank. "*Ken Burns' Jazz*."

"What's it about?" asked Reed.

"Jazz."

"I mean, what about jazz? What's in it?"

"They used to make the music harder to play, on purpose," said Frank. "They'd write lines they knew the white musicians couldn't do. Because they knew they were going to try to rip them off."

"That's crazy."

"Yeah," said Frank. "Thirteen hours."

"That's long."

Frank hit the brakes. He changed lanes and pulled off the highway and onto a tiny, serpentine road, barely the width of the truck.

"Is this the exit?" Reed asked. It wasn't. He'd made the trip to the dump with Frank before.

"Yeah," said Frank. "No, it's not. I'm not throwing it away."

"What?"

"I'm taking it home with me. Don't tell Brent."

"Why? It's probably cursed," Reed said. "I mean, it cursed the whole production."

Aside from Willy hitting his shin, a number of things had gone wrong during the Hudson River Theatre Company's production of *Death of A Salesman*. Tech rehearsal had been a week-long emergency. The lights kept coming in late. The car sounds, meant to suggest Willy's death drive, came in minutes too early, as he was still saying goodnight to his family. "Of course," the director kept murmuring from the dark gallery, waiting face-in-fingers as the crew scrambled to figure out what was wrong. "Of course." These distended rehearsals pushed the cast to the point of collapse. The actor playing Stanley, the waiter, developed a kidney stone a week from opening night. He was replaced by the ticket clerk, an acne-struck teenager who looked like

a new, young chess grandmaster—the ticket booth was run by Brent's nephew under duress. The show was attended poorly the first weekend and even more poorly the second. Yet again, the Company had gone into the red on a play. A few more months like this and they would go on what Brent called "indefinite hiatus," which meant that everyone was fired.

Frank laughed. "That wasn't the couch. No one knew what was going on. Everyone was running around like fucking Trinculo."

"Who?"

"Shakespere. It wasn't the couch."

"But you're taking it home?"

"Yeah."

"It's ugly."

"I think it could be nice," said Frank. "It'd need some cleaning, but it could be good."

***

Frank's house was a sagging two-story colonial. The sage-green paint was chipped. On the porch was a row of dead plants and two weather-beaten Adirondack chairs. In the yard, a tree bent in the direction of the wind, away from the river. The truck went quiet and they stepped down onto the gravel. Reed heard birds in the bare trees and the faint noise of the highway behind them.

Frank climbed into the bed of the pickup and began to unstrap the couch. Reed stood nearby, his hands in his pockets. This was a familiar shape for the two of them: Frank doing what needed to be done while Reed hovered with an interested look on his face, waiting to be asked to hold a board or the end of the tape measure. Frank had gone to trade school for carpentry. Reed had a history degree. He reached up and put his hand on the couch's leg to assuage his feeling of uselessness.

"Help me carry it in," said Frank. They hauled it off the pickup and carried it up the driveway. Its frame hit Reed's shins with every other step.

They had to tilt it forty-five degrees to get it through the door. Reed's face was pressed up into the back cushion. It smelled of mildew and sweat. The birds (white egrets) and the flowers (buttercups) invaded his vision and made him dizzy.

Halfway through the doorframe he felt overpoweringly angry at the couch. It was old, and it had been designed to replicate something even older. All the plays the Company put on were old. This part of the country was old: the houses, the diners, the churches. He was surrounded by ancient things gripping their age as a toddler grips a filthy sentimental blanket. He passed through the door, swearing and struggling against the couch's weight. They waddled into the living room and set it down.

Frank's house was full to the brim. Photographs and paintings in odd frames hung on the walls. There were dozens of wooden racks and shelves and cabinets—Reed realized that he had seen Frank building some of them at work, when there was nothing else to do. A row of pegs held mismatched pots and pans. Across the room, teacups hung by their handles from a grid of hooks. Potted plants filled the windowsills. There were shelves of books against the walls, and stacks of them on end tables and on the floor. Chatchies covered every remaining surface: paper-mache animals, odd rocks, clay bowls full of coins. In the cacophony of the house, the couch fit perfectly.

They maneuvered it in front of the hearth, across from the couch that was already there. It was a deflated sofa, gray and brown. The two couches faced each other. Frank took a seat on the new couch and leaned back, his hand tracing the clawed arm.

"You've got a nice place," said Reed.

“Thanks,” said Frank. “A lot of this is my fiancée. I just build things for her to put her things on.” Out of the car, on the couch, Frank finally seemed to relax. He rested his feet on the turquoise coffee table.

