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Show Hogs

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by

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Shaving my head, becoming a monk
I spent years on the road
pushing aside wild grasses
peering hard into the wind
Now, everywhere I go
people just hand me paper and brush:
"Do some calligraphy!" "Write me a poem!"

—Ryōkan, "Inspiration," Translated by Ryūichi Abé and Peter Haskel

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Performance Piece

I don't know what else to say except that you already know my mother. If you've read anything written about her work, if you've seen the real thing, or have been witness to it, you've already read a more fitting obituary.

Margarete Jean Levy passed away semi-peacefully on Friday, December 15th, 2023. I say semi-peacefully because it is important to be accurate. And because she started seeing things towards the end. She told me the world's greatest philosophers who'd ever lived were gathered around her. For what, I'm not exactly sure. She saw Plato, she saw Voltaire in his giant powdered wig, she saw the Übermensch Nietzsche himself, she saw Freud. They talked like old friends for a few minutes. Then one of them, probably Freud, must have said something that really pissed her off. *You don't know me,* she yelled across the ward, spitting at their faces. *You didn't, and you never will*. She spit into the air one last time, and the great Margarete Jean Levy departed.[1] The spit had landed on her chin and dribbled down it instead of sticking the landing on the Übermensch's face. I went back to the hotel, took a shower and slept for three days.

We begin where my mother, who you've come to know as the barn woman, was born. The house Margarete inherited from her mother was not a house at all, but a large red barn in Fish Creek, Wisconsin, with white trim around the doors and windows. Picture a barn in a storybook for

[1] In my research, I found a map of the United States labeled with the most commonly used action verb in obituaries. "Died" on the East Coast, "slipped away" in Hawaii, "went to be with his/her lord" in Texas, and the relaxed Californian "succumbed." My mother did none of these things. She just left the place she was because she had somewhere else to be.

children, the kind that teaches them how to speak. Now, take away the picket fence and the smiling cartoon pigs. This is where the two of us lived after my mother's infamous flight from the art scene in New York, my home since the age of 5 and until I turned 14.

At school, there were rumors about my mother and I having matching cloven hooves. There was a girl in my year called Amy-Marie Albertson[2] who used to make me take off my shoes and socks every day on the playground and show her that I was hoofless. The worst of it was, I couldn't even show her that we did not actually sleep in hay and eat from troughs because our kitchen was always filled with strange objects that would later become art: chicken wire, two by fours, and plaster. You couldn't even find the sink.

At this point in her life and for many years later, Margarete was mostly nocturnal. When I came home from school she had always clearly just woken up. In her morning kimono, drinking instant coffee, and applying the signature red lipstick that would one day be part of the face sold on posters, water bottles, shower curtains, and days of the week underwear. She would go out into the night and come back with twigs in her hair, smelling like burning plastic, if she came back at all. I would stock up on chicken noodle soup and other canned forms of sustenance on my weekly trips to the Piggly Wiggly with the money taken from underneath my mother's mattress. She never believed in banks.

[2] Out of respect for all parties involved, I am using her real, legal name.

It was the day Amy-Marie Albertson took my shoes and didn't give them back when Margarete became the barn woman. Amy-Marie spotted my feet from underneath the bathroom stall, and stuck her round, pink face between the gap between the stall and the floor.

"I thought I smelled barn in here," she said.

I told Amy-Marie she was probably smelling her own shit.

"I bet it smells like home to you," she said. She lifted up her nose with her pinky finger to make a pig's snout and snorted. Two girls whose names I don't remember laughed on the other side of the door.

She really was too old for this kind of thing; I was almost embarrassed for her. She crawled inside the stall and unlatched the door, so that the two nameless girls could come in to hold my arms down. She took off my shoes, horrible leather clogs that pinched my toes in addition to being offensively ugly. On a reflex, I kicked her hard in the face with my sock-covered feet. I cut the skin of my toe on her teeth, I stained my favorite socks with her warm, red-brown blood. I ran out of the bathroom and didn't stop running until I was on the gravel road that led home. The gravel made small dents in the bottoms of my feet as I walked. In retrospect, Amy-Marie had probably done me a favor. I really hated those clogs. I looked much better without them. Maybe if I hadn't kicked her in the face, nobody would have cared about my mother's work, and she would have died in that barn, nameless.

She was sitting on the overgrown lawn when I arrived, cross-legged, eyes closed. I sat down beside her, the grass soft beneath my martyred feet. It took her a while before she realized I was there, and asked me why I wasn't at school. It was then that I started to cry.

"What happened?" she asked when she opened her eyes.

"Everybody hates me," I confessed.

"I'm sure that's not true," she said.

"It is!" I said in between sobs. "They think I'm a freak who lives in a barn."

"Well, so what?" she said. "You do live in a barn. That is weird."

"That's not the point! It's not a real barn!"

"All I meant was that if they don't like you, maybe you're better off for it," said Margarete. "And how do you know they hate you? Did you ask them?"

"I don't have to ask them. I just know," I said.

"Well, so what? People who everyone likes grow up to be boring, you don't want to be boring, do you?"

"I don't know. Maybe I do."

"Freak is a compliment," she said. "It means you're inventive."

"I don't feel very inventive. They think you're a freak too," I said. "They think we live like cows, eating feed and sleeping in hay. That we never wear clothes in the barn, and we're all covered in hair and mud and things like that."

I told her everything about Amy-Marie, the shoe-stealing, the snorting, the pig-nosing, and the drawings she passed around the class of me as a human-livestock crossbreed.

"You said she called you a pig, so which is it, cows or pigs?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.[3]

"Cows would be better, pigs have too much political subtext," she said more to herself than to me. I asked her what she meant.

"I'm sorry that happened to you, Joan," she said. "But have you ever thought about how helpful it would be to transform your suffering into a different context?"

"I don't know about that."

"Sometimes we need to take the things that hurt us and make something out of them," my mother explained.

I pictured a vision board or a rainstick decorated with Mod Podge and tissue paper.

"I've been thinking about getting into performance for a while now," she said. "And I think what your friends described would be a perfect jumping-off point. Wild women penned up in barns… like livestock… we could perform her projection into an innovative portrait of the female domestic in the nuclear family."

"What do you mean, *we*?"

"Just a minute, I need to make a call," she said, holding up a single finger as she went inside to use the landline.

[3] It was very inconsistent. Sometimes we were cows, sometimes goats, pigs, or horses.

She was on the phone for two hours. I climbed up into what was once the hay loft but at this point was the space that contained my bed, a lamp, and a faded poster of George Michael. I didn't and still don't particularly care for his music, but I kept him on my wall because I could always count on him to be a shiny, commercial object of contention. I took off my socks, and aired out my wounds. They were not as bad as I feared. Just a graze from Amy-Marie's incisors. From downstairs, I heard the words "innovative," "funding," and "milking machine."

The next morning, it was decided. We were moving back to New York. The performance was set, she even had the title picked out: *Bovine Love.*

In a gallery in Brooklyn, the barn I had lived in for most of my life was reconstructed with three walls, like a sitcom set. There were no modern appliances; it was filled with stalls and hay. The plan for her durational performance piece was: for 30 days, my mother would live in the barn, eat from troughs, sleep in hay, and chew her cud. A farm hand would come by once or twice a day to muck out the stalls and to change the food and water troughs. The most important decision to be made was what would be eaten in the trough. She and the gallery owner went back and forth for weeks before the opening. Cubes of red and green jello, potato salad, mashed fava beans, tapioca pudding, wild rice cooked in milk and cinnamon? Everything said too much or nothing at all about domesticity. She settled on a mix of red and green lentils cooked in vegetable broth. This gave it a feed-like quality that was perfect for her to eat out of her hands and let it drip down her face and neck. The barn smelled awful. She would perform what she called 'the flight' on the hour, every hour. Of course, everyone in the world has seen the flight now.

Everyone's seen my mother's pale, naked body jumping through the window of the barn's hayloft, breaking through the glass pane. There's nothing left to say about the flight that hasn't already been said by better minds. So I'll just say this: You can read what everyone's written about it. You can look at the pictures and see her mouth hanging open in that feared O. But nothing compares to being a witness to it.

She'd wanted to include me in the piece somehow. It would be something fun we could do together. But when I refused to be naked or to wear some sort of bell around my neck, she decided to give it up.[4]

The panes were all breakaway glass, made of sugar. During that month, I timed my visits to be on the hour so I could pick up the pieces of sugar glass and let them dissolve in my coffee. She never spoke during 'the flight.' But she looked at me in such a strange way when she was in character. If you've ever passed a semi-truck filled with pigs on a highway and caught the eye of one of them when looking out the window, you know the look. That knowing look, that searching for guilt in the watcher's eyes.

During that month, I lived in a room at the Holiday Inn and Suites, paid for by the gallery. I think my mother chose it as a sort of punishment because I did not agree to be in *Bovine Love*. This is what you want the rest of your life to be, she'd said. To me, the hotel was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It was plain and comforting in its corporate beigeness. I ate muffins from a

[4] I remember being angry, but most of my anger came from knowing that my anger was useless. Something life defining had already been created—I knew this, my mother knew this.

plastic bag and watched whatever was on TV. I swam in the chlorinated pool every morning and left my wet footprints across the short brown carpet. I scratched a new slogan onto their complimentary stationery. The Holiday Inn and Suites: *Here you need not hide, nor pretend, nor be anything other than who you are and who you are called to be*.[5] At the time, I thought it was pretty good, even if it was a little heavy on the amount of nors. I made a copy of my own, then slipped the original into the envelope that held my room key, to be returned upon my departure.

