

Crossing

Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

These five stories present and trouble a question that has been posed in literature from courtly love poetry to Romantic anti-heroes to the writing born of Twentieth Century human and civil rights movements: what if one's individual desires are greater than or different from what she is allowed by her world, or half her conscience? Where should her fidelity lie? Unrepentant transgression and the penance one must endure after such a choice: in one way or another that recognition and impulse, and the aftermath of following it, is the force that moves characters through these stories. The stories are of romantic love, and the love is both literal unto itself and an allegory: the question of fidelity has to do with the self, as the characters' choice to attain the lover, in each case, is also an attainment of the self because it is an assertion of the "rightness" of individual desire against the decrees of a greater system. The "crossing" thus refers to that of boundaries: the characters make choices to push or break through what is sanctioned and what is untried; they transform; they become from one self into another as they resolve to defy, love, and simply be, drawing new lines through and around their worlds.

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INK

The problem started when she was twenty and she sucked a black widow spider off her date's neck. She didn't mean to. Carlisle had been looking at the tattoo since she and Spider Guy met. It was very pretty, with the eight long legs intricate and dark like tarred lace and the hourglass perfectly nipped-in, a pinup girl's waist in red. Spider Guy was proud of it—said it didn't hurt a bit even though the belly of the bug would fatten and thin with the movement of his jugular vein as he spoke. That he would put such a perilous creature so close to his blood felt like some kind of promise and though Carlisle couldn't say about what, she liked it, in a staying-out-too-late, dessert-before-dinner kind of way. She accepted when he asked her to see a movie. In the theater she let Spider Guy hold her hand in between popcorn handfuls but all she could feel was the spider next to her watching her in the dark.

They went back to his apartment to make out, perching awkwardly on the edge of the bed. He put his hand on her belly and rubbed hesitantly at her t-shirt, deciding if he could get up and under it. "I really like you," he said. His voice sounded thick, as if he had a mouthful of whipped cream he was trying to speak around.

Carlisle's face hovered close to his ear. She tried hard to not look at his neck because she wanted to badly and so thought she shouldn't. She nibbled his ear to distract herself. It didn't work. He said something else but she didn't listen—her face moved to where her mind didn't think it should go, down to his neck. Gently, she kissed the spider. She could smell it, the cigarette black and

candy red of ink. She kissed it and kissed it and then gave it a tiny nip with her tongue. It tasted like poisoned heaven. Soon her mouth was wetly wide open over it and she scraped at it with her teeth and pulled at it with the bottom of her throat.

Spider Guy's hesitant hands had frozen to her shoulders. He was silent save for the expelling of stunned little breaths until he yelped. Carlisle's tight-closed eyes snapped open. The spider was gone.

He was furious. The tattoo had cost him three paychecks worth of moving bed pieces at the build your own furniture store.

"Get out!" he snarled, pacing at her from the mirror in which he had seen the damage. She did, fast, and he slammed this front door at her back in case she hadn't gotten the message already. Message: don't do that again.

But she felt like she would.

She hoped it might go away. But when strangers passed on the street waving a tiger on an arm or a dragon on an ankle Carlisle's nose caught the campfire odor of the orange, the just-pulled celery smell of green. Her nose got so good she soon didn't have to see it—she could tell by scent alone if a person had a tattoo hiding somewhere, under their clothes or a newly-buttoned-up personality. It drove her crazy, in a chocolate covered strawberry kind of way.

Finally she developed a theory. Maybe if she did it again she would find she didn't like it after all, and she could give up daydreaming about it and nightdreaming about it and just wanting it.

Carlisle went to a dark bar in another town. She stayed in the corners of the room, watching. She made a wish for luck and then sniffed out a sketch of

roses blooming around a guitar, its indigo color scented like incense and rum raisin. She found it on the man's pectoral through his fringed leather jacket and the smell of beer. Carlisle was twenty-one now and could buy him three extra tequila shots before she drove him back to his house, to his bed to his shirt off to her kneeling over him and running her fingers over the strings of his little guitar. Now that she was near it again she hoped it would be as good as she remembered, good as she had been trying to forget. He was very drunk when they started kissing. She was very drunk when they finished.

Carlisle went home alone afterward and lay on her bed, electrocuted awake until even after the sun rose. She licked the inside of her own mouth to try to get at the last of the indigo and thinking one word. More.

She liked the body part of it, the warmth in her mouth of the ink heated by blood, the softness or toughness or fuzziness of the skin mixing into the taste of the touch. She liked the way bodies could be layered when arms and legs were sketched with little figures of hula girls or posed naked ladies looking cooked plump.

The people in the bodies were the problem. Carlisle had to be careful. Always, she had Spider Guy's angry voice in her head, the sound of his doorslam like a gunshot, and the other times when she started to pull at someone's ink and they pushed away or began to scream at her—it took days to shake the sickly buzz of confusion from her belly. These times felt like stepping off a curb she hadn't

seen in front of her. Carlisle began to make sure she knew where she was walking.

The easy ones were people who had too much to drink and didn't quite notice what she was doing. Shoulders and backs were good, too: no one could get mad over a stolen tattoo if they didn't see it go missing. At least until Carlisle was long on her way home.

The lucky ones were people who wanted their ink removed. Sometimes Carlisle would comment on a tattoo and then listen to what the owner said about it, and sometimes she would hear a sad story about how he didn't like that band or love that ex anymore, or how it was one of her biggest regrets and she wished she could undo it. Carlisle would look around to see who else was listening, and then lean in to tell the person she could make it alright and sure enough, afterward they would be shy but happy, looking at their clean skin but never at her, leaving quickly as though something unspeakable had passed.

Another year happened, then two, and Carlisle had all of these colors and names and places and secrets stored up in herself. Not knowing what else to do she just went out to get again, and again.

Then, there was Mary.

They met in the grocery store, seeing each other for the first time across a produce bin, late summer peaches on Mary's sides, pears and apples on Carlisle's. Mary had pretty blue eyes in a plain face and hair so blonde it almost forgot to be any color at all. Carlisle was twenty-five and hungry.

Though she was hardly chubby under her blue jeans and sea green turtleneck Mary had eight boxes of cookies and three gallons of milk in her shopping cart. When she caught Carlisle looking she explained: “I run a day care in my living room to help with the bills.”

Carlisle wouldn't have cared if Mary was an astronaut on her way to the moon next month to pay the electric. She had started the conversation with Mary, Mary of all people, because of the way she smelled. Mary well-wrapped in her turtleneck was rampant. Carlisle almost already had Mary in her mouth she was that aromatically gorgeous. Carlisle got her number. She had an interest in starting up her own home day care and wanted to see how it was done. Tomorrow.

But nothing happened that first day. Or the next. It was soon clear that Mary would be as buttoned-up as her endless parade of high collars and jeans and long sweaters. She spoke either too fast or with big, vacant spaces between sentences, or not at all. Her eyes moved like moths around the room, landing everywhere but on Carlisle. Mary was as impossible to hold as water.

Still, a couple of days a week Mary and Carlisle would sit at the kitchen table grasping mugs of tea that stained the air between them with steam. They talked through the afternoon while Mary's husband was away at work. In the living room the toddlers shrieked and bounced off one another. It had been immediately, implicitly understood that Carlisle had no interest in childcare—they both knew this was about a Something Else. But what?

Autumn started. The weather was cooling and Mary still wasn't warming. She did seem pleased, though, whenever she opened the front door to find Carlisle

standing there. “You came,” she would always say, her voice astonished, her smile pleased. Stomach growling hard, Carlisle decided to take it as a sign.

On an afternoon when it felt right Carlisle leaned a little farther across the table. “We always talk about nothing things,” she said, putting on her safest self. “Let’s talk about something. Tell me about you.”