“Sit down,” said Frank. Reed sat on the old gray couch, across the table from Frank.

“It’s pretty nice, isn’t it?” said Frank. He patted the cushion next to him. A cloud of dust rose. The particles were visible in a shaft of light through the window. “It’s a good find.”

“It is nice,” said Reed.

“Come on,” said Frank. “I know you hate it. You wanted to throw it off the bridge.”

“I think it works in the context of the house,” said Reed. Frank laughed.

“You’re too nice,” said Frank. “You keep it all bottled up. Then, eventually—” and he made a gesture like a popping bubble, fingers together, then splayed out. He made the noise with his lips.

“Well,” said Reed, “it’s not my thing.”

“Say you hate it,” said Frank.

“Why?”

“Practice. Say it.”

“I hate this couch. It’s regressive. It smells.”

“There you go.”

Reed looked around again.

He was surrounded by the accumulation of two lifetimes, Frank’s and his fiancée's, maybe sixty years combined. There were the things they’d built, and those passed down from parents and from grandparents. There were gifts from friends and neighbors, and from one to the

other. And some things that belonged to no one: stolen things, things given out for free, things other people forgot. The house held them all.

Reed's own apartment was small and clean. It was in one of the new buildings in the center of town. He had no roommates. His bed was separated from the rest of the room by a wood partition. The roof sloped—he had to bend his head to stand beside the window.

He found that he couldn't look at Frank directly. Nor could he continue to look around the living room. Instead, he stared at the couch, at its pattern of interlocking flowers and birds. His head was filled with a soft hum. He couldn't think of what to say next. The pause in their conversation stretched.

"Where's your bathroom?" Reed asked, though he didn't need to go.

"Upstairs," said Frank. "First door on your right."

***

It was the most beautiful bathroom he had ever seen. At the far end stood a freestanding bathtub. It had clawed feet, like the couch. The window was half-covered by a lacy white curtain. A ring of mosaic tiles circled the room like a belt.

As Reed peed he stared out the open window. Birds flew in and out of the bent oak tree. The gray of the river was barely visible.

He washed his hands and looked in the mirror. Then he opened the medicine cabinet. He saw ointment, deodorant, toothpaste. There was a neat row of pill bottles. He closed the cabinet and opened the trash can by his feet. Tissues, diabetic test strips. In the shower: anti-dandruff shampoo, and a red pumice rock for scrubbing the dead skin off of your feet. Though he didn't want to, Reed took pleasure in the discovery of the diabetes and the dandruff, the dead skin, the meds.

He went back downstairs. Frank was standing in front of the couch, examining it. He bent down and picked at one of its seams, then rubbed a stain with his thumb.

"Is it salvageable?" asked Reed.

"I think so. I've got some crazy cleaning chemicals."

"It really does fit the house," said Reed. "It even matches your tub."

"Zoe might hate it," said Frank. "I bring too many things back from work. It might be her style, though. She's into that regency shit."

"She might be into not getting lice," said Reed.

"There you go. That's more like it."

"Do you and her have a system? For decorating and everything?"

"We've reached a non-agreement. We pick up whatever we want, and we reserve the right to be upset. It works out. But we both hate that thing." He pointed to the sunken gray couch on the other side of the room.

"You think you can get any money for it?"

"Are you kidding me? Look at it. Look at the foam spilling out of it. Actually, you know what? Would you want to help me take it to the dump? We have the truck now, and it won't fit in my car."

They carried the old couch outside and loaded it onto the truck bed. Frank drove back down the road and onto the highway. The tension entered his body again. He was silent. They hurtled towards the dump, both pairs of eyes pointed forward. Cars passed them on their left, one after another.

***

As they drove, Reed thought of something that had happened his first week on the job.

He'd been holding one metal pole in each hand—he was to take them to the storage room. He asked Brent for the keys, and Brent stood, unclipped them from his belt, and threw them to him from across the shop. Reed twisted in an attempt to catch them under his arm. The end of one of the poles swept across Frank's desk and made contact with his quart jar of iced coffee. It hit the floor and shattered. Frank's things were soaked. Coffee eddied under his chair.

Brent disappeared. A second later, Frank walked in.

"I'm so sorry," said Reed. He was afraid of Frank, then. He had not yet grown accustomed to the constant trash talk and cursing.

But Frank seemed to accept the situation in one short breath. "It happens," he said. He went to get a mop.