I can tell you about the post *Bovine Love* apartment. You might have seen the pictures: the thin, multi-colored fabric scraps hanging from the ceiling, the red lamps, and the surrealist furniture.[6] She left it rarely, but there were always friends dropping by with bags full of groceries or loaves of bread. I often wondered when she had time to make all these friends if she never left her apartment. What more can I tell you? She ate like a bird, small twigs and nuts, quickly and often. She smoked, but was not loyal to one particular brand. Not that this made her less of a consumer. Whenever I pointed this out, she would get very tired and reach for another.

After *Bovine Love*, I moved into the Emma Willard School—a girl's boarding school upstate. She said she wanted me protected from the harsh beam of her fame. But really, it was because of the parties. My classmates at Emma Willard wanted to know all about them. Could I get them in? Did they really flood the bathroom on purpose? Did I know George Michael personally? Was it

[5] This, I have since learned, was copyright of a Unitarian church already.
[6] Dalí made the couch. It was shaped like a pair of lips, with a fringe hanging off the bottom. It was my favorite. It was not for sitting.

true my mother gave out goodie bags filled with prescription pills? The truth is that I didn't know, and didn't want to.

Sometimes I would get letters in the mail that had been addressed by somebody else. In them, my mother's handwriting was childlike and shaky. They may have been her attempts at poetry. I'll never know now. They said things like: *Come home, little foal. Come home*. *Let's go to the barn!*

I'd call her on the payphone in the campus center every Sunday. When I mentioned the letters, she said she didn't remember writing them. The parties stopped when I came home for school breaks. Or maybe they were never as often as people said. We ate cold takeout and watched movies—but nothing popular or topical. Mae West walking up a long flight of stairs and talking out of the side of her mouth, Charlie Chaplin falling down and getting back up again.

It was towards the end, during one of the quiet moments, when she asked me what I would write about her after she was dead. She was doing well that morning, sitting up in her hospital bed. A nurse had painted her lips their signature red, which only made the rest of her face seem duller and sick, instead of brightening it.

"When I'm dead," she clarified. "What are you going to say?"

I looked up from the email I'd been responding to and said, "I don't know. What do you want me to say?"

"You must have something planned."

"I haven't really thought about it," I lied. It was all I could think about since the sickness began.

"Really?"

"I don't. I was just going to say that I wish I knew you better," I said.

"That's good," she said after some consideration. "I kind of like that. It makes me seem far more mysterious than I actually am."

When I think of my mother, I still imagine her the same way I did when I called her from the payphone at school. I think of her on the phone, the cord wrapped around her hand, the body of the phone resting between her shoulder and chin. In one hand, she has a drink, or maybe a pen resting on a pad of notebook paper, drawing swirling lines or flowers in no particular pattern. Her head is thrown back, and she is laughing. I think of how we might be together if we had never really met and only spoke to each other through the phone, the distance allowing us to talk like old friends. In the barn, we could have set up a telephone made of soup cans and twine, one can in the hayloft where I slept, and one can in the kitchen.

No matter where she was in the world, she called me once a week. During my second year of college, she often called me in the early hours of the morning. She would leave long, rambling messages on my answering machine. (She had hired a person to give her sound baths, she wondered what I thought the color pink sounded like, did I remember that adorable salmon dress that she'd made for my first communion, where did she ever put that, had I been feeling the shifting tides of Saturn, the sound baths were terrible, should she fire the sound bather?) My

roommates found the first few messages colorful, entertaining. But the charm wore off when ten or fifteen of these messages stood between finding out if their friends or lovers had called them back. I decided it was best to just answer the calls in a whisper. I used the money from my trust to buy a second phone and kept it in my room. Eventually, my body was hard-wired to wake up on the second or third ring, no matter the time.

"It's the Ides of March tomorrow," she said on one of these nights.

"Keep your eyes open," I said. "Don't take any meetings. Or wear any togas."

"You're being funny, but bad things happen in fifteens," she said.

"It's threes," I yawned. "Bad things happen in threes."

"Maybe to other people," she said. "But to me, it's always been fifteens."

"You're very ominous tonight," I said.

"It was the fifteenth of the month when I met your father, when I left art school, and when *Bovine Love* was featured on MTV Cribs. And I was fifteen when I got pregnant. The first time, not with you."

She said this so casually, as if it were something I already knew. Most of what I have learned about my mother's life has been discovered this way.

"What?"

"The pain was awful, it was a full day of labor. Not like you. You were easy. But boys hurt more to birth, I think I've heard that before."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. How would I know?" she said. "I don't even know what they named him. He could be anyone."

"Why did you go through with it?" I asked. This was news to me, she had never spoken about my brother before, and to my knowledge, she never did again.

"That was what people did," she said casually, as if this was something she repeated often.

"That was what people did?" I repeated.

"It was," she said. "It's not easy to talk about. It was the curse of the Ides. I got a terrible haircut on the 15th of last month."

"Of course," I said. "Why should you ever have to talk about something that you don't want to?"

Either she ignored this, or she truly didn't notice these things.

"I think maybe I should cancel those meetings tomorrow and just stay inside."

"Yeah, cancel all your important meetings." My voice came out high and tight like a child's.

"They are important, my show is in less than a month."

At this point, I said something I regret too much to repeat in writing. I hung up the phone and didn't answer the rings that followed. We didn't speak for a year.

My brother, whoever he was, was never mentioned again. But I know he is somewhere, maybe even walking around the world with his mother's face. I used to imagine him cooking his breakfast before work in a blue oxford shirt. He doesn't know his birth mother's name, but he's

seen her many times. He pours his coffee into a mug he bought at a museum gift shop, with a picture of his mother on it: squatting naked in a hay-filled barn as tourists and Brooklynites and well-dressed babies look on in wonder.

Did Margarete mean everything she said? If she did, then she was right; my brother could be anyone. I spent years looking too long at the noses of older men, trying to match them to my own. But it never did any good. I knew that I would never see myself in him if he never knew my mother.

Her obituary reads as follows:

Margarete Jean Levy departed this world on Friday, December 15th, 2023. She is survived by her only daughter, Joan Margarete Levy, head of advertising at SPARK! Media, as well as her only son, identity unknown. She will be missed by countless friends and admirers of her life-long work, an enigma in and of itself.

The Meditators

I am not writing this to you because I care about you or life in a monastery. I am writing to you because I need something to do as I wait in this beige room for someone to call my name and tell me if I do or do not have any of the following sexually transmitted diseases (see attached results). I hope that you're wondering why I'm being tested for all of the below, but I don't think you'll like the answer. It will not help me or anyone else reach enlightenment. If anything, it might set us all back a few steps. We can't all be like you.

I have been cast in America's favorite equestrian dating show, *Hot to Trot*. We are about to start filming on a beautiful ranch outside of Puerto Vallarta. It's warm here, but the water is freezing. It's not the right season. I'm told it's something to do with the wind. We'll have to pretend like it isn't when we shoot the pilot and ride our horses out of the sea in our neon swimsuits. The producers are keeping my phone in a box in their locked office. I have a new awareness of the empty space where it used to sit in my pocket. Now that it's gone, I keep reaching for it, like I'm waiting for a call.

Anyway, I thought of you today as I peed into that plastic cup. I thought of a morning from the fall semester of our senior year, when you skipped a lecture just to sit with me in the quiet on your blue and white pinstripe bed sheets and read. I can't remember what I was reading. You read that book of Buddhist koans as thick as my head. And when I asked you what a koan is, you weren't quite sure.

“It’s like a riddle. But one that you can’t solve, and you shouldn’t try to because it only brings suffering.”

“Sounds fun,” I said. “Can you read them to me?”

You did, and I know you probably think I’ve forgotten them by now, but I remember. Some were stories, some were questions. None had answers. Some were beautiful and new, and others I’d heard before and seen on refrigerator magnets. What is the sound of one hand clapping? Show me, what was your original face before your parents were born?

A monk asked the master Sengcan, "Master, show me the way to liberation."

Sengcan said, "Who binds you?"

The monk replied, "No one binds me."

Sengcan said, "Then why do you seek liberation?"

But you already know this. My favorite is: "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.”

When I asked you why you should kill a god, you answered with another koan. (I know now that Bhudda is not a god. You’ll have to accept that I’m no good at understanding these things if you decide to keep reading this.)

A monk sees another monk bowing to a statue of the Buddha. Outraged, he says, “I could piss on this statue, and it would mean just as much.”

“Fine,” says the other monk. “You piss, I bow.”

I thought of this koan as I pushed my plastic cup of piss into the slot above the toilet at the clinic. I thought of how, at this moment, you might be bowing with your shaved scalp pressed to the floor. And here I was trying to piss into a cup so that I'm cleared to flirt with men and their horses on national television. I piss, you bow. You bow, I piss.