“I’m not something,” Mary pleaded.

Carlisle confessed: “I think you are.”

Mary’s cheeks painted themselves naked pink. She looked into the other room where the children sat in front of the television, mouths open and faces glowing with the wavering hues of a cartoon. Carlisle knew her next move.

“I’ll come back to hear more.”

Mary’s eyelashes beat like they would fly away, and Carlisle felt something in her chest make the same motion. Mary started slow. She told Carlisle about growing up in a big house halfway between the woods and a city, and how once she had hidden in the basement for so long, just for fun, that her mother had finally called the police.

And every day after that one Mary unwrapped herself, shedding stories. She began to laugh more and gesture large, sending breezes of herself into the air that Carlisle lapped up gratefully. She asked questions just to get Mary to move again. Mary told Carlisle about the time she snorkeled alone in the Gulf of Mexico and about the month she spent in Spain where she didn’t know the language and was so silent she felt invisible. She told about her husband, how he

managed the family business, three stores in two towns that sold eyeglasses. He worked long hours and went away on business sometimes. He did well.

“Then why do you watch children?” Carlisle asked.

Mary nodded. She quickly put two more spoons of sugar in her tea and then rose to dump it all down the sink. Silence, and then she said, her back to Carlisle: “It’s good to have something to keep one at home.” And then she said: “More tea?”

It began to snow one day, the first of the winter. Mary stood at the kitchen window chirping with happiness and watching the world get dressed in white. Carlisle sat at the table watching Mary, her nose and mouth and insides raving. She had finally tried picking up someone else the day before, thinking maybe it could tide her over—a girl in a health food store with green Celtic knots endlessly tying themselves between her shoulder blades. The girl had been blonde but not the right shade of it; as Carlisle kissed her inky back the girl made thick, lazy sounds of being okay with it all, but the only thing Carlisle could hear was the not-voice of Mary. It tasted like nothing.

“Don’t you love it when it snows?” Mary at the window sighed.

“No. Everything is one color. No color.”

Mary pressed on, unperturbed. “That’s just it. Everything gets tucked away, like a secret. Like burying treasure.”

That's when Carlisle saw it. Mary's hand was up gently bunching a fistful of curtain, and where her sleeve had inched down from her wrist a small blue curl slithered out, hissing that there was more of it. More.

"Come look," Mary said, and Carlisle misunderstood or understood too well and got up to stand behind her. Silently she traced a finger over the little sapphire ringlet, following it to slip her touch under Mary's cuff. Mary gasped and coiled into herself, looking like she had been stolen from.

"Pretty," Carlisle told her.

"No," Mary answered.

"Show me," she begged, reaching for Mary's hand. Mary backed away shaking her head and then pointed to the door, suddenly queenly.

"Go home. I can't. I want. I need to think. Just come back tomorrow." Mary's voice flurried through the kitchen like a blizzard as she walked out, leaving banks and drifts of colored perfume behind her. Carlisle did go home. She felt like she was eating herself alive. She wouldn't go back. It was too much. She wouldn't go back.

The next day in Mary's kitchen, Mary's face was very white. "I have a secret," she whispered with a glance at the children rolling on the carpet. "It's an awful secret, but I'll show you."

She led Carlisle into her bedroom. Shut the door behind them and sat Carlisle down on her atrocious flowered bedspread.

The shades had been drawn so the room was lit in dusky lavender. Mary whimpered standing in front of the bed, hands already busy with her blouse buttons. “Promise you won’t think I’m terrible?”

“I’ll be disappointed if I don’t.” Carlisle couldn’t hear her own breath over the slamming of her heart in her ears.

Then, there was Mary in her bra, Mary in her skin, and Carlisle was frozen. It was even better than she had hoped. Mary was covered—sleeves of ink on each arm, a whole bible’s worth of holy characters sprayed over her shoulders, a tree growing up her ribs, a crown of thorns perched on the head of one breast.

“None of the neighbors know,” she said, a fat teardrop sliding from eye to chin and down over the snake eyed dice under her collarbone. “I’m sure they’d kick me out of the neighborhood. Heaven knows they wouldn’t leave their kids with me.”

“You got any on your lower half?” Carlisle asked, hooking a finger through Mary’s belt loop to pull her closer, running shaky fingers over the bouquet of daisies blooming by her navel.

Mary yanked the band from her hair and shook out her sun-white bun. She pulled her bangs over her eyes to hide them, her eyes so big and soupy with shame Carlisle could have bathed in them. She raked her fingers over her soaked cheek and sat down next to Carlisle, grabbing her hand. A gesture of appeal. “I just couldn’t stop. I tried, I did. It got to where if I left the house, I’d just go get one, for no reason at all. Just because I—”

“Wanted it.”

Mary nodded. “My husband hates them. I had only a couple when we met and he thought it was pretty and kind of different. Now he won’t even touch me. He says the color hurts his eyes.”

Carlisle was scared she would move too fast or too wrong but she felt herself in an undertow. Her will melted, she pressed the tip of her nose to Mary’s right shoulder where two fat cherries ripened shamelessly. Mary didn’t move away.

“Why?” Carlisle asked, about nothing in particular and so many things.

“I just liked it. I don’t know.”

“I like it too,” Carlisle whispered, and she also liked the goosebumps that suddenly textured the yellow koi fish sliding over Mary’s bicep. When Carlisle’s lips closed the microscopic difference between touching and not-touching the fish’s skin, Mary’s breath gave a little pop, some bubble in her breaking. The fish tasted two parts lemonade to five parts electric.

Carlisle paced herself. She went over a couple of times a week, always in the middle of the day when Husband was at work. When Carlisle arrived she and Mary would put on for the children—Mary would boil water for the tea, they would sit cups-in-hands looking at each other across the table and trying to make appropriate conversation while they wrestled a shared, blooming breathlessness. Eventually Mary would clear her throat and say to her own eldest child, five though not yet in kindergarten: “Nell, dear, make sure the other children don’t

wander outside. Watch your cartoons or play a game. Mommy will give you some juice in a little bit.”

That was the cue. That was when Carlisle could break from the table with a start and follow Mary in a stupor of anticipation to her bedroom. When she could lock the door behind them and throw Mary on her bed or against her bureau or to the floor, bust her shirt buttons from their threads, remove her pants with the precision of a butcher. Mary would quake with giggles and little gasps of fear and bite her own hand to keep from screaming and scaring the children as Carlisle lapped the colors out of her pores and deeper from her veins. On the days she was feeling rough Carlisle left little bruises where there had been ink; other days she sealed the removal with butterfly kisses.

Carlisle paced herself. But it was hard. Soon Mary didn't bother to get dressed on the days Carlisle was coming. She would answer the door in her bathrobe, naked and spiced with maddening dyes under the terrycloth. She'd fill the kettle with water but give up before turning on the burner. Grabbing Carlisle by the collar she would drag her, dumbly elated, down the hall, yelling over her shoulder: “Nell, Mommy's going into her bedroom and won't be out for a really long time.”

Carlisle took the tattoos in arrangements and designs that only she and Mary could make sense of. She unbraided the black tribal band from Mary's arm as carefully as untangling a knot of hair, played tic-tac-toe with the tiny tarot cards that lay in a spread over Mary's ripe-rolling backside. In turn Mary sighed and growled and spoke in instant, strange languages; she quivered and sobbed and

said Carlisle's name like it was a wish penny falling into a well. What had Carlisle's ears ever done without Mary in them?

It was the thing Carlisle couldn't think about, for the way the idea sickly shrank her insides. Mary would run out of ink.