The next time Reed saw Frank, that afternoon, his desk was clean and reorganized. A new jar of iced coffee, identical to the first, sat atop it. Reed thought for a moment he had hallucinated the events of that morning.

"Sorry, again," he said to Frank.

"It happens," Frank repeated. "Needed to tidy up, anyway."

Reed went and washed his hands and felt like crying.

***

By the time they reached the dump, the morning frog had burned off, and the sun was bright and hot. An ocean of trash stretched out around them. Reed could see broken furniture and the arcs of tires. He thought of the years accounted for, and all the meals, parties, deep-cleans and vacations represented. He wondered if any of his own trash was there. The styrofoam container. The old onion.

A man in a blue jumpsuit was walking toward them. He had a limp and it took him a long time to get there.

“Looking to dump that couch?” he asked when he reached them.

“Yes, sir,” said Frank.

“Okay,” he said. “Drive it up to the building over there and we’ll get it weighed for you. And then we can figure out your fee.”

“What’s the rate?” asked Frank.

“First two hundred pounds is fifty bucks. Past that it’s ten cents a pound.”

Frank winced.

“Bet you’re wishing you’d put it out on the side of the road, huh?” said the man.

“It would've just sat there,” Frank said. “It’s a piece of crap.”

“Well, hey, it’s not so bad,” said the man. “I look at crap all day. Believe me, I’ve seen crap. I’ve seen a lot worse.” He turned and walked back toward the building, tilting with every other step.

Cat City

The owners of the house with all the cats had died, finally. Their yard had been a jungle. Now, a team of landscapers was cutting down the palm trees and ripping out the ferns and vines. Soon, it would look like every other house in the neighborhood.

Steven stood in the street and watched. He wondered how much it would sell for, once the remodel was done. Since moving into the neighborhood fifteen years ago, he'd seen the property values explode. It was a quiet area, centrally located. You could drive for twenty minutes and be in any part of the city. One house at a time, it was being settled by new families, or by young couples considering kids. This particular property was next to the train tracks, but it didn't matter. Last year, a place down the block had gone for over a million.

The landscaping crew took a chainsaw to a stout palm. It was a hot day for June, ordinarily gray. Sweat was printed on the men's backs. Like Steven, several of the neighbors had paused to watch them work. He recognized one of them: Bob Reinhardt lived against the train tracks too, several houses down. He owned a boat, which he kept in his driveway. The rumor was that he also owned a shotgun, which he kept in his closet. Sometimes, when he got drunk, he shot it into his own fireplace. People said they'd been over and seen the bullet holes.

Steven raised a hand and walked over to Bob. His greeting was drowned out by the sound of a chainsaw.

"I never thought they'd be gone," said Bob over the noise. "Total surprise. They were here before I moved in."

"They've been here forever," said Steven.

No one really knew the elderly couple that owned the house. On the few occasions Steven had seen them, taking out the trash or replacing one of the bowls of cat food in their

driveway, he said hello. Sometimes, they would raise a silent hand back to him. He had no idea what either of them had done professionally, where they had moved from, or whether they had any children. He knew they were called the Ortegas. That, and the fact that they liked cats, was where his knowledge of them began and ended.

The bowls of water and cat food attracted all kinds of other animals. In the evenings, as Steven and Laura did their regular loop around the neighborhood, they saw skunks and racoons pacing in the driveway. Possums leapt back into the gutters, the naked tips of their tails visible.

Mostly, there were cats. They came up from the tracks and squeezed between the slats of the back fence. They lounged in the driveway. When they heard Steven and Laura approaching, they disappeared into the foliage of the yard. They seemed more graceful there. The dense vegetation and loamy soil flipped an ancient switch within them. At the house, they transformed into tigers, panthers, jaguars. Hunters and killers.

The tone of the chainsaw changed. The palm tree fell to the ground. Bob let out an impressed curse.

***

Steven returned from his walk. Laura was seated at the head of their long wooden table, writing on her computer.

"The Ortegas finally died," he said.

"Who?" she asked, not looking up.

"The couple who owned the house with all the cats."

"Both of them? They can't both have died." She kept typing. Retirement had kindled a kind of ambition in her that Steven had rarely seen in anyone. She meant to finish her novel by the end of the year.

"Well, they're tearing out the plants. I figure they're going to start on the inside soon."

Laura looked up from her computer. "I mean, they didn't both die at once," she said. "One of them had already died, and then whoever was left in the house died."

This did not seem like an important distinction to Steven. The couple was dead. But all details were important to Laura, and the details of chronology, of the order of things, perhaps mattered to her the most.