*

Since I'm sure you've never heard of *Hot to Trot*, I will explain its process so you can be appropriately disgusted. *Hot to Trot* targets the tired and overworked, who want to watch something that asks nothing of them. They aren't even asked to remember who is who, which is why our names appear on the screen next to us every time we speak, with our ages right beside them. The most *Hot to Trot* asks of the watchers is to react when the editors cue you to. Notice that they have added a sting or a drumbeat in the appropriate place for you to laugh at the seventeen sexy singles riding horseback in a beautiful place. There will be challenges and races. There will be kissing on horseback over seaside cliffs, two beautiful jockeys facing each other on the same saddle. We'll pair up, break up, and fight. And the other women and I will cry in the way that women on reality TV always cry, with our hands pressed into the corners of our eyes and our fingers stick-straight. And at the end, of course, there will be a prize. My co-stars are real horse people: polo champions, jockeys, farmers, breeders, and barrel racers. I am none of these things, as you know, so my agent had me taking riding lessons for the past month before production.

The horse I'll be paired with during filming is a dappled stallion named Joe who I'm convinced wants me dead, or maimed at least. Once during every session, he throws me from his back. My

legs and forearms are permanently bruised. I've started wearing knee pads and a helmet, but these are not very sexy, and I am afraid I will not be allowed to wear them when we start looking for love. When I pick my body up from the gravel, Joe turns so that our faces are on the same level, stills, and stares at me.

I'm sure the bruises will fade in the sun. Once we start filming, I plan to spend my time being paid to drink cocktails out of halved fruits, and swimming in the frigid sea. The jockeys, the polo preps, the breeders, the farmers, and the barrel racers will probably say that Joe and I are not there for the right reasons. To which I will say, during my confessional interview to the camera, "What are the right reasons for dating other people and their horses?" and "What is the sound of one hoof clopping?" and "What does love become when it's watched so closely by so many?" But they'll cut that part out of the final edits.

*

I had expected a much worse use for my degree in theater arts and stagecraft. I thought at best I'd be traveling the country singing songs to children about brushing your teeth and being nice to your neighbors. Did we always expect these future versions of ourselves? Probably not. Who could have predicted this? I can only picture you as you were. I write this to a version of you at 18: funny-looking with a bad haircut and those awful khakis, lacrosse trophies, and certificates of achievements on the walls of your dorm room. Why were you so bored by everything then, so unimpressed with everyone? A better question: Why was I the only one who found your complete dullness interesting?

Were you thinking about koans and attachments when you set up that projector in an empty conference room at the library? Together, we watched scenes from silent films as homework for "The Actor and the Body." Our assignment was to reflect on the movements of their bodies, silver and white flashes across a black screen. Instead, we tried to guess what text would appear on the next slide, making our voices squashy and old-fashioned. Nothing was serious to us then, no topic was sacred, no joke too far. I kissed you in stop-motion, in awkward frames pushed suddenly together, as the bodies onscreen jerked and spasmed.

*

For the past few days, I've had nothing to do but sit alone in my hotel room while they shoot the screen tests. They've taken away the TV and radio, as well as the book I brought with me. There's a phone on the nightstand but I can't remember anyone's number for the life of me, not that there's anyone I really want to talk to. I stare at the empty space in the wooden console where the TV would be, and I think of questions that don't look so good on camera. Can horses go into the ocean? Is that something they like? What was the original face of the first person to have an STI? What will I look like on camera? The editor is the one who will decide what they see. Shots of facial expressions and the sounds of individual words and phrases can be rearranged in any order, in any sequence.

*

An even better question: why did you let me stay in your bed after I got sick all over it? I would have told myself to leave. In the eye of the lens during my self-tape audition, I saw your face just before the vomit reached your chest. I reshot it over and over.

"My name is Samantha. I'm 23. I'm an actress. I'm just looking for a nice guy to settle down with."

That was all I had to say. My agent loved the tapes. I looked innocent and aloof, someone the whole family can root for.

*

Did you cut your hair off? What sound did the hairs make against the ground when they fell? What did you do with the clippings? If I ran my hand over your head now, would it feel like small patches of sand, or would it be smooth and fleshy, and a little pink? How much do they let you keep? How much do you want?

*

I met a few of my fellow castmates as their horses arrived at the ranch today. We really aren't supposed to meet until the cameras start rolling, but some of the more serious equestrians wanted to personally make sure their horses were cared for. The poor horses had to be shipped separately from their jockeys, packed into wooden crates and tranquilized, then loaded into silver trailers. They staggered out like foals walking for the first time. It's no wonder Joe hates me. He is probably plotting the best terrain on which to throw me from his back, like a gulch, a very steep valley, or maybe a nearby volcano.

You'll be happy to know I've made a friend. He is named Jon. His family breeds Icelandic horses, and he's brought one along with him. It's shorter than any of the other horses, and since he is taller than any of the men, it makes him look like he's on a merry-go-round for children. He told me that now that his horse has been out of Iceland, it can never go back. After the show is

over, the horse will sell for tens of thousands in America. Jon is back from a tragic elimination last season, where he was trampled by two non-Icelandic ponies just as his lover was making her final choice between him and the jockey who had won the Kentucky Derby. He is bearing it well.

"What is your name?" he asked me this morning, as he brushed out the mane of his little horse.

"Sam," I said, before remembering that I was supposed to go by Samantha. Apparently, another bachelor is a famous jockey named Sam. Jon motioned to my left cheek, to the birthmark I hadn't covered.

"Oh," he said. "I am sorry. I thought you had dirt on your face. But I can see now that it is just like that."

After we talked, Jon asked me to pair off with him when we started filming. If the public loves us, he'll give me a share of his family's ranch in Iceland. I could live there all year if I wanted. I could have my pick of any of the smallest, toughest horses in the world.

*

Many of my fellow castmates have come on horseback in hopes of real love. I met a girl from Texas named America, and yes, that was her real name. I called her America the beautiful at first because I was ready to despise her. Until I realized that it was an adjective with too much truth to be mocking. America the beautiful is looking for love. She let me feed her horse giant carrot stalks and told me about her plight.

"It sucks having to travel miles just to find another human being that's not related to you," she said, shaking her head, her waist-length hair swinging. "And even when you find a

guy, you wish you hadn't. There was one this time a guy left me in the middle of a cow pond after we did it and just drove away."

I told her I was sorry and listed off my pathetic history: one man who swore off women completely, one man who never liked me much in the first place, and a monk.

"Men suck," she sympathized. "They make normal girls think there's something wrong with them."

"So your plan is to meet a guy here and whisk him away to the middle of nowhere?" I asked her.

"Pretty much, yeah," said America. "If I found the real thing, he'd follow me wherever I wanted."

"And you think you can find that here, the real thing," I said. "Riding horses in bikinis?"

"Well, yeah," she said. "I'd better! Where else is there?"

"I always thought that it feels more perverted to watch real people fall in love," I heard myself saying. "If it's all an act, it feels less creepy. They're just actors who put on a show and we're only doing what we're supposed to. But if it's real, you might as well be hiding under their bed all day, waiting for them to come home."

"You poor thing," she said. "Don't worry about it. You'll find someone."

Her horse inhaled the final carrot I'd been holding. America the beautiful said she'd see me around, and then lead the horse back to the stable.

Why do I feel so guilty about how I spoke to her? Do you have any insight on this? Why is it so easy for me to mock? It takes so much guts to confess that you believe in anything. Whatever America the beautiful is, she believes in love and reality television. She believes that she will find a man who'll follow her anywhere and stay where she puts him. Why can't I commit to any idea so confidently? I'm sorry for what I said the last time we met. Apparently this is what I do, and it was really nothing personal.

*

Maybe it's because of the way I spoke to you that I keep having the same horrible daydream alone in my hotel room. You're in it. Your shaved head sticks out of your robe. You hold a wooden begging bowl as you walk alongside the highway. You've been doing this for hundreds of miles. Sometimes you hold out a thumb, but usually no one stops. A trucker pulls off at the shoulder, he doesn't know what to make of you. From a distance, he mistook you for a boyish girl because of the beauty of your robes. He offers to buy you a meal and a drink, and you accept. He brings you to one of those fake honky-tonk bars they have around the Adirondacks. It almost looks like the bar where we met, only there are even more flatscreens pinned to the walls in my daydream. The trucker brings you a stein of beer and a hamburger, it's too much. It's more than you need, but you've been trained not to waste, and so you eat it all, and soak up the sauce left on the plate with your french fries. You look up from your plate and see my face on one of the flat screens. The other ones are all playing matches from different kinds of sports. What am I doing on screen? It varies. Sometimes I'm throwing a glass of white wine in someone's face, and sometimes I am doing unspeakable evil that has to be covered by a thick, dark square across the

screen. But whatever it is I'm doing, you see it, and you recognize me. And I know that you're ashamed, but not surprised.

*

Do you still believe in what the Buddhists say about desire? I think they might have gotten it right. Maybe when you knew me, I might have found this depressing, but I can see now that it is just like that. Now that I'm in the business of selling attachments, I hope you won't think of me any worse than you do already. If you had seen the last apartment I lived in, you might understand.

Now I live in an all-inclusive resort in isolation. It's all so glamorous. I thought I would cry when I arrived and saw the towels laid out on the bed, which had been folded to look like cranes and swans. I still haven't used either of them. They live on my bathroom counter because I don't want them to lose their shape. It was the thought of undoing the folds that had someone so carefully shaped like eyes and beaks.