She wore less and less scent. Each day when she opened her front door, Mary in her robe was fainter, lighter, less mixed and cacophonous. Carlisle knew Mary thought about it, too. Once as they lay on the bedroom carpet Mary had curled her head into Carlisle's neck and asked it. "What happens when there's no more?"

Carlisle wound her fist into Mary's dandelion hair, shushing her. She could still taste the tiny paprika starfish she had just lapped from the bottom of Mary's foot. "We don't think about it. There's more now. That's what we think about, love. The now."

But it was going to be a problem.

On a drizzly spring Friday Carlisle slid Mary's robe from her shoulders and with a sweeping look, she took the measure of what she had done. Mary's entire body was clean as on the day she was born save for one last little tattoo, an asp coiled under the melon curve of her breast. By just looking Carlisle could already taste it—the black and green and topaz yellow of the ink, the texture of the lines and Mary's skin and the tap of her heartbeat below all that blood and rib and pleasure-shivered muscle. Carlisle wanted it so badly she ached. She looked at the tattoo. She licked her lips. Mary whispered something but Carlisle couldn't hear. She took a breath.

She couldn't do it.

"I can't do it," she told Mary.

"Yes you can," Mary said sweetly, giving permission. Then she looked at Carlisle's face and her own went worried. "Please?"

The little asp regarded them with cruelly wise eyes. The truth of the choice slammed into Carlisle like a car. She felt her bones break. If she had this, now, it would change Mary forever into something she couldn't have. If it were dark and Mary were lost she wouldn't be able to just breathe and find her.

They stared at one another. The silence of an unknown future wailed loud as a siren in their ears. Carlisle shook her head. For the first time she felt like she would rather not-have. The only way she could keep Mary was to not have her.

Why didn't Mary understand that?

They fought as quietly as they could while Mary bundled herself into her robe and followed Carlisle to the kitchen where she grabbed her jacket and let herself out into the rain, leaving behind the sounds of the children calling out in a chorus for snacks and Mary's word that she had said over and over again as if her life depended on it—*please*. Don't stop. Don't say that. Don't go. Then don't come back. Please.

They didn't speak for two weeks. Carlisle frantically searched for a second job and third job, something that would allow her to bury Mary in ink again. It wouldn't be the same, she knew. Every tattoo would taste like this: the scramble to keep it all going, the sad and scared and the wretched inevitable. But she couldn't not try.

Mary got to her first, though, showing up at her door on the fifteenth evening smelling faintly of a dangerous little slip of green and topaz. Her face was beautiful but so angry, so sad.

It was Husband. “Now he wants me every night, and he’s always looking at me and he always wants me naked so he can *look* at me,” Mary screamed, fists pounding into Carlisle’s chest. “Do you know what you’ve done to me? I can’t take it. I have to go away now. I have to leave my whole life because of you.”

“Come with me. I’ll take care of you. We’ll go anywhere you want and I’ll keep my eyes closed all the time, I promise. I’ll never look at you.”

Mary shook her head. “Everything’s different now,” she said, her voice a hundred years older. “I’m different.”

“Please?”

Mary just put her hand over her heart where Carlisle knew the asp still lay, hiding, and turned to leave. As she did she made an exquisite noise—all the animals-hit-in-the-road, violin-strings-breaking, love-affairs-ending sounds in a single sob. It echoed in Carlisle’s ears long after Mary disappeared at the end of the road, the very last of her scent trailing after her. Carlisle watched and held her breath as long as she could and then, let it go.

CROSSING

When Clara first saw him Virgil reminded her of a horse. He was tall, two hands above the other men in the street; he wore his working life on his body in the strength of his upright back, the stomp of his gait. Wind and sun marked the skin of his cheeks.

The War was over, the Union had won and men were returning from the battlefields ready to make a life. But this man was not a soldier. He had a wagon that Clara watched him hitch to a post. She trailed him, into Nearcy's Grocer where he bought whiskey and matches and salt, and then to the hotel on Second Avenue. She caught him on the front porch.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Virgil looked. The girl before him was tall and held her chin high. Hair dark as dogwood. She had strode up him in her laces and stays from the frills of the Madison city crowd: men in trousers, women with parasols and pearls on their ears.

It hit him then. Virgil had the sudden sense he had just seen the girl step out of a river and all of this, the city, flowed back and fell away from her, dripping down—her skin naked and her hair loose and wet. He blinked and it was gone.

He answered her question. "I'm going West."

"Yes." She waited, pressing him with her waiting.

"Wyoming territory."

"Are you a farmer?"

Virgil turned his head and spit into the street. He wondered briefly what it would be like to kiss her. “Trapper. That’s mountain land.”

“I’m Clara.”

“Clara,” he repeated. Men like Virgil came East in the spring to sell and buy—crops, fur, provisions, wives. They posted ads, stayed in hotels and found girls looking for a place to travel to. They hoped for daughters with ruined names and unmarried women nearing thirty.

Clara already had several prospects. She would have a home and children and the comfort of a husband’s business, her own match set of everything she had ever known. She looked at the man in front of her. Clara knew that if he could carry her, away from there to someplace else, she could hold on.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

They married the next day and went West.

Virgil’s cabin sat in a clearing in a valley. Clara imagined the valley was how the bowl of the sea would appear if you emptied it: impossibly wide and re-flooding with sky. The air smelled clean, cold and dry. The grass in the clearing waved thigh-high and the pines on the mountains were so green they were black. The mountains themselves set Clara’s breath on fire. They were the tallest thing she had seen in her life.

The closest neighbor was a half a day’s ride away. She and Virgil were alone.

He struck her once. Throughout the afternoon, doing the necessary work around the cabin she felt the ache of his hand lying over her cheekbone. She made dinner and while he was eating it she went to the shed and got his longest gun, carried it into the house, and pointed the black barrel across the table at his eyes. “If you want to hit me again you’ll have to kill me afterward, or I’ll kill you.”

Virgil nodded. That night in their bed he didn’t turn to her as usual. But she surprised him by climbing on top of him, her fingers tangling in the hair on his chest until he was sunk her full depth. He closed his eyes to hear her feral sounds and it was then, when he was pinned, tied, and blind, that she slapped him hard across his face.

In Wyoming Clara discovered that there were stars behind the stars. If she looked long at a dark place in the sky dim points of light bloomed into view. She could feel their heat on her skin.

Some mornings the plains of Clara’s body were covered with small red marks. Virgil couldn’t understand her skin—his own wife. “I laid out,” she would say. Virgil knew she meant outside with no clothes on, her body spread over a wooly blanket she dragged from the house. He worried about this “lying out.” Maybe the outdoors affected the skin of a woman in ways he didn’t know. He barely remembered his sister and didn’t often think of his mother. The worry made him touch things harder and he slammed his cup onto the breakfast table, chopped wood until his palms blistered open.

Clara knew the marks on her skin were burns, the same a body got from being in the sun for too long. She could trace their patterns and find the constellations on her body—Sagittarius on her thigh, the Great Bear on her breast over her heartbeat. In Wyoming she laid out and took on the staining burns of starlight.

The first winter passed. When the snow began to melt trapping season began and Virgil disappeared into the mountains for days or weeks. He returned with poles of strung, limp animals that he skinned and cured in the shed.

Clara kept the house while he was gone. When she couldn't stand to work any longer she roamed the woods and tasted snow off different surfaces—the black soil, the bark of a tree.

“Where do you sleep when you're in the mountains?” she asked Virgil a night that he was home. Her fingers dragged at a skein of wool. She had spent her day mending clothes.

Virgil felt his voice like a stuck door in his throat forcing open. They were not in the habit of talking much. “Camps. Have a couple of shelters built up there. Simple but enough to keep warm and dry.”

Clara thought of it, a place in the woods. She wound the wool round her finger until her skin stung with the blood trapped in it.