"Fair point. Whoever was left died."

"How do you know they died? What if they just moved away?"

Steven took the head of kohlrabi he had bought at the farm stand earlier in the morning and put it on a cutting board.

Laura went on, "Prices are high. Maybe they wanted something smaller."

"They wouldn't have had any idea about the prices. They didn't go outside." He split the kohlrabi into fourths and began to chop. His greatest ambition since retirement was to become a better cook. This meant using the strangest ingredients he could find, hence the kohlrabi, which he decided to stir-fry.

Laura was silent for a while. "It'll be weird," she said. "That house was a part of the girls' childhood."

"They called it cat city, right?" said Steven. "They crossed to the other side of the street when we walked by."

"Joan did," said Laura. "Rachel wanted to see if she could pet the cats."

Steven put down the knife and turned to look at Laura over the kitchen island. "Joan hated when she did that. She thought they were rabid."

"They probably were," said Laura.

Joan had been a pragmatic child who'd grown into a pragmatic adult. Laura was like this and so was her mother, and, from Steven's memory, her grandmother. They were women prepared for any outcome, women with contingency plans and escape routes. Joan carried on the line.

Steven's younger daughter, Rachel, took after him. She would charm anything with a pulse. She held her hand out to the stray cats fearlessly.

"Do you think the cats will come back to the house once it's sold?" he asked Laura.

"I guess if there's no food, they'll figure it out."

Laura returned to her computer. Her document seemed infinite. It was single-spaced and had very few paragraph breaks. She refused to let Steven read it, but told him it was a "psycho-romance." He added chicken, carrots, and ginger to the stir fry. He made a pot of rice.

They ate sitting next to each other at the kitchen island. The table had always been too big for the four of them. With the girls gone, it seemed even more menacing, like something vampires would own. The food was good, Steven thought, except for the kohlrabi. It tasted funny.

***

As he washed the dishes, Steven suddenly remembered the disappearance of their own cat.

It had been their first year in the house. Joan was eight and Rachel, seven. Steven's memory of this period was of one extended tantrum. He'd almost forgotten about Woody altogether.

Woody had white fur with black spots. He spent most of his time on the right-most couch cushion. His devotion to lounging and to sleeping was monastic. Nothing else concerned him. He would let anyone hold him for any length of time. He barely noticed his toys, outlandish

combinations of feathers and bells. Trying to get a reaction out of Woody became a favorite game for the girls, like tourists in front of a Buckingham guard. He never broke.

Because he did not leave the couch, his absence was immediately obvious. Joan ran into the dining room screaming. They checked under the couch and behind the bushes in the yard. Laura made "MISSING" fliers. Steven took the girls to go put them up, and to ask the neighbors if they'd seen anything.

Steven was worried about Woody, but going door-to-door excited him. He finally met people he had seen in the neighborhood for months. "Feel free to call me with anything you need," he told them. "Even if it's not cat-related. If you just need to borrow something, if you need a jump-start or some eggs. Anything like that." He gave out his phone number.

"We'll find him," he told his daughters from their bedroom door. He held his hand above the light switch. "Someone will call. Or maybe he'll come back on his own."

Joan wouldn't calm down. "Cats are most active at night," she said. "We have to keep looking."

"Woody normally sleeps through the night," said Steven. He slept through most of the day, too. "We'll keep looking tomorrow."

"We have to find him," Joan said. "It's our fault he got out."

Steven remembered it so well: Rachel turned all the way around in her bed to face Joan. "He's probably out somewhere, just having a good time," she'd said. "Making friends with the other cats. He'll be back before you know it." They both got quiet. Steven turned off the light and closed the door.

The girls had to go to school the next morning. In the afternoon, Steven and Joan walked around the neighborhood. They shouted "Woody!" down into the train tracks, though he had

never really responded to his own name. Rachel stayed home. She seemed to have accepted the cat's death. This continued for the rest of the week. Then they stopped looking.

No one called with news of Woody, or for any other reason. Steven couldn't believe that nobody had needed a favor. He'd grown up in Kansas—there, asking someone to hold your mail or water your plants was commonplace. But here, people didn't ask anything of each other. Everyone wanted to be with their own families, in their own houses. They treated others as they wanted to be treated: with indifference.

It must have been a month later. Laura and Steven were taking their usual after-dinner walk. There, in the driveway of the Ortegas' house, suddenly illuminated by a motion-sensor light, was Woody. He sat next to a bowl of water, staring at them.