*

I've come up with a kind of ritual to make my mind stop reliving that horrible daydream of your discovery of me. There are other daydreams too: one where I make a headline in the paper, and you see it the next day when you shred it to make a lining for the chicken coop. One where someone has snuck their phone into the temple and is watching highlight reels with the sound turned off. I know these are ridiculous, and you will probably never see *Hot to Trot* until years later, when we can chalk it up to the stupidity of my youth. What's worse—I hope that somehow

you will watch every moment of *Hot to Trot*, and even after you see for yourself all the disgusting things I've done, you will still decide that you've always wanted to know me.

*

Here is the ritual. I put on the white hotel robe, walk out of my room, and down the hall. I walk across the beach for as far as I am allowed to, and since I have no begging bowl, I use an empty coffee cup from the continental breakfast bar and hold it close to myself with both hands. (I'm not exactly sure what a begging bowl is, so I don't know how these things are usually carried. But this is my own ritual; it is only there to be held.) When I reach the edge of the beach, I place my begging cup in the sand. I kneel on the ground next to it, and then I get back up. I do this eight times, then I turn around and walk back up the beach.

Maybe my co-stars, who watch me from the windows of their own rooms, think I am performing some sort of bizarre exercise routine. Maybe they wonder about the purpose of kneeling down and standing up again, knowing that it will do nothing for my gluteal muscles. Maybe when we meet on the beach, they will ask me why I do this and what purpose it serves for my physical health. I'll tell them, "It does nothing. I do it when I want to do nothing."

Whale Fall

We are pinned underneath the model of the blue whale at the American Museum of Natural History. No one knows how long we've been lying here or what caused the ceiling to cave in. The way we've entered has been blocked by shrapnel, bits of ceiling tiles, and display mannequins of walruses and extinct marine life. We hear the sounds of digging like a dog's nail's scratching at the other side of the wall. We are all strangers, but our bodies are getting too familiar too quickly. Our feet, arms, and elbows have ended up in each other's faces and eyes. They poke us in the ribs and chest. We cannot tell who they belong to or if they are our own. Maybe the blue whale has more limbs than scientists previously thought.

The audio exhibit keeps skipping. It's stuck on the phrase, "Some people think whales are just big fish."

There are five of us. Or five that can be seen and heard. Maybe there are others that are quieter, or silent witnesses. One of us is caught underneath the dorsal fin, the weight of the whale's body resting on his back. He is one of only two men. His beard is patchy, one of us can feel it brushing against their calf. The other man is an old man, dressed in a purple tracksuit crushed underneath the whale's tail. The alcohol in his cologne burns our eyes. He's singing strings of women's names. He has a nice voice, low and a little raspy, but that might just be because of the asbestos in the insulation.

"Sandra….Julia….Rosie….Barbara….Lorretta."

The women beneath the whale are all tourists. There's a mother and her young daughter, wearing sensible walking shoes and backpacks on their stomachs. There's another woman in her fifties who's overdressed for the hall of ocean life in a red polyester pantsuit. She is trapped somewhere underneath the whale's chin, or what would be the whale's chin if whales had chins.

"Sir!" she yells back to the man. "Could you stop that?"

"Maria," he sings. "Rosalie….Lillian."

"Shut up!"

"I want to go home," says the daughter.

"Amanda!" sings the old man, adding lots of vibrato.

"Shut up!"

"Just let him sing," says the man underneath the dorsal fin. "Why shouldn't he?"

"I don't want to die listening to the names of his fucking mistresses," says the woman under the chin of the whale.

A fresh storm of insulation falls onto the whale's back and slides down the flanks and tail.

"I don't like the blue whale!" the daughter says in tears. "I want to go home."

"Susanne...Lucille," sings the old man.

"They can't be his mistresses, nobody has that many," says the mother.

"He's lived a long life," says the younger man with the patchy beard.

"Maybe they're women he's killed?" says the mother.

“Maybe they’re confessions,” the younger man agrees. She may be right, he thinks, it’s possible the old man is a killer. Who visits the museum alone, in a tracksuit, no less? Then the younger man remembers he also came to the museum alone with no children.

“Joanne,” the old man sings, his voice sliding from a tenor’s pitch to a much lower note.

“Hey! That’s me!” says the mother. “He sang my name!”

“Shut the fuck up!” says the woman under the whale’s chin, crying.

“Some people think whales are just big fish,” says the audio guide.

The old man stops singing. After it's gone, we all think of how nice it was to have something filling the silence. There is no more ceiling left to fall, so the only sound that is left to listen to is our own breath slowly being pushed out of us by a large marine life force.

“We just all need to push upwards,” said the woman under the whale’s chin, straining to lift up the whale’s face with only her chest. Her hands are buried under something heavy. We all give it our best try, arching our backs if we can’t use our hands, clawing at the whale’s skin with our teeth, nudging it with our knees, and spare limbs. The whale’s skin tastes like dust and chemicals, of course it does, that’s what it’s made of. It’s not salty like we expect it to be. No matter what we do, the whale doesn’t move.

“Do you think anyone can move this thing?” asks the mother, called Joanne.

“No. It’s 21,000 pounds of fiberglass and polyurethane,” says the younger man. “Takes them a week just to dust this thing.”

“How do you know that?”

"I take my students here on field trips every year. I'm familiar with the plaques."

"This can't be happening," said the woman under the whale's chin.

"Anyone got any good jokes?" says the old man.

"Knock, knock," says the young girl.

"Any joke but that," he says.

"What the hell is happening to us? Shouldn't we be dead already?" asks the woman under the chin of the whale.

"Oh, I've got a good one," the old man says. "So this guy walks into a bar…I know, I know but I promise it's a good one. Bear with me."

The audio display stutters past the phrase it's been stuck on and moves on.

The stages of the decomposition of a whale's carcass…

"So the guy walks into this bar, right?"

…support a wide variety of marine biological communities…

"And he sees the bartenders are all horses."

A whale skeleton can feed free-moving scavengers for months…

*"*And his mouth starts hanging open, and the horse says, 'Hey man, what the hell? You've never seen a horse tending bar before?' And he says…"

Scavengers will consume the soft tissue…

"And then he says…"

The digestion of the carcass by the various organisms can last 50-100 years….

"What does he say?" asks the young girl.

"He says…Well I can't remember exactly now, but the joke is that he didn't find it very funny."

"That joke sucks," says the girl.

"We should be dead. We probably are, aren't we?" asks the mother. "How can we still be breathing?"

"You're telling me," laughs the old man. "One day, when you're as old as I am, you'll ask yourself that question every morning. You'll wake up, look in the mirror, and you'll ask: Has it happened yet? Is it happening now?"

No one answers him because none of us can really say one way or the other.

"Do you think we're being punished for something?" says the young man.

"Maybe we are," says Joanne, the mother. "We didn't work hard enough. I really think if we try again and just push really hard-"

"Shut up, Joanne!" says the young girl, smiling because she is not allowed to speak this way.

A bar tended by horses, strangers being flattened together underneath a blue whale. The joke is that nobody finds it very funny.

"What do you think? Do we have any regrets?" asks the young man.

"All of it," says the old man. "All of it."

Organic fragments will enrich the nearby sediment for—

Something large falls a little ways behind our heads. None of us are in a position to see what it is, but after the dust settles, the audio display is faint and muffled.

Joanne apologizes to the old man for thinking he was a murderer. The woman under the whale's chin apologizes for calling him an adulterer.

"It's alright," he says, wheezing a bit under the pressure of the tail of the world's largest mammal digging into his side. "One of you was right, and it wasn't Joanne."

"So we are being punished," says the young man.

"No, not punished," says the old man."I don't believe in any of that stuff."

In the new near silence, we are more aware of the contact between our bodies than ever. It makes us feel naked. It's so quiet that we realize there could only have been five of us in the hall of ocean life from the beginning. It occurs to us that we have never introduced ourselves. So we speak our names out loud to the world's largest mammal slowly pushing the air out of our lungs, to the abandoned walrus mannequins, to the fallen ceiling tiles, and to the scratching at the wall. Lucy. Joanne. Marcello. George. Amanda. When we finish our song in the hall of ocean life, there's nothing but quiet.

Ernie

Who was the old man in the turtleneck hiding behind the hors d'oeuvres? No one had heard of him. When Robert pointed the man out, the other guests' eyes moved straight past him to find a former poet laureate or someone else with a much better name. This never happens at these kinds of parties. If there is a face Robert doesn't know, it's usually attached to a name he's heard before or one he's supposed to have heard of and now must spend the majority of the evening pretending he has. *Of course I've read your work. Of course! It's transcendent.* Robert has learned what to say to other writers and literary freaks to get them to like him. People love to be told that they are transcending something, whatever they think that means.

The old man was drinking something brownish and slow-moving from a clear glass. Where did it come from? Robert knew Katherine, his editor, had only bought white wine that the guests sipped in pre-rationed plastic cups resting on thin napkins. Robert Braithwaite was a New York Times best-selling goddamn author. The crasher must know this, or why else would he have come? There was a headshot of Robert framed on the wall, above the cover of his latest novel stacked in neat piles. Maybe the crasher had it hung in a dugout shrine in his closet, full of candles and offerings.

The best-seller was about an aging yet successful author who walked around certain parts of New York haunted by his past in an undiagnosed depressive episode. Robert's stepdaughter told

him he'd written a woe-is-me book. The critics told him something else, in words that barely fit on the back of the book jacket. They'd probably used the word transcendent.