When Clara first saw him the bear reminded her of nothing. She had seen nothing so beautiful, nor had wanted to be a thing with the furious tugging she felt in her chest at that moment. She wanted to be the bear.

The bear was standing thigh-deep in the quickening water of a river. His body was the color of rust. When he used his arm his muscles flowed from his shoulder and down his back. Every so often a trout bounded from the water and in one graceful motion the bear would lunge and grab it from the air with his jaws. Even his killing movements looked easy.

Breathless, Clara called from the shore. "Teach me how to do that." The bear turned his head and looked at her with black eyes.

Another trout bulleted from the water, metallic in the springtime sun: the bear swung his head forward and caught it and made his way over to Clara. He was big as a boulder. He held the fish out to her in his snout. She took it, felt the massiveness of his breath on her fingers.

"Teach me," she asked again.

The bear shook his head. "I can't," he said. Clara could feel his voice in her spine like it had always been there, waiting to hear its echo in this other creature.

In her hands lay the fish. She parted the skin where the bear's teeth had made a cut and gently bit into the fleshy meat. She tasted the quicksilver of blood.

The bear watched her. Clara dropped the fish and stepped forward. She laid her hands around his jaw and ran her nose and lips and the tip of her tongue

up the broad plain between his eyes. He growled, and she knew it was the sound of assent.

In the summer Clara was gone into the woods from daybreak until the moon rose. Virgil had long ago given up his worry for her—she always came back, and he knew the look that crossed her face on the days she had to stay in the house to preserve vegetables, to make a batch of soap, was more danger to her than anything that could come off the mountains. He knew the look of a creature trapped, about to will itself to death.

In the winter Virgil was gone up the mountains. Clara envied him his dens in the forest. In her core she ached for the bear, who was sleeping through the snow with the plants, who was frozen still as the ponds.

“This isn’t how it’s supposed to be,” the bear would say to her as he stroked her neck with his face.

“I don’t know what that means,” Clara would answer, because it was true. She had no theories about the order of forms or the alchemy of spirits. What she did know was that the dawn looked different when she watched it with the bear, that the sunlight had variations as it crawled up the height of a tree. Walking together, she witnessed him suddenly turn his head just before a bird shot out of a bush. She followed him and soon she, too, could hear the birds before they moved, could hear an animal’s intentions.

Her body fit well with his, though she had known it would even that first time she pulled him to her, her back against an edifice of stone, her dress in a tangle in the dirt at their feet. Their textures played together: his calloused paw rasping over the length of her smooth arm. When she closed her eyes she saw his great dark form, soft and wild-looking, and her laced around him. Saw her white thigh about his rounded haunch, slashing brilliant as lightning through the dusk of his fur. Her back a lean curve under him.

His nose was damp and cold on her belly and searching between her thighs. As he breathed she felt the sensation of being read and recognized through the hundred different details of her scent. He noticed all of her. Clara hungered for this sense of having every pore and droplet and shiver of herself caught and devoured—it was the sense of existing so much.

Her skin still spoke in strange marks. Scrapes on her shoulder blades, bruises that looked like the kind a body gets when it's kissed too hard. Virgil knew it was unlikely she was meeting someone in the woods but it wasn't impossible. Towns had crept closer to the valley as more people spread Westward, closing the distances between neighbors. There could be other trappers or hunters coming into his territory. Or an Indian—Clara had no decency like that. She forgot what was properly human and what wasn't, including her own self.

Virgil began to look at everything too hard. He would catch himself staring at the sunlight on the strands of a cobweb in the shed and then curse

himself as foolish. At night he swallowed glasses of whiskey until sleep dragged him in. In the morning things would look the way they should, the way they actually were.

In April there was a Rendezvous: the fur companies had sent the word out and set a meeting place on the plains, and the white trappers and Indian trappers from every corner of Wyoming gathered to trade that season's hides in exchange for the goods of the East—cloth, guns and knives, good tobacco and coffee, as well as things wives missed like jewelry or insensible fabrics or a mirror.

Virgil returned with the wagon full of all they would need for the next eighteen months. He had been gone three weeks and that night when he drew Clara's shift off and pulled her body to him, he felt what her day clothes had concealed: the small, firm bulge of her belly. Of course Clara had said nothing.

All the time Virgil had spent in the mountains rained into his brain like hornets. It was true that he had taken his husband's rights whenever he had been home—but that didn't mean everything. He pulled away from her body with a grunt. "Is it mine?"

Clara got out of bed. He could hear her footsteps move through the dark of the cabin, and then the front door open and slam closed again.

Clara began to feel the baby's kicking with the onset of thunderstorm season, as though the new life took energy from the electricity in the air. Her body

swelled huge with wetness like the thick clouds on the horizon. She walked slower.

By midsummer Virgil's rage had eaten a hole into his stomach so that he lost his breakfast in back of the house while working. He couldn't sleep at night for thinking that this wasn't the way it was supposed to be.

The night of a great storm he lay next to Clara and tried to hear past her breathing, trying to hear instead the growl of thunder in the distance. He was burning up at the edges fast as paper, wondering how to stop it all, at how easy it would be to put a hand to her throat.

"What are you thinking about?" a voice next to him in the bed asked. Virgil choked on his breath. It wasn't Clara's voice.

It came again. "Tell me what you're thinking about. You feel so hot."

Virgil knew whose voice it was. He let himself be carried off on the knowledge, sure as a current.

"I was thinking about you," he whispered.

Every night after that, while Clara slept still as death, Virgil and the baby talked. The baby's voice reminded him of something he didn't hear anymore but could faintly remember—music like a piano, like a lady's wind-up jewelry box. The baby was a girl.

Virgil did the needed things. He cut and sanded wood for the cradle; he made trips to the nearest homesteads to ask which of the wives and older daughters would help when the time came.

He liked the baby's voice though it scared him at times—how smart she seemed, like he might not have anything to teach her, so that his hands felt empty. Then he would think of all that could go wrong which she would be helpless against, the animals and blizzards and sicknesses, and it seemed like he had too much to have to give.

At night Clara found she couldn't dream, as if her self wandered away and left her body behind in the dark for other beings to shelter in. During the day she lay in the clearing on a cot Virgil built for her, its stretched canvas bowing under the heavy curve of her body. There in the sunny wind and smell of the dirt and plants she could dream about the baby. A girl with eyes black and shiny as obsidian, with a broad, flat plain for a nose and powerful shoulders. Hair the color of rust and blood and with nails on her hands like flint. Clara dreamt and couldn't wait to watch her daughter—a young girl who could stand in the river and learn to pluck fish from the air with her father.

“I know she's yours,” she told the bear, her belly hovering between them.

“Clara.”

“She is. Why wouldn't she be?”

“What does she sound like inside?” Virgil asked the baby as Clara's body slumbered next to him.

“Like the trees in the wind during a storm. Like every tiny part of her is crashing into the other parts. It’s very noisy in here.”

Virgil knew this was right. His wife was like trees: if left alone through the ages she would never stop overtaking her own height.

“What are you?” he asked the baby. “Are you made of trees? Or rain, or snow?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m more like lace. Woven. Something man-made—”

Virgil felt his heart skip as she finished—

“You made me, remember?”

The infant had a nose as tiny as a kitten’s and bleary blue eyes. Virgil touched the baby’s fingers amazed that human bones could come so small. He wondered if her hair would be the same shade as his, before it had started to gray.

Clara had said nothing when the attending women rested the squalling infant on her breast. She mutely nursed her daughter, hands cupping the tiny head like it was bird’s egg. Her silence had started the moment she laid eyes on the baby.