His fur was dirty. Grass clung to his stomach. There was a hairless line on the right side of his face.

"Come here, Woody," said Laura, bending down and extending her hands. Woody did not move. His tail swayed in the light.

"Come on," said Steven. He made a clicking sound with his mouth. "Come here." Woody was still. He seemed more awake than he'd ever been. If they moved too fast or made too loud a sound, he might run.

"Over here," said Laura, making the clicking sound too. "Woody!" She slapped the tops of her thighs with her hands.

One step at a time, Woody walked toward them. When he was at their feet, Laura bent down and grabbed him. They almost ran home. Woody squirmed in Laura's arms and tried to scratch her through the sleeves of her sweater.

Until his death two years later, Woody was a different animal. He still spent the majority of his time on the couch, fast asleep. But his demeanor had changed. He would not let himself be held. If disturbed, he scratched and bit. He was no longer allowed outside (Joan's policy), so he took to waiting by the front door and making a break for it at every opportunity.

The toys that had once got no reaction from him now drove him into a frenzy. He pounced on them from above and attacked them with his claws and teeth. He stood by the window and watched birds and lizards cross the yard, his head moving side to side, his ears raised. He wanted to kill.

The girls were too young to understand this change. After a few months they could not remember what Woody had been like before he disappeared. But Steven was never comfortable with the cat again. He would wake up in the middle of the night to find Woody standing on his bedside table, the cat's triangular face a few feet from his own. Sometimes he would find broken things which neither one of the girls would take responsibility for. Though he never saw it happen, he became sure that the destruction was Woody's work. When the cat died (from a lump that had been growing, undetected, by his groin), they buried him in the backyard. As he laid a ring of rocks around the spot, Steven could not say he was not a bit relieved.

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They drank wine on the couch. He brought it up to Laura.

"I still remember how guilty Joan was," she said. "It was like she thought she personally lost him, like she dumped him on the side of the road somewhere."

"I wish I'd spent more time with just her," said Steven. "It was easy for me to get along with Rachel. No effort. Maybe if I'd hung out more with Joan, she might have been less nervous."

"Less time with me, maybe. That's where she gets it form"

"That's not what I meant."

They finished their wine. "It seems like her new job is going well," said Steven.

"Yeah. It seems better." They sat next to each other as the house grew dark.

***

The next morning, Steven returned to the Ortega's house. Most of the palm trees were down now, and the house was more visible. Around the garage and by the door, the paint had bleached to a sickly pink. On the sides of the house, where the sun had been blocked by the vegetation, it remained a deep salmon color.

Like the day before, a small crowd had gathered to watch the crew work. Big orange buckets were filled with plants, then emptied into the back of a truck. A white plaster statue, made to resemble an ancient Greek goddess or a nymph, lay on its side in the driveway. Through the windows Steven could see men moving around, ripping up carpet and carrying out old bathroom tiles and mirrors.

Bob was standing in his yard. He was up to his knees in dead brown grass. Broken slabs of concrete surrounded him. Next to him, the blue boat loomed.

Seeing Steven, Bob raised his hand and started walking over.

"They're moving fast," he said when he reached him. "This thing will be sold in a week."

"Yeah. It seems that way," said Steven. "With what things are going for now, they'll be looking at a million, a million and a half, even."

"Well, shit. Have you ever thought about selling?"

"After the girls left, we considered it. But it's such a nice area, and we only had a few more years on the mortgage."

An orange tabby cat slunk up from the gutter and darted down to the tracks.

“Those fucking cats better not come to my house,” said Bob. Steven realized that he was already drunk. They watched the house for a while.

Bob said, “I lived down the street from them for twenty-five years, and I don’t know their names. You’d think I’d see a piece of mail or something.”

“Ortega,” said Steven. “Christian, and I think, Monica. Maria. Something with an M.”

“Ortega.” He scratched his chin. “Yeah, no. Doesn't ring a bell.”

The crew was tying ropes around the final palm tree. “It always bugged me,” said Steven. “It was like they were too good for the rest of us. They didn’t try to be neighborly at all.”

“Huh,” said Bob. “I just figured they were depressed.”

Steven suddenly felt uncomfortable. He wanted the conversation to be over.

“It’s a shame that they died, anyway,” he said.

“It is a shame,” said Bob. “They were wackos. But they were the neighbors. They didn’t make any noise. That’s something.”

The tree fell with a giant crash.

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The house sold.

“You don’t have to welcome them to the neighborhood,” said Laura. “It’s four blocks away. Not really in our jurisdiction.”