For the reading, Robert had chosen a section that described the heart of the novel perfectly: the confrontation between the novel's hero and his ex-lover turned morning talk show host as they crossed paths by the artisanal cheese stall at the farmers market. This particular scene was based on a real-life encounter with his ex-wife. Except there was no award-winning dialogue; there was hardly any dialogue at all. The reason for this, Robert decided, is because nobody talks the way they do in fiction. We interrupt ourselves and talk over each other when we talk to each other at all. When we do, we bore ourselves and say things that sound like grocery lists and tax withholding forms once you start to write them down on paper.

"Thank you all for being here tonight," said Robert at the podium. He put on the tortoiseshell glasses that he had bought specifically for this moment. "I'm going to read part of the novel we're here to celebrate tonight, so without further ado…"

The crasher was closer to the front now. Something in his face looked familiar—his close-trimmed white beard and the thick skin that peeked out beneath it. Nobody looked at the crasher but Robert. A woman in a green sweater dress seemed to walk straight through him. Robert cleared his throat and started to read. The passage described the brightly colored vegetables, the shape of his ex-wife's breasts, and the unbearable weight of genius. When he'd

finished, the crowd applauded; some even wept. The crasher did neither of these things but stared straight through him.

Robert made the rounds for an acceptable amount of time before calling an Uber from the bathroom. Before he left, he used one of the urinals, counting the ceiling tiles as he pissed. Even though his eyes were fixed on the ceiling out of habit, he was sure the crasher hadn't been using the urinal beside him a moment before. But there he was. He hadn't even left a thoughtful urinal of space in between them, though there was no one else in the bathroom.

"Still don't know what your book's about," he said to Robert. "But nice speech."

"Thank you," said Robert, his eyes still fixed on the ceiling.

"You took lots of pauses," he said.

"Yes," said Robert.

"The first rule of giving speeches," he said."Is what you don't say in between what you do say."

"Exactly," said Robert.

It was terrible, trying to see the man without really seeing him, to look without looking at him too closely. What he could see of the man's face from the corner of his eye was so familiar—another face he was supposed to know. He made his way over to the sink, turning the tap on for too long to cover up the sound of the stream coming from the crasher. He washed his hands and stepped out into the hall, into the elevator, and down to the ground floor. On the street,

a shiny black car with a silent driver and mints in the cupholders was already waiting to take him home.

In the apartment, the lights in the kitchen and down the hall to his bedroom were turned off. His wife was already asleep. She never came to these kinds of things anymore, she said they made her feel stupid and tired. He kept inviting her anyway. There was a light coming from Robert's office.

Through the glass pane in his office door, Robert saw the crasher, asleep in his office chair, his chin pulled into his collarbone, his hand still resting on that glass of brown liquid. He now knew exactly who the crasher was.

He recognized this face from a photo he had studied since the second grade. The teacher had spread out thin paperback biographies across the reading rug and asked the children to pick a historical figure to dress up as for the living wax museum. The crasher's face had starred in the cover of the biography Robert chose: *Who was Ernest Hemingway?* On the cover, the man wore a thick fisherman's sweater and squinted off into the middle distance, looking pained. He had a square jaw behind a closely trimmed beard and skin that looked like someone had left him out to dry in the sun for an hour and then forgot about him for years. Robert knew nothing about him, only that he looked sturdy and impossible to knock over, so he slipped the paperback into his backpack and read the whole thing on the bus ride home.

On the day of the wax museum, he wore his father's old red turtleneck that didn't match the photo at all, and a white beard that had come with a Santa Claus costume that his mother had trimmed and dyed salt-and-pepper. He memorized the publication dates of books he was too young to read. The sign at his booth read, "I'm Ernest Hemingway, ask me about my life," which he pointed at silently when the janitor had asked him if he was dressed up as Santa Claus. The grown-up version of the paperback was on Robert's bookshelf, a biography called *Hemingway: A Life Without Consequences.*

He opened the door and took the chair opposite the sleeping ghost. Hemingway's ghost opened an eye. Robert knew that he should say something beautiful or important, but nothing came to mind. Instead, he came up with a phrase he's said often and never really meant.

"What are you drinking?"

"Whiskey, absinthe, a bit of rubbing alcohol," said the ghost of Ernest Hemingway.

"We call it the Veil-Raiser. You can't taste much after death, but this gets through most of the time."

"Mr. Hemingway, can I call you Ernie?"

"No."

"Have you read my work?" Robert asked, hating how small this made him sound.

"I really don't know a damn thing about your work," said Ernie.

"Oh," said Robert. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard my name next to yours a few times," said Ernie.

"Good things, I hope."

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Ernie. “I can’t hear shit through the veil.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Robert said. He couldn’t tell Ernie that his work was transcendent, even though it probably was. “What did you think of the reading?”

“I told you it was a good speech,” he said. “But I don’t know what the book is about.”

Robert noticed that Ernie had a way of looking past the thing in front of him. It was the same face he made in the photo he and his college roommates had taped to their living room wall. They had been so convinced that their apartment was Paris in the 1920s, that they were Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Eliot. He stood up and took a box of cigars from his bookshelf. He’d been saving it for his stepdaughter’s high school graduation, but now he needed something to do instead of staring.

“Want one?” he asked, placing a cigar in his mouth.

Ernie accepted and took a lighter out of his pocket.

“I hate these things,” he said.

So did Robert.

“In movies, you’re always smoking a Cubano,” Robert said. “Did they get it wrong?”

“Of course, it looks better on screen. I never smoked before a hunt,” said Ernie. “Your scent can give you away so easily. Are you a hunter, Robert?”

"No, but I’m a pretty good gatherer.”

“Was that a joke?” asked Ernie.

“A bad one.”

“Don’t do that again.”

"Noted."

"Do you tell knock-knock jokes like that in your novels?"

"Well, yes and no," Robert said. "I'd like to think that they have a sort of quiet humor to them."

"Do you think you're funny?" asked Ernie, jabbing the air with his cigar for emphasis.

"Maybe not funny exactly," said Robert. "I guess I'd say sardonic or tongue-in-cheek?"

"You use too many goddamn adjectives about yourself," said Ernie. "I don't need to read your book now because you've already used every word in it."

"People like descriptions," said Robert.

"You know what else people like?" asked Ernie. "Trash, filth, smut! Dirty movies, westerns, and women who wear too much perfume and hats with those big fake flowers."

"Nobody wears those kinds of hats anymore," Robert said.

"Still, they read your books," said Ernie. "Or they say they have."

"Do you want to go for a walk?" asked Robert. "I don't want my wife to wake up."

He walked towards the hallway without waiting for an answer, deciding that he should be more assertive. He was already halfway to the elevator when he heard the door close behind him.

"So the wife," asked Ernie loudly. "First one?"

"Be quiet, people are sleeping," Robert whispered back. "And no, she's not."

"So what number is she?"

"She's not a number, she's my wife." Robert said, pressing the down button on the elevator.

“So second? Third? Fourth? Fifth?”

Ernie was talking out of the side of his mouth that wasn’t keeping a grip on the cigar, his words knocked into his teeth on their way out.

“I don’t want to talk about my marriage with you,” said Robert as the elevator doors opened and he selected the ground floor. “That’s private.”

“I didn’t ask about your marriage, Robert. I asked a simple question.”

“But you were going to ask about my marriage.”

"No, I was not!”

“You were, it was a leading question.”

“It was a yes-or-no question.”

“No, you were about to give me advice about women, love, or even worse, sex," said Robert. “And I don’t want to hear it. It probably hasn’t aged well.”

“Just answer the question.” The elevator dinged, and the gray doors opened.

“Third,” Robert said.

The doorman was still awake in the lobby, but barely. He waved to Robert as he walked out the door with the ghost in tow. Ernie didn’t speak as Robert started walking instinctually towards Central Park. It wasn’t far, and he hadn’t been there at night in a long time.

“Do you ever feel guilty?” asked Robert, as they crossed the street.

“Why should I?” asked the ghost.

“You’ve done some bad things.”

“Do you?” asked Ernie.

“Maybe,” Robert confessed.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about women,” said Ernie.

“I never said that.”

“Let’s change the subject.”

“Has that line ever worked for anybody? It’s a graceless segway.”

“You and your goddamn adjectives.”

“Goddamn is an adjective too.”

"No, it’s not. It’s a meaningless word intensifier.”

“That’s called a description, Ern.”

They’d reached the park now, the dark limbs of trees reached upwards into the empty sky. The last of the tourists were still out, staggering back to their midtown hotels, along with all the other people who had nowhere to be in the morning. The spiced nut vendor was closing down, the neon letters disappearing one by one. The man scooped the remainder of the nuts into a plastic garbage bag and tied it off.

“In my next life, I would like to be a nut vendor,” said Robert. “You just get up in the morning, you get your cart and all your nut-spicing ingredients, and you say, ‘Ok, time to go to work.’ And you go to work, and you melt the sugar on the almonds and put them into little bags. And nobody says to you, ‘I noticed you put cinnamon in these nuts. Can you tell us a bit more about your relationship with your father?’ I bet he’s gone years without anyone bringing up Freud to him. Nobody asks him what good his spiced nuts do for the world in general. They just fill a hole in

tourists' stomachs, and that's enough. Nobody asks what he thinks about preserving the art of nut vending. Nobody asks him if one day there will be spiced nut-making intelligence that will replace all the vendors in New York, which would never happen anyway."