The cabin was empty now but for the three of them. “I’d like to name her,” Virgil told his wife as he smoothed a hand over her hair. “Lydia.”

Clara turned her face to the window and sniffed at the moonlight.

Virgil didn't hear Lydia's voice again for four years as she graduated from first words to the struggle with sentences and then, there it was, sweet and clear as he remembered. When she fell asleep on him evenings Virgil wouldn't leave his chair. The weight of her small body anchored him to the floor so he felt how solid a home he built.

Clara's hair grew into its own thicket, a tangle the pattern of bramble. She found clusters of blackberries in her hair and didn't know whether she had lain in a bush or if they had grown from her body's own materials.

The news in town was that the railroad was coming to Wyoming, next year or someday—no one knew for sure. At the Rendezvous Virgil bought bullets and sugar, blankets, and a haircomb for Lydia's April-light hair that made him think of his sister's. The man who traded the comb to him said it got its shine from the inside of seashells, which was something Virgil would surely tell Lyddie when he gave it to her.

The first time Virgil said it Lydia was seven. "We might think of moving to town. We need a school. I could get steadier work."

Clara's voice was a warning. "We have everything we need here."

Virgil looked at Clara. She had dirt between her fingers and a bobcat's sharp eyes. "I think about later," he said. "When I'm not around. She needs other

people, Clara. To find a man who can give her a good life someday. One who's learned things. Respect.”

That afternoon as the bear moved in her Clara cried into his fur. His paw fit all the way around the back of her head. He licked the tears off her chin, picking out the salty taste of an animal peeled raw. He had never seen a creature cry but on Clara he knew what it meant.

Clara liked her daughter best when she was running. She would take Lydia into the clearing and spot things for them to chase: passing butterflies, dandelions whose soft skeletons they blew apart. They ran and Clara would laugh and then stop, to watch Lyddie keep going on her own—her baby's steps turned into a toddler's bounce into a child's lope—Clara could see them all at once, these steps taking her daughter away from her. One day Lydia reached the other end of the clearing and turned back, and in one swing of her hair and rise of her chest, Clara saw her daughter grow up.

“Where did you get my name, Papa?”

“Lydia was my mother's name. She died a long time before you were born, trying to have me another sister.”

“And where did your mother get your name?”

“From a book, I think. Funny that I remember that.”

“Which book? What is it about?”

“Hell if I know, Lyddie. I haven’t touched a book since I was shorter than you.”

“I’d like to read it.”

Virgil looked at his daughter. She was thirteen. Her eyelashes were golden. “I would like that for you, too.”

Virgil left for town suddenly. He didn’t explain himself and Clara didn’t ask him to. When he returned he found her in the yard.

“I talked with Jack O’Rourke,” Virgil told her. “He says there’s jobs in the cities with the railroad come through. I could get in the slaughterhouses. I know that kind of work.”

“So that’s what Jack says.”

“I’m moving to Laramie before the winter, Clara. I’d like you to come with me.” He gathered every remaining word he had stored in his body. “I know I’ve never been able to make you do a thing you didn’t already want to do. So I’m asking you.”

Clara squinted into the clearing and saw a blur of tones. It was growing harder to see things—the stitches in the sewing, the eyes of potatoes that needed cutting out. She inhaled instead, and her nose identified the earth wet with last night’s rain, the new summer grass that would soon dry to gold in the heat. She smelled the year turning, the way it always was.

“Virgil, I want to stay here.”

Virgil exhaled. He leaned in, took Clara's lips between his for a moment, and let her go. "Fine. I'm taking Lydia with me."

These were the things that Lydia tried to pack into her mind so carefully before they moved: the sight of the cabin against the bluebell sky. The sound of the pond in spring drinking from the snow runoff. Her mother's low voice as she talked to the plants and bugs in the garden. Her mother's hands in her hair, fingers flowing through and making Lydia feel like she was made of water. Her mother's quick turn of the head just before a rabbit darted across the clearing. Her mother's smile when Lydia showed her something wonderful she had found—a bird's nest, a dragonfly's stained-glass wing. Her mother's smile. Her mother's smile.

Clara didn't ration the food in the cabin or the cellar, even as November crushed the sunlight hours shorter and colder. Instead she ate everything in a matter of days: baked the last of the flour into bread, opened every jar and bag of vegetable. She felt her new weight strong around her bones but also dimmer, her senses fading with the winter twilight.

Virgil had taken only what he and Lydia would need to get started. In the name of a new beginning he had left every piece of his trapper's life. The curing supplies and traps were still in the shed, as were his maps of the mountain, marked with the trails to his shelters.

She gathered a map and one woolly blanket. She put out all the lamps. When Clara left the cabin she didn't shut the front door. Let whatever wanted to get inside, in.

The shelter she found was as humble as Virgil had promised years before. Three wooden walls against a sturdy slope. When Clara shoved open the door she saw that he had dug a room-sized hole into the slope to make a deep, warm space inside. She knew this: Virgil was good at making things.

She heard the crunch of snow at her back and then a shadow overtook the doorway. She turned.

Clara and the bear looked at each other. "I'm here," he said, but she had already known.

She was so tired, ready to sleep until spring shook off the winter. The bear lay down his heavy form at the back of the shelter. Clara shut the door and in the shade folded herself against his body, pulling the blanket tight to her. She closed her eyes. She knew that if she slept long and deep enough, she would begin to dream, real as waking life, about a young girl with hair and eyes the color of April arriving for the first time in the bustle of a city—a young girl arriving like wading into a river, ready to watch the fast-speeding miracle of trains roar past.

THE SEMINARIST

There is nothing left for me to do but go to her and tell her. When she opens her front door I am going to say: “Bette, I don’t know what all this has been about, and I hope you’re happy, the both of you. I really do. But it has become impossible for us to be friends. You’ve obviously changed. Have a swell life, babe.” And that will be it—a nice, clean parting. Who knows if he’ll be in there with her, or what he’ll have told her?

The problem is that everything about him is unsuitable. You should see this guy she’s with. It’s all wrong. He was wearing bright *green* underwear. I’m talking St. Paddy’s Day drugstore decoration green tightie-whities. Tightie-greenies. And he kisses like an idiot.

Do I need to back up? Explain why I was kissing my friend’s lover? I will. Don’t worry about it; I’m used to it. I am a person who requires a lot of explanation.

I know I appear a little enigmatic. Shape-shifty. My name is D., just the letter. I nixed the rest when I decided that I couldn’t be the one thing my body told the delivery room I should be. Freud said, “Anatomy is destiny.” I say there’s no such thing as destiny. It is up to you to make yourself. Am I female because my mother used to put me in dresses? Am I male because people think my short hair and clothes mark me so? No—I can be whatever I want to be and whatever someone else needs me to be. You think people don’t go for that? That I have to spend my Saturday nights alone? Think again. I am part blank canvas, part moving target. Imagine the possibilities.

My non-commitment on this front comes in handy for my line of work. I teach sex for a living. Not like sex ed with charts and anatomical drawings, or that guru shit where someone tells you that you can come by just breathing and visualizing your chakras. The fact is, sex is an art, and like any art, it requires theory, practice, and learning—a few lessons if you want to dabble, or a period of apprenticeship if you think you can get good. This is where I come in. I am a naturally talented artist. A self-trained master. I've written books, three of them. I've appeared on talk shows, given lectures and sermons. I have credos.

No one quibbles with my work on principle; my methods, on the other hand, are controversial. I give what I discreetly and tastefully refer to as “seminars,” and my approach in them is, shall we say, hands-on. I firmly believe that the only way to teach someone how to be a great lover is to make really great love to them until they can do it back. How do you learn to swim—or ride a bike? You have to actually do it, put your body in the medium and the movement. But what if you were trying to learn to ride on a broken bike? The point is, I am the un-broken bike you learn on. I am the best damn bike you will ever ride or your money back. I've never had anyone ask for their money back.