“I thought it would be nice,” said Steven. He covered the pie in tin foil. He’d found the boysenberries at a stand on the side of the highway. He’d decided he liked them, though not as much as raspberries or blackberries.

“Do you think they know about the previous owners?” Laura asked.

"I don't see how they couldn't," said Steven.

"Just don't scare them off," said Laura. She re-opened her document.

Steven walked to the Ortegas' house with the pie held carefully ahead of him. Their yard was an empty lot now. Even the tree stumps had been removed. The house had been repainted to a tasteful gray. A hybrid car sat at the curb.

Steven walked up and knocked on the door.

The woman who answered had short, straight hair. She wore a soft-looking blue sweater.

Steven told her his name. "I live up on Greenwood, you know, a couple blocks up. I heard you were moving in, so I thought I'd bring you something to welcome you to the neighborhood."

The woman smiled. "You did *not* have to do that," she said. "Thank you. I'd invite you in, but it's so messy, there's nowhere to sit."

"I don't mind," said Steven. The woman took the pie and stayed where she was.

"Sorry, I'm Molly," she said. "And now I can't shake your hand." She gestured at the pie with her head. In that moment she looked very young, only a few years older than Joan and Rachel were now. "What kind is it?" she asked.

"Boysenberry," he said.

"I love boysenberries," she said. "I like them better than blackberries and raspberries, you know? They have a much more sophisticated flavor."

"Yes."

"Well, thanks so much. It's been absolutely crazy. The whole house had to be redone. And we still have to figure out what we're doing with the yard."

"I was wondering about that," said Steven.

"Kevin—my husband Kevin—was talking about a desertscape. So we don't have to water it."

Steven felt a pull on his gut. "Before you moved in, the yard was like a jungle," he said.

"Really?" said Molly.

"Yeah, they tore it all out. It used to be full of palms and ferns. Like something from the Mesozoic. You couldn't see the house. The people who lived here would leave bowls of food and water out for the stray cats. My girls called it cat city when they were little."

Molly seemed stuck in the doorway with the pie in her hands. "That'd explain it," she said. "We keep seeing cats in the yard. They're coming up from the tracks."

"They were some strange people," he told her, unable to stop. "They might have been very depressed, you know? They didn't go out, you never saw them. And when you did, you'd say hello to them and they wouldn't say anything back. They died, I don't know if you know, right before the house went up. They could have made a million dollars if they sold, but they didn't sell. They probably died in the house."

Steven stopped.

"I didn't know that," Molly said finally. "I mean, we knew they died, I guess. Just not the rest of that. We saw the house go up on the market and we took it." She made a circular gesture with her hand in the air, as if to say, *all of it*. "It's such a great area."

"It is a great area," said Steven. "Twenty minutes from everything."

***

It was getting dark by the time Steven got back. Laura was at the head of the table again. She typed quickly and without stopping. Over her shoulder, he read:

...I remember most of all the point of contact between our foreheads. The point generated heat, a feverish heat-energy dispersion which traveled through ourselves. It was like two atoms meeting in a fissive collision, two planets making their inevitable impact, two rocks struck together to create the Promethean spark…

He went outside and stood in the yard. They lived at the top of a hill, and from his front yard, he could see the train tracks that ran behind the Ortegas'—Molly and Kevin's, now. He felt the train approaching in his feet. It came every few hours. You could take it all the way up to San Jose, somewhere up there. He'd ridden it once. He remembered he'd sat on the wrong side, and he couldn't really see the ocean. He meant to change seats but they all filled up. On the way back, he'd got it right, but by then it was dark and he couldn't see much of anything.

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The word got around quickly: Bob had taken his shotgun out of the closet, walked out into his yard in the early hours of the morning, and shot one of the cats. The yard of the Ortegas' old house was no longer hospitable. Bob's yard had a forest of weeds and a boat that had not been used in a decade. The gunshot had awakened the neighbors, who looked out and saw Bob stooped over a small lump in the grass. He was still there when the landscaping crew arrived. They did not speak much English, and Bob spoke no Spanish, but they managed to talk him into walking back into his house and closing the door.

One of the landscapers dug a small grave in Bob's yard. Another covered his gloved hands with plastic bags, lifted the body of the cat from the grass, and lowered it into the earth. The men filled the grave and marked it with bricks. They stood in front of it for a second. Then they crossed the street to rejoin the rest of the crew. They began on their project to turn the yard into a modern, water-free desertscape, where, its owners hoped, no cats would want to live.

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