"I wouldn't be so sure," said Ernie. "Think about the automobile."

"I'm not talking about cars," said Robert.

"I know," said Ernie. "Your metaphors are worse than your adjectives."

"What do you think?"

"Do you want to know, or do you just want me to agree with you?"

"I want to know," Robert said. "What do you think?"

"I think you should just be a man and answer the questions people have about your books," said Ernie.

Robert sat down on a park bench, the one furthest from the streetlights. Ernie sat next to him, dropping the stub of his cigar and crushing it with his heel.

"You're probably right."

"I am right. You've got money. You have a beautiful third wife, probably."

"Don't talk about my wife."

"Alright," Ernie said, raising his hands in a half-surrender. "Why do you write?"

"Because I've never been good at anything else."

"Well, you're not that great at this thing either," said Ernie. "No offense meant."

"Alright," said Robert, with what he hoped was a quiet sort of dignity.

"I guess I meant it more generally. Why should anyone write, not just you?"

"To make ourselves feel better," Robert answered.

"That's soft." Ernie scoffed.

"Maybe. I've been to the panels. I know I should say art is a call to action, that it can change things. I know that's what I'm supposed to say. But I really think it's just a thing we do to deal with being alive. Like when the Greeks were so bored that they wrote the first comedies, and when the people who lived in caves painted their handprints on the wall. What else did these people have to do? They all probably said something that loosely translates to, 'We're here, we might as well make something about it.'"

"I don't think I agree with your definition," said Ernie. "I think trash is made to make us feel better, like war pictures and romance novels. Trash shows life as we want it to be, real art shows life as it actually is. Real art tells the truth."

"Yeah, it makes you feel better if it does. Right?"

"It's late. I should get back," Ernie said, like he had a train to catch.

Robert pictured the late great Ernie picking a small, glowing screen out of his pocket, looking up the fastest route home, and scrolling through the brightly colored circles with interest.

"Not yet," Robert said. "I'm going to show you something."

"It's not one of your dirty novels, is it?"

"It's not. I just think you might find it interesting," said Robert. "Come on."

He started walking towards the Abercrombie and Fitch on 5th Avenue. Ernie followed him on his right side. Robert had been there just a week ago with his stepdaughter, and he waited for her as she picked out her new summer clothes.

"You bought your gun at Abercrombie and Fitch," Robert confessed. "I read it somewhere online, but maybe they got it wrong. Or maybe they just wanted something interesting to say, and that's what they came up with."

"So?" asked Ernie as he crossed the crosswalk before an oncoming car.

He didn't wait for Robert on the other side, who had to jog to catch up to him and duck past the widening groups of young people holding onto each other and stumbling homeward.

"You have to wait for me," said Robert.

"Why?" asked Ernie.

"Because you don't know where you're going."

"How the hell do you know I don't know where I'm going?"

"Fine, lead the way then."

He stepped over a pile of spilled fries, squashed flat into the pavement, loose from the grease-stained box.

"Disgusting city," said Ernie.

A bus passed by with an ad for a new game show where professional chefs make gourmet meals with sewer rats and other disgusting things.

"I never liked 'Hills Like White Elephants,'" Robert said.

"That's fine," said Ernie.

"No, it's not," said Robert.

"It wasn't my best. I used to save everything I wrote," said Ernie. "Especially grocery lists. They were probably some of my best work. You've got to think about preserving these kinds of things, Robert. How's the air in New York?"

"The what?"

"The air, Robert," said Ernie. "I'm sure it's damper than it used to be, which is not good for saving papers and so on. You want dry, dry air for this kind of thing. Keep a safe in Arizona, the Sahara, or somewhere."

"I don't have any papers."

"Well, there's your problem."

Robert thought of the contents of his inbox. The 2,577 unread messages, the spam filters full of advertisements for erectile dysfunction medication, and the promises of large sums of money. If Ernie was right, his best work ended with words like "circle back," "squared away," and "Best, Robert." He didn't make grocery lists anymore. They said nothing for the rest of the walk. They moved in a pair through the thinning crowd, past glowing neon signs and the men who stood outside them, watching. Robert wished that he could see only what they saw: a middle-aged man in a suit walking alone at night towards a closed department store for teenagers.

When they reached the Abercrombie and Fitch on 5th, Robert stopped and turned Ernie's shoulders so that he was facing the window display. Stretched across it was a poster of a male model in black and white, damp for some reason and bare-chested, with six muscled lumps

above his navel. The boys in these ads were always wet while wearing jeans, which Robert couldn't believe was an appealing combination that sold—who wears jeans to the beach? Next to the poster, the headless mannequins wore everything you see the kids today wearing and a few things that Robert had never seen anyone wearing. Baggy denim jeans, cropped cotton t-shirts, and sand-colored linen dresses. Behind the window display, the inside was too dark to see.

"Well, here it is," said Robert, suddenly feeling that he should take his hands off of Ernie's shoulders. Ernie said nothing, because what could a person possibly say?

"They don't sell guns anymore," Robert explained.

The two stood still together, looking at the window display. Robert didn't look away because staring at the poster was better than staring at the greatest novelist of the 20th century staring at a half-naked man. Instead, he waited like this until he felt that there was nothing beside him.

The Conversation Pit

Two girls, off on winter break in January. They are standing in their swimsuits on the deck, shifting their weight and jumping in place to keep their feet from sticking to the ice. Together, they lift the cover off the hot tub. It's two thousand and something, and news of the hot tub has just reached Minnesota. It's all the rage. At night, a hot tub always becomes a different place—a confessional. Maybe it's something to do with the fumes from the chlorine, or the feeling of being boiled alive. It's dark, and the only light comes from the ones under the water's surface and through the windows of the empty house. The first girl offers her confession: that she's lived five lives before this one. Who was she?

"Diana," she says. The people's princess, of course. "Except I didn't really die when I went through that tunnel. It was just to get the press off my back."

"What about your other lives?" says her friend.

"Nobody you would know."

"Yeah, but who were you?"

"It wasn't anybody that interesting."

"We can't all be Diana, I guess," says the friend. "What did you look like when you weren't Diana?"

"I'm not really sure," says the first girl. "It's not like you can see yourself when you regress into your past life, unless you regress to a moment when you happen to be looking into a mirror."

The hot tub confessional booth does not belong to her. She has been tasked with watching the house overlooking the lake, watering the plants, and feeding the venus flytrap. The house is minimalistic in its design: exterior concrete and glass and dark wooden beams. From the side that faces the street, it's difficult to see what it might be like inside. But from the middle of the lake, you can see right through the glass-paned walls and into the kitchen, the living room, and the conversation pit. Outside, the lake has frozen through. There might be cars parked on it if people around here still did that sort of thing. But the ice-fishers don't come anymore, the boat launch is closed to public access, and besides, whatever you catch must be released.

Two girls alone in a beautiful house that doesn't belong to either of them.

"Let's be different people," one of them says. "People that live here."

And so they decide to rename themselves. The first girl chooses Diana, the second girl chooses Barbara, which makes the two of them laugh. No, they agree, there would never be a young Barbara living here. But there might be a young Camilla, Diana says. This is the name she decides to choose for her friend.

"Wait, I don't get it. Why Camilla?" says the now Camilla.

"She's a royal," says Diana. "Or something like one."

"If you're Diana, then I don't want to be 'the other woman,'" says Camilla.

"Well, we're not the real Diana and Camilla," she explains. "We're just named after them."

"Alright, so I won't take your man," she jokes.

The girls can make each other laugh too easily, out of habit more than anything else.

"Diana and Camilla would never be in the hot tub without a drink," says Diana.

"That's just something they wouldn't do," agrees Camilla.

Diana gets out and runs to the kitchen, steam rising from her skin into the cold air. She comes back with a carton of boxed wine.

"They definitely wouldn't drink that shit," says Camilla.

"I can only have what's in the fridge," says Diana, climbing back inside the hot tub.

"What kind of person would live here and drink that?"

She takes a sip of the boxed wine. To drink, she has to hold the box over her head, lifting her chin up to the valve at the bottom.

"The Connells."

"They sound Irish? Are they Irish?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"What are they like?"

"They seem really nice," says Diana. "The Dad is in real estate, the Mom flips houses, the kids play lacrosse."

"Did you look through their stuff?"

"No."

"That's the first thing I would've done."

"I looked in their fridge," Diana says. She takes a drink of the wine, which is flat and weak, and comes out in a limp stream from the spout.

"This job is wasted on you."

"You didn't see the inside of the fridge. It's absolutely gorgeous," says Diana. "It's color-coded."

"No, no. The fridge isn't where you look. Here's what you do," says Camilla. "Downstairs, find the junk drawer. This place might not have one, I don't know if rich people have that sort of thing. You might not think the junk drawer would be that interesting, but usually you can find some good stuff—notes between husband and wife, to-do lists, bills... You could find out how much their mortgage is, if they're having money troubles, and if that's putting a strain on their marriage. Don't even bother with the bathroom on the first floor unless you care about what kind of toilet cleaner they use. Then, you go right upstairs to the master bedroom, and that's where the money is. The best drawer is usually the sock drawer, especially in a man's dresser. Or, once you figure out which side of the bed is his, look in the nightstand and under the bed too. Then go to the master bathroom, and look in the medicine cabinet. If they haven't changed it, I'd look in the garbage in the bathroom too."