But today? My flawless record: shot. And it's all because of Bette. Bette, with eyes the color of bourbon and over-sized tortoiseshell glasses. Bette, who speaks with a softly French accent honed in Provence where she grew up, oui. Who has a new lover. Boyfriend, *beau*, whatever. There is a new person in her considerable yet discerning black book and Bette called

me to coffee a few weeks ago apparently just to tell me about him. We got through one cup each before the bombshell dropped her bombshell.

“Where’d you meet him?” I asked.

She said: “Nowhere interesting. Not anywhere that you’d be interested, anyway.”

I’ll be honest. Bette and I are just friends, but I’m not crazy about it when she’s dating someone, which she almost always is. Sure, I know they’ll be gone in a matter of weeks, or a couple of months if they do something else that holds her interest off the sheets. Maybe painting, or that philosophy professor who was way too old but who had met de Beauvoir: star-fucking-by-association. And yet. But I played nice. I asked the questions.

“So what’s Mr. Right’s name?”

Then she told me. “His name is Brock.”

For a moment I thought she must be kidding. Brock? You can picture this guy, right? Jock cowboy surferdude football-for-a-head. I mean, am I crazy? Has there ever been a more preposterous male name than Brock?

I may have implied my feelings about this. “Brock? Il s’appelle *Brock*? You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not kidding. And don’t speak French to me. It makes me want to hit you.” Like that would be a bad thing.

“Alright. Brock. Sorry—I am reminded of cavemen.”

“I didn’t want to tell you about him because I knew you would be an asshole.”

“Well, you do know me better than anyone,” I said, and it’s true. She didn’t nod. She didn’t have to. She knows when she’s right and she wears her rightness nonchalantly. She’s dreadful.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I wanted to tell you because I think this one is different.”

“Why, he’s got a tail?”

“Fuck you. And you know you’d put a tail to good use if you had one so don’t say it like it’s a bad thing.” She flicked her eyebrows at me. Her eyebrows are her own tail, squirrel-lush and expressive enough to need their own language. I am fluent in Bette’s eyebrows.

I asked when I would get to meet him because she had made such a production of telling me. She lifted her cappuccino to her lips and slit her eyes at me across the table. She used her cup like a fan over her face, an instrument of flamboyant secrecy.

“You will,” she said. “Be patient.”

Here’s the thing: Bette and I have never slept together. We almost did but thankfully, I put the brakes on that night and saved our friendship. We met through work, more or less. She’s a literary agent who specializes in niche self-help and DIY, books that more squeamish agents won’t touch: your BDSM for Dummies and pot brownie recipe collections. She’s not my agent—I don’t have one—make your own destiny, remember? But we began to bump into each other. After a couple of mutual launch parties and cocktail hours she and I had lunch. We went to a film fest. Things were sailing smoothly.

One night we were at some industry party. She was wearing a blue scarf and this atrocious, loose brown sweater. Bette is blonde in that dewy way. Do you know what I mean? Like her face is made of this perfect arrangement of droplets and they catch the light on her cheekbones and swell her lips and pool deepest in her eyes, and whenever you watch someone else lean in to kiss her cheek, you have this moment of fear that they're going to break it, the surface tension or magic spell or whatever it is that's holding her together. But of course, she never breaks—you only worry, and worry. That night she had her hair twisted into a bun, and she was pulling her glasses on and off as she talked to people and watching her, I knew that I had to find out where she thought she was going after the party so I could change her mind.

She let me into her apartment. She let me kiss her all the way to the bedroom and get her onto the bed. I had known I wanted her and she seemed to really, really want me back.

I need to clarify: I don't only have sex for work. Once in a while someone will catch my attention enough and we'll have a glorious, soaked sheets weekend together. The best part is that I can bring the benefits of my expertise to whomever I'm with, free of charge. I have a good time, they have a great time, and isn't that what it's all about?

The bottom line is that what I was about to do with Bette was not unfamiliar territory. And I was at my prime. I unraveled that hideous sweater from her torso. I unknotted her hair from her bun so I could tug on it and then twisted it back up so I could free-range over her naked neck. We had been kissing

for so long her lips had gone the consistency of pudding hot off the stove. I had her bra off and nipped at her belly with my teeth and our fingers met at the zipper of her pants but when my hand touched hers I realized she was trembling. I knew I couldn't go through with it.

It was for her own good. I'm not friends with anyone I've been involved with, work or play. And it obviously *meant* something to her—she was angry with me for stopping it, for stopping us. Wouldn't return my calls. She came around but even then, she would subtly bring it up once in a while and hint at what might have been. I skillfully deflected these moments and sure enough, she dropped it. That was almost a year ago and damn it if I wasn't right—things are perfect between us. Were perfect. Before Brock the Block.

"I'm pretty sure I've found The One." Those were Bette's words. We were at her place after a matinee when she said it, sitting on the couch with wine. Music. I should have smelled that she had set a stage. She had been seeing Rock for about three weeks. Three weeks! Me, I don't believe in "The One." It's not that I'm anti-romantic. The concept just has too much of a whiff of, well, *destiny* about it.

I said: "Jesus, Bette. How do you know?"

"Does it matter? I need to talk with you."

"About?"

"Brock and I haven't slept together yet."

I was surprised and then relieved. "Oh? What's up?"

She looked out the window, turning her face into the sunlight coming through the glass. Her cheekbones made the sunlight shimmer. “I’m tired, D. Of not just having my Someone. I feel like I’m waiting for my life to start. I’ve felt this way for some time.”

“And you think Brock is going to be that life?”

She faced me again. “I think he is a way to it, yes.”

“So what? You think not sleeping together is going to—shit, don’t tell me you’re getting married.”

“Don’t be stupid. No. But we are taking things slow. I want it to be special.”

I was floored. Who was this schoolgirl sitting in front of me? Where had my enchantingly insatiable, gloriously smutty companion gone?

“Well,” I tried. “Like I always say, trust the rhythm between the two of you.”

“Thank you. But D., the thing is, so far it’s not going the way I would like it to.”

I perked. “Yeah? Why?”

She sighed tragically. “He’s a terrible kisser. His hands are a little clumsy. It’s endearing, I suppose, but I worry that when we are finally together, it will be, how do you say—”

“God awful. Unbearable. The worst sex you’ve ever had.”

“I was going to say a deterrent.”

“Right.”

She took my hand in hers and smoothed her thumb over my skin. “D., I know we’ve had our unsure periods, but I want you to know that I value you more than anyone.”

I am an idiot. “Bette,” I let my tongue trot me off to my demise. “I would do anything for you.”

Her eyes flickered. She has chambers and chambers of lights in her eyes and just when you think they’re all on, she throws another switch. I felt the spark in my spine.

“Yes, I know you say that. Which is why I have a favor to ask.” And then she asked.

Which is how I came to have Brock sitting in my office for a seminar consultation as my newest client. The only thing I could think about the man planted in front of me on Tuesday afternoon was: I cannot believe that Bette would for a moment mistake him for “The One.” Her One. It is extraordinary how un-extraordinary he is. He isn’t fat or thin, tall or short. He’s not a bad specimen to begin with. You could even say he’s good-looking, if bland is your thing. Strong brow, carved jaw. But he holds his face poorly and moves it poorly and is just *in* it poorly, which is everything, the way you are in things is *everything*. I just couldn’t understand. His hair was dark and too poofy on top of his head.