"Ew!"

"No, that's where the good stuff is. You can find out so much!"

"Like what?"

"Like if the couple is trying to get pregnant—pregnancy tests. If the wife is going through the big change, no pads or tampons. And…."

"What?" She leans her head forward, giving her friend permission to confess.

"If they wax down there."

"You're disgusting," Diana laughs.

“I don’t think it’s that weird,” says Camilla. “Honestly, I think people expect it when they leave you alone in your house. I mean, if I ever had a house like this, I would expect it. But sometimes you find out more than you want to know, and it kind of bums you out and it’s not fun anymore.”

“I think Prince has a summer house here. Once I saw these two guys in suits standing outside the garage,” says Diana. “I would look through Prince’s garage.”

“It’s probably all the same stuff you have in your garage. Garages aren’t great as far as snooping goes.”

“You should have been a detective,” says Diana.

“It’s too late for me,” she jokes. “I’m washed up! I’m finished!”

“Let me cut your hair,” says Diana. “You should come to the institute, I can do it for free.”

The people’s princess is probably right. Camilla’s hair is halfway down her back, and is of no specific color at all.

“I know, it’s getting bad.”

“Real bad, babe. You look Amish. Is that what they do up at Carleton? Barn-raisings?”

“Okay, you can cut it.”

“I brought my kit. I could do it tonight if you want.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

There is a redness in her chest creeping up from the line where her skin meets the hot water.

“We should probably get out now,” says Diana.

The girls are in the kitchen, one with her hair over the sink, still wet from the hot tub, the other with scissors in hand.

"Stop moving," says Diana. "I'm almost done."

12 inches of hair fall into the sink. She is left with a blunt line of hair that stops right below her chin. Diana pulls a square mirror out of her kit and holds it out.

"You took too much. You said it wouldn't be that much," says Camilla, her hand reaching toward the phantom ends of her hair.

"It's not too much. You look amazing! Don't you feel hot?"

"I guess?"

"Well, don't move so much next time."

Camilla takes another drink of the weak wine.

"This stuff sucks."

"I think we need the real thing," says Diana.

Two girls in the living room, and they've put on some records—it's one of those old blues singers going on and on about how fools rush in where angels fear to tread. And look, they've invited a few friends, two young men, who enter stoned, carrying a half-empty bottle of gin and a case of cheap hard seltzer taken from their parent's garages. The girls greet the boys, who call each other Andrew and Mike, and call the girls nothing at all, maybe because they have forgotten their names since high school or maybe because they do not know the new ones they have given each other. One is jockish and square, the other a future ear, nose, and throat doctor.

The living room is not a room at all but what the interior designers call a “conversation pit,” a square-shaped depression in the floor lined with a leather couch and white shag carpeting. To put the records on, they have to walk around the pit carefully to avoid falling in. The ear, nose, and throat doctor spreads out the goods across the white carpet. They take turns with the gin bottle and pass around the kind of polite questions asked by people who are supposed to know each other better than they really do. No one touches the seltzer.

“I’m going on a mission,” says Andrew, the square one.

“Are you a spy now?” asks Camilla.

“No,” he grabs the bottle from her. “I’m going to teach people about Jesus.”

The girls both laugh, the doctor Mike does not.

“Where do they need you and Jesus so badly?”

“Orlando,” Andrew says. “I’m leaving in two weeks. I won’t be staying anywhere this nice, though. Your house is unreal.”

“Thank you,” says Diana. “It’s not really mine. It’s my Dad’s.”

Andrew looks off into the distance, squinting to read an invisible passage, which he then begins to recite, the tentative sermon of a pastor-in-training.

“In my father's house are many mansions,” he says. “If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”

“What?”

"It's from the book of John," says Andrew. "King James Edition. Jesus says that to the apostles, only he doesn't mean real mansions. It used to mean a 'room,' or a place where you sleep."

"So there aren't any mansions in heaven?" asks Camilla.

"No, probably not." says Andrew. "Maybe. I don't know."

"You're not selling it very well," says Camilla.

"I don't need to sell it," he says, getting angry. "Jesus sells it."

"I didn't know he was a realtor," says Camilla.

"It was his backup plan in case the carpentry didn't work out," says Diana. "He's very practical."

"Forget about the mansions. 'Where I am, there ye may be also.' That's the important part—being with God."

He asks Diana to show him the many rooms in her father's house. He does not look like he suspects that the house belongs to someone else's father. Camilla is left with the future doctor, who wants nothing but to lay in the center of the conversation pit and stare up at the high, white ceilings. Inside the dark leather of the conversation pit, it's as if they are looking up from the bottom of a well.

What the architects don't tell you is that without any conversation, it's just a pit. She climbs out and makes her way to the kitchen drawers to look for the junk drawer. The kitchen drawers are

empty. Even the ones that should be full of pots and pans, silverware, and plastic dividers separating pens from neon post-it notes.

Under the sink: no drain-o, or limp rubber gloves, no stacks of yellow and green sponges. In the cabinets: one singular plate, white, and heavy-looking. And one singular glass—tall and cylindrical. Maybe, she thinks, the family has a personal chef who has taken the cutlery to be professionally detailed. Or maybe they are part of the chef's equipment that she takes home with her at the end of the working week.

The fridge is perfectly stocked, the produce is even arranged in neat rows. It's all very civilized: polite oranges waiting in line for their turn to be peeled and eaten, the grapes stacked in pyramids inside their glass tupperwares. Prepackaged meal replacement shakes (the kind loved by both Diana and the elderly), Mexican cokes, small glass pots of yogurt from France, single-serving wedges of brie. But there are no eggs, no milk, no meat, nothing that could feed a family. The walls of the fridge that open outward are completely bare. The butter is missing from its penthouse perch above the rest of the door-side condiments.

She walks quietly up the stairs. She can hear Diana and the missionary talking in the room that is supposed to belong to the youngest daughter. She stops to listen to the sounds behind the door, breathy laughs and deep breaths. Does the missionary notice that none of these rooms could ever belong to Diana? Will he see instead that they could belong to anyone, those abstract paintings of circles and squares on the white walls? Will the mansions in heaven be similarly furnished?

In the master bedroom, the sock drawer is empty. There is nothing in the room to suggest any sign of daily living. No glasses forgotten on the nightstand, no slippers, no clothing in the walk-in closet. The books have ornate, decorative spines and look as though they might be hollow. There is no television. She notices the blinking light on the nightstand and a small black camera. It is not faced towards the bed, but outwards watching the door, as though it were expecting a visitor. They look into each other's eyes, each recognizing that they are seeing and being seen. The light pulses gently, a friendly wave, as if to say, "where I am, there ye may be also!"

She knows she'll find nothing in the bathroom cabinets and garbage, but she looks anyway. No expensive skin creams, or strange-looking pill bottles. There is no garbage can at all.

Downstairs, she finds Mike smoking on the couch, flipping through the channels. He pauses on a scene of college kids on spring break at the beach, drinking cocktails from long, brightly colored plastic tubes. The kids are tan and laughing.

"You shouldn't smoke in here," she says to him. "You'll get ash in the carpet." Without looking away from the spring breakers, he holds up a makeshift ashtray. He's folded up the sides of one corner of the seltzer box.

"I think someone's watching us," she whispers, both of them staring at the TV, where the girls are now playing beach volleyball.

"What do you mean?" asks Mike.

"I don't know what I mean," she says. "I don't know."

He exhales, and smoke fills the conversation pit. She takes the cigarette from Mike's mouth and puts it out on the seltzer box ashtray.

"Seriously, the smell stays in the fibers," she explains. "For years. They'll have to have it detailed."

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" asks Mike.

"What are we, eight?"

"Ok, fine, what are you studying? Is that what I'm supposed to say?"

"Undecided."

"You know what? I think you want to take care of people," he says.

"Sure."

A single ficus plant sits beside the record player. Between its leaves, there's a small camera lens, black and square, a red light blinking, and the sound of an iris widening, focusing. She climbs up and out of the pit to examine it. The soil is damp. There is no condensation on the lens. She pictures Diana picking it up carefully before watering the plant, wiping down the lens, arranging the leaves back into place. She puts on the strangest record she can find, an opera by Puccini, and announces that she is bored. Mike asks if she would like to make out. Yes, she says, relieved. And so they do, standing up straight like decorations in the middle of the conversation pit. The vibrato of the tenor sounds painful. The kids on TV are having a water balloon fight. Young women are being sprayed with squirt guns, wearing white t-shirts. It is unclear if their goal is to be sprayed, or to avoid the spray. Mike pulls at her arms, and walks backwards towards the

couch. No, she wants to be vertical. She is standing the way you teach children to act when a wild dog approaches: *arms out like a tree!*

"You're going to be a good nurse one day," he says to her. "I can tell."

Diana and Andrew come down from upstairs. Andrew asks Mike for the keys to the car, he's left his pipe inside. Mike tosses him the keys, and follows Andrew out the sliding glass door around the back. Diana lays down on the couch, stretching her neck out to see the TV behind Camilla, where now a break-up is unfolding on the beach, a tear-soaked confession in a wet t-shirt. The opera has drowned out the sound, the girl on screen is yelling at her boyfriend, and the soprano on the Puccini record has started singing *O Mio Babbino Caro.*

"What were you watching?" Diana asks. "Or not watching?"

Camilla sits at the edge of the couch, watching Diana watch TV.