Nevertheless, he and Bette were paying customers so I treated him with the utmost professionalism. Meaning, I treated him like I would any other difficult pupil. In the consultation, my clients and I simply talk and make a game plan for the seminar sessions. I explained to Brock what Bette’s requests were and gave

him the lie she had fed me, that she had been a client and wanted him to learn the techniques. Ballroom lessons before a wedding.

He was impressive from the get-go. When I asked him to tell me a little bit about himself as a lover, you know what he opened with? “I’ve never done this kind of thing before.”

“Oh, you’re a virgin?” I was being a prick. It felt delicious.

“No, I mean *this*,” he said. “With someone, you know, like *you*. I usually don’t—you know.”

I enjoyed his suffering, his awkwardness, because he wore it so poorly—because it clearly killed him to feel at a disadvantage. I bet he cried as a child when he lost board games. I bet his face got splotchy and pinched like a lemon and he whined and made the other kids think he was a big baby. I wanted to make him whine again.

I got up from my chair so I was the only one standing and began to pace the room, chin down, hands behind my back. Professor-mode. I said something expert. “The first rule of the art of being a fantastic lay is to be able to speak your desire. How can you expect to be good at sex if you can’t talk about it? It all starts in the mind. If the eyes are the windows of the soul, the mouth is the door of the mind.”

He looked confused. “You mean dirty talk?”

I ended things as quickly as I could. We scheduled two sessions in the next three days. Bette wanted him done by Friday. Jockstrap mentioned this at the end of our consultation.

“Friday is the big night,” he proclaimed, raising his eyebrows like he was talking about some fucking bachelor party. He tried to punch my shoulder. I ducked and his fist hit the wall. I hope he cracked every single one of his knuckles.

The next day was worse. Wednesday, Seminar One: the basics. I don’t always have to go that far back with people but from Bette’s vague report and my own impressions I wasn’t sure he could unhook his own pants, much less a bra. Really there was no helping him. I tried. “Let’s start with touch,” I began. I wondered how long I could go without touching him. “I don’t mean yours—I mean theirs. We tend to focus all of our concentration during sex on what *our* hands are doing and feeling, but think of this: when you lay your hand on someone’s body, their skin is touching your hand in return.” I produced a spray of feathers at the end of a long stick. “To this end, you want to play—”

“What’s that?” Brock pointed.

“Ostrich feathers. A tickler. For skin? Here, take your shirt off.”

“It looks like a cat toy.”

“Okay, we’ll work with that. Play with your partner like she’s a cat. Be the mouse. Let her chase you.”

“No. No way. I’m the cat. She has to be the mouse. I’m not being the mouse.”

I had to cut the session short by two hours. You know when the last time I did that was? Never. I’ve run through seminars with a hundred and two degree

fever and used the extra body heat to my advantage. It was the green underwear. I couldn't take it. He got undressed and there they were. I got this image of him wearing them in her bedroom, in her bed, against her white skin. What is she doing? He's so bad he's perfect. It is as though she picked a guy she knew would drive me, exactly me, crazy. Did she hold auditions? He completely lacks imagination. He's stupid. He's not sexy. He doesn't see how unbelievably freaking lucky he is that she deigns to notice he's alive. I will tell her this when I get to her door. When she opens her front door I will say Bette, you have lost your mind or your taste and in either case, I won't be a part of it anymore. I have standards and had thought you did, too.

I tried calling her last night, before my final session with Sock. She didn't answer. Which is fine. I didn't have anything to say to her anyway.

And that brings us to today, Friday. Session Two: the day I would have to bring myself to touch loverboy. I tried to start with something easy. "Let's talk about necks. Very crucial part of the body. A good rule for kissing your partner's neck is that there is no rule. Do it exactly the way you want to: your mouth is telling you the way to do it. Do you want to kiss it like you're eating a peach? Do it. Or would you—"

"A peach?"

"Yes. For instance."

"That's strange."

"You're strange."

"What?"

“Shut up. Moving on then.”

We began to get some actual work done. I got him to trace first instead of grab right away. I was remarkably professional and demonstrated on him.

Quickly. Then we got to kissing.

“This is kind of weird,” he grumbled as we moved closer to each other.

“It’s weird if you can’t be a grown up about it. Pretend I’m—someone you want to be with.” I couldn’t name names. It would have killed me. But actually, it didn’t matter. It all went

south. I started to kiss Brock and all I could think was: Bette’s mouth. Maybe she kissed him right before he came here. Maybe there’s a little bit of her left. I wondered if I could taste her. I began to try to taste her on him.

I think I do know, partly, why all this is happening. About a month before Brock showed up, I messed up and kissed Bette for the first time since that first time.

We like to go to the sea together, Bette and I. It’s one of our favorite places—kind of like “our” place. The whole sea and all of the beach. Maybe we need that much space for the two of us. We were taking one of our sea-walks. What you have to understand is that Bette and I are about the same height and this drives me crazy. I mean in a good way, a great way. I tell my clients that relatively similar height is an asset: you need make only minor adjustments to reach collar bones with lips, to put hips between thighs. It’s one of the delicious ways Bette and I would slide together like puzzle pieces, if it came to that, because we can stand eye to eye, belly to belly. That day we stopped walking and

Bette shivered in the breeze, so I bundled her up to me in my coat. The surf was at my back, Bette was looking over my shoulder at the water, and my face was exactly at the level of her hair, which smelled so good. Then she shifted a little and her face was exactly in front of mine, and I nudged her nose with mine so her chin tipped back and then her mouth was exactly on my mouth. Like I said, it was the height.

It would have been great if she had pulled away and slapped me right then. It would have been perfect because I would have known exactly where we stood and I could have groveled and blamed it on low blood sugar or my predatory sexual appetite or made some stupid joke. But instead she kissed me back, a soft deepening maddening kiss and we stood there for way too long kissing and then she pulled away and looked at me and it was awful. Her eyes got so big, and then she smiled at me, this *asking*, little girl smile.

My stomach knotted. My heart felt like a fucking cowbell. I straightened out and said, "Sorry. Didn't mean to," like I had knocked her glass over at dinner. I started to walk but I saw her face right before she slumped and followed me. She looked like I had slapped her.

We fought that evening. I condemned her for changing lovers more often than her sweaters, said what would she do if she ever found herself wanting someone past the normal expiration date? She said I wouldn't know how to take what I wanted if it was standing right in front of me so I had nothing to say about any of this, nothing. It felt like we had said it all before because we had tried so hard to never say it. And when the sting fell away after a couple of days, it even

felt good. Clean and new start-ready. We agreed to meet. I brought her flowers, we hugged, and it was just like always. Then when I wasn't looking, Brock showed up.

And there I was this afternoon, kissing the hell out of him because I was thinking of Bette and trying to kiss her through him. My hands were in his hair. He finally shoved me away for air. His eyes were glittering like a drunk's. His chest was heaving. "Wow, you really know how to give it to a guy."

I slapped my hand over my face. I was going to be sick. "Fuck, look Brock, I think I have to rain check on this. Be a pal and don't tell Bette. I'll get it together and we can reschedule."

Then he began talking. Said if it was all the same to me, we could just tell Bette that we had gone through with the seminars.

"What about the techniques?" I said, thinking stupidly of my pride, how I didn't want Bette to think I was a bad teacher if Brock was a disappointing lay. "Don't you want to please Bette? Don't you want things to work between the two of you?"

"Sure. She's hot, other perks aside."

I felt my back go up. "Perks?"

"Well," he said. "If you really want to know, I have an idea for a book."

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah. I have this great idea for a book, like a life coach thing. It's a plan for how to become richer in a year."

I tried to keep breathing. "Are you richer?"

“Than what?”

“Than you were a year ago. Using your plan.”

“No, I don’t have to do it—the book will make me rich.”