"Nobody lives here, right?" Camilla asks.

"No one but us, babe." Diana says.

When she looks away from the TV screen, she sees Camilla's eyes find the camera, hidden in the leaves of the ficus.

"Eventually someone will," Diana says. "It's a show house. I told you, the Dad is in real estate. He hasn't sold this one yet."

"You're being paid to watch an empty house?"

"Not exactly."

She points at the ficus plant and the camera shielded between its leaves.

"What does he do with the video?"

Diana shrugs, it's not her problem. On the TV, the girl is running up and down the shore, a lens flare covers the screen.

"What is wrong with you?" she says. "Why wouldn't you at least ask him what he does with it? We could be on the dark web right now. There could be edits of us doing anything."

"It's not like that, I had to sign a contract. I got it notarized and everything. Nobody else can see the feed."

"You got it *notarized*?" asks Camilla.

"This is not a big deal. I know it sounds weird, but it's not like that at all."

"Then what is it like?"

"You can't tell the boys about this," she says. "They'll tell my parents. Or they'll tell someone who'll tell my parents."

"I really don't think they would."

"Just don't tell them." From somewhere in the pockets of her jeans, she pulls out a fifty and presses it into Camilla's hand. "Or anyone else."

"No one else sees it, right?"

"Right. No one except me and him would even know you were here."

"Can we keep being people who live here?"

Diana smiles. "Sure."

The boys have started up the hot tub again, and the girls get back in. They've been out long enough now that the cold hurts again, and so does the heat of the water. Andrew is talking about life in outer space.

"Who cares, right?" he says. "It doesn't matter what's really out there. We live on earth, like, who cares?"

"You're saying you'd never go to space?" asks Mike.

"Not unless I'd be paid."

"Why would you be paid to go to space?"

"Like if they needed someone to test a rocket, I don't fucking know."

"I'd go for free," said Mike. "I want to eat space food. It's supposed to taste different than it does on earth. It's like living in microgravity makes all the fluid in your body rush to your face. You'd like it. Foods probably taste different in heaven too."

"Is food in heaven also space food?" asks Diana.

Camilla notices a square-shaped object over the sliding glass door, blinking at her.

"I think it's time to get out," she says.

One of the boys proposes that they should race to the other side of the lake. Lifting themselves out into the cold, they run down the lawn, over the frozen dock, and out onto the surface of the lake. They probably can't feel the bottoms of their feet, which have turned a darker shade of red than the rest of their bodies, mounds of snow stick to their skin all the way up to the backs of their calves. Screaming from the shock of it all, they streak across the lake, their footprints disturbing the untouched snow. Camilla looks back up toward the house. From the middle of the

lake, with all the windows lit up, you can see almost everything. In the other houses, of which there are few, people might look out the window and see four pink blotches moving across the blue-white ice, dressed like the kind of children they find face down in snow banks, who go out drinking and forget their coats. Camilla stops running and stands completely still, looking for signs of life in the windows of the other houses. She sees a husband and wife sitting with their backs to the window, watching TV. She's too far away to see exactly what show is on. The blurred pixels might be the back of a girl's head or the outline of a large rock face. The others have reached the edge of the lake, one of the boys yells in victory. She looks back at the TV, and the image has changed—it's harder to place. She is barefoot in a black swimsuit, the kind made for swimming, not lounging. How long until they turn their heads and look behind them? Would they look if she fell through the ice? There's no telling how thick or thin it might be. These things aren't measured exactly when there are no ice fishers.

Behind her, the others are running back, their faces ruddy and their mouths wet and laughing. Mike reaches his arms around her navel and lifts her a few inches off of the ground.

"Your toes are going to fall off if you stand still," he tells her.

"Let's go back inside," says Diana. "I want to do something fun."

Little Ones

Listen. We can't talk for very long because we can't hold our heads up on our own. That's what the boss says—our neck muscles need to develop. She says she will help us grow big and strong and create bodies of work that are developed and attractive.

"I want to help all you little ones. You're just babies," she had said to each of us, during the third round of our interviews. We had all been in separate meetings with her and had thought she was referring to the babies of the world in general, not to ourselves. We have all come from different lands to this strange and foreign city, so maybe we are the babies of the world after all.

We work in a beautiful building in Kreuzberg with many conveniences. Like many buildings in this city, it used to be something else, and something else before it was something else. We guessed that our building was a kind of factory. In the entryway, there are large brass vessels that reach from the floor to the ceiling. Next to them are two gray statues of muses that nobody else had wanted, their flesh pitted with small holes. The building is full of stylish art professionals, who arrive at 11 a.m. and take several hour-long coffee breaks. And then there's the three of us little ones: Hanne works in the Department of Engagement, Joris in the Department of Administration, and Mattias in the Department of Video and Data Research Entry. Our current task: find the name of the owners of every commercial building over 50,000 square feet in the city and its surrounding suburbs. We study the local property records, and move the numbers from the left columns to the right. The work is hard, the espresso machine is on the fritz, and the

salads are hard to carry and deliver with only six arms. But we love one another. We do what we can.

Alright, so this morning, we were moving numbers from column to column when the boss told us to go out into the city and come back with four very specific objects that none of us had ever seen before.

We could have separated. If we were less wobbly, maybe we would have. But we were each so tired that we decided against it as soon as we crossed the street. On the tram, we rested our heads on each other's shoulders and almost fell asleep there.

We let the language of the other passengers wash over us, picking out words we knew, but not knowing what to do with them. They fell limp in our hands: “much work,” “but,” “perhaps,” “so sweet,” “I can not,” “made,” “exactly,” “of course.” We’re still learning. We can say excuse me and I’m sorry. We can order a coffee and ask a waiter if there is a table for three. We can obey the man’s voice on the buses and trams and the woman’s voice on the U-Bahn when they both tell us to “Einsteigen Bitte.”

“I feel so old,” Hanne said. “I can feel myself aging looking at those columns.”

“Imagine how I feel,” said Joris, who is the oldest among us.

“Things just keep happening to me,” she said.

“Yes, that is called aging,” said Joris.

“Is it our stop yet?” asked Mattias, his eyes still closed.

"I thought you were directing us," said Hanne.

"I thought you were," he said.

"Let's just walk," said Joris.

When the summer ends, our underdeveloped necks will be left to fend for themselves. The boss says there is no money to keep the little ones around for the fall. (Another German phrase we have learned in our time abroad: *Natürlich. Ich kann das baby helfen.* Our boss repeats this phrase under her breath if the coffee we bring back is cold or the property we are looking for cannot be found.) We are aware that we will lose each other. But instead of saying this, we stepped off of the tram and into the sun together, the air thick and sweet. We talked about the Beatles, which one was the most attractive, and other things that have no earthly use. Joris and Hanne think it's Ringo, Mattias thinks it's George.

The materials store was the most beautiful place we'd ever seen. Not the outside, which was tall and concrete, its only ornament the slanting white letters that form the store's name: "Modulor." It was the inside, with three separate floors of architectural and design supplies, anything a creative professional could need packed into every open space. Rolls of paper as tall as ourselves stacked up against the wall, industrial-strength adhesives with bright colors and block letters, and figurines of passersby for architectural models. There were also materials for which we had no idea what use we could make of them: wire mesh, brass sheets, corrugated sheets, pre-cut copper strips, and piles of strange-looking metal circles. We abandoned our list and walked up and down

all three stories. In the textiles section, we saw the most ribbon any of us had seen in one place. Samples of satin and lace tied in complex knots and intricate braids.

We asked a tall man with an angular haircut where the objects we needed were. He said that they would have to be ordered specially. We didn't want to leave empty handed, so we each grabbed a thick stack of paper to feed the printers and held them on our laps on the tram ride back to the office.

One day, said Mattias, we will all have enough money to do our shopping here, and not look at the prices or even think about what we would use any of it for. Hanne said he was being materialistic and stupid. Besides, she said as she patted the stack of papers on her lap, we've got everything we need right here.

All this to say, the boss informed us the paper we bought was the wrong size. It is too squat for the printers that prefer A4 standard-size paper. We had no idea that so many different sizes of paper could be made! If you have the need for beautifully cut A5 paper, we have left the stacks in Monbijoupark next to the man who often plays the saxophone there. They are free for the taking.

A Note

While writing this collection of stories, I kept coming back to a painting called “The Barn” by John Wilde. And when I couldn’t think of what to write next, I flipped through all the images of Wilde’s paintings that I could find online. Somewhat of a mythical figure himself, John Wilde was Wisconsin's most successful surrealist painter and printmaker. Wilde hardly left Wisconsin except for a brief stint in the US Army during World War Two, where his artistic talents were put to use producing drawings for the army venereal disease program, as well as maps and terrain models for intelligence.[7] If you haven’t seen his paintings, picture what the old masters may have painted if they heard of surrealism. His paintings are beautiful, strange, and disgusting; they seem to perform for the viewer rather than pretending to depict the subjects in their natural state. Many of these stories are inspired by Wilde’s paintings. Thank you to the late John Wilde for all of your work.

[7]David Becker and Jim Escalante, “Memorial Resolution of The Faculty of The University of Wisconsin-Madison on the Death of Professor Emeritus John Wilde” (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, September 25, 2006). https://kb.wisc.edu/images/group222/shared/2006-09-25FacultySenate/1929(mem_res).pdf

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