The scream I was suppressing. He kept rattling on. “I was talking about it to Bette and she seemed pretty into it. I mean, it must be easy to write a book. You do it all the time.”

“When were you talking to Bette about it?”

“When we met. Really, I just wanted to see if I could have an ‘in’ on my idea, and then turns out she was into me. She agreed to see what she could do in terms of the book, and she said she wanted to see me again. You know, like *see me*. It was a twofer.” Then he laughed.

I snapped. I made this crazy sound like I was going to tear down the walls. I demanded that he get out of my studio. Because that’s how I found out. That’s how I found out I was being thrown over by the woman I love for a guy who wants a book deal out of her. Because I do love her. I’ve known it since the night I almost had her and then didn’t. When I got her onto the bed. When she pulled off her ugly sweater, yanking out her bun with it. She let me tangle my hands in her hair and then bound it back up and held my lips to her collarbones. She said my name into my mouth as she was kissing me. Our hands met at the zipper of her pants and it was then that I felt that I was trembling. We both were. Our hands were trembling and she looked at me and I could see she was ready. She was ready and I wasn’t. Do you know what that’s like? She is so much braver and fiercer than I am. It is terrifying to find yourself in love with someone so fierce. I

forgot everything in that one moment, how to be or do anything. She made skin new for me.

So I stopped. I couldn't go further.

And I've fucked it up since then and maybe it's too late. I've held her at a friendly distance and now she may or may not believe this guy is The One, her destiny—fate and perfect matches and all that stuff that I so desperately need on my side right now.

That is what I have to tell her. How? How is anyone supposed to live like this? Without answers or a plan or any kind of expertise? What if I get to her place and he's in there with her?

What if I'm too late? I have no idea what I'm going to say to her. Bette, I know that my heart is the same size as your fist because you are holding my heart and it fits in your fingers far too tightly. I just have to say something, anything.

I'm going. I'm going to her. I am going to knock on her door and wait out the long, long wait until she opens it. For her, I will wait.

THE EXHIBIT

A restoration was underway at the Hall of Exhibits. I did not know exactly what this meant when I took the position, only that the Grand Reopening was to take place in four weeks and that the restoration was in its final intense stage. New exhibits were being installed, given finishing touches, catalogued. I was to be part of this work. I was part of it, until tonight.

I hadn't been to the Hall since I was a little girl. I remembered it only in that disjointed, unfocused way you do a dream, as an endless parade of galleries of art and artifacts and zoological displays. There were gardens on the grounds. The animals, I remember most clearly, were the thing that held my young attention. The tropical aquarium and the aviary full of birds. A room of tanks of reptiles, the air wet and odorous and ticking with cricket sounds, and a pavilion where visitors walked along tree-lined paths as species of butterflies trembled overhead. The butterflies fell onto your shoulders like living snow. It was important to watch where you stepped.

When I arrived again four weeks ago I saw that the grounds around the immense building of the Hall were well-kept but empty—no garden exhibits, no giant tent for the aviary. I wondered what had become of those features.

The lobby was a formidable space, elegant and chilly with veined marble and pillars. The chandeliers the size of small boats were necessary—for all its expansive height the lobby was windowless. I would come to learn that the whole of the Hall was windowless.

People wearing identical, dark green jackets hurried past me, through pushing dollies or showing each other clipboards, and then I saw a man striding toward me. Mr. Percy, smiling widely.

“My dear!” he said. “Welcome to our marvelous institution!” he beamed, shaking my hand with both of his. His green jacket had tails like a magician’s. Across the breast his title was embroidered in gold. Director of Exhibits.

We said some greeting things and then I asked, perhaps too soon, if I could see my studio. I am not good with small talk.

“Eager to get to work, are we?” Mr. Percy said. His moustache was speckled gray and flapped on his lip like it would take off. His hair was black as shoe polish. “You will fit in quite well. This way!” And he led us into the Hall.

I am a metalsmith. I was hired by the Hall of Exhibits to do finishing work on the installations and make repairs before its Grand Reopening. Mine was a temporary position, but it had been suggested that a more permanent one might open. I was not sure upon what conditions but I was sure I could fulfill them. I can do anything: the heavy work of blacksmithing, the delicate processes of small and precious metalwork. I can make a bowie knife from scratch and inscribe a love poem on a silver locket. I’ve been told that I might specialize to make myself a niche. I point out that if you fit nowhere you can fit anywhere. I’ve been told that it seems at odds to be a smith and a woman. I point out that I only chose to be one but would change neither.

I had told Mr. Percy all this during our telephone interview. What I don’t know how to do, I said, I figure out.

“Marvelous,” he had answered, and I heard a smile seep into his voice.

Eventually the corridors of the inner Hall would become familiar to me as my own veins but that first day I felt as though I was being spun in circles as Mr. Percy led us through. All the corridors were identical—swampy with shadows, lit only by wall sconces that emitted a glow barely brighter than candlelight. On both sides the walls opened again and again into exhibit rooms. From within light and color, shapes and detail, leapt out, beckoning. It was a seductive setup with all advantage given to the exhibits. I found myself wanting very much to stop and investigate their spaces. But we hurried past. We were on business.

Mr. Percy pushed through a closed door marked with a small plaque, brass, well-shined, that read: “Private.” We were in a new hallway then, lit brighter, whose walls were lined with closed doors.

“One of our technician’s wings,” he explained, producing from his pocket an impressive ring of keys.

“Are these all studios?” I asked. The doors were marked only by numbers over their frames. We had stopped at Three Hundred Sixteen.

“Our private workrooms, yes,” Mr. Percy said. He unlocked and threw open the door. “And here is yours!”

The room was lined with racks of hammers and pliers. Shelves of full jars of patina and pickle solutions. Brand new anvils and vices and a rolling mill, not a mark on them. Comprehensive sets of drill bits and punches. A press, and buffing wheels for polishing anything I might make. Torches and tanks of gas waiting to

be used and sheets of virgin metal stacked a foot tall and coils of wire longing to be cut.

My hands began to itch. “This will do,” I said.

Mr. Percy smiled. “Marvelous.”

Technicians dropped off projects for me—broken objects or pieces that had been deemed somehow aesthetically unacceptable. Orders written on slips of paper appeared on my workbench. Some were detailed and included suggestions for how I might go about the task. These I ignored. I know my own work.

When I got an order that took me out of my studio to the exhibits themselves, only the exhibit’s room number would be given, “Needed in Thirty-Five,” and I had to find my own way. I had been given a map of the Hall printed on dense paper with gilt lettering. The layout of the Hall spread over the paper in an intricate, coursing knot of corridors and numbered rooms. Finding the exhibits was the most challenging aspect of my job.

As I worked each day, the Hall revealed itself. Sometimes an order would give me some idea of what I was going to see—“The fixture holding the skeleton aloft would look better in a gold metal than the current silver.” But when the task was more generic—“Dent in aluminum frame of display case”—I would have to wait until I found the room.

There was no way to guess. I fitted cabinets with frames and locks in exhibit One Hundred Four, flowers that had been preserved with some ingenious process of glues. Buffed a scratch off the curving hindquarters of a bronze man in

exhibit Thirty, a room of sculptures which stood like a forest of human figures crouching and stretching in stony gray and marble white. The dented aluminum case had held eggs, exact natural replicas in blown glass, some with models of infant birds inside illuminated by bright light. I was asked to add decorative engraving to display bases in a gallery of miniature trees like bonsais, except this exhibit boasted unusual specimens—a maple with crimson leaves the size of quarters and some hanging with tiny fruit.

“Is it edible?” I asked a woman who was fussing with the apples. The embroidery on her green jacket read: “Botanics Technician.”

She looked sideways at me. “They aren’t for eating,” she said, and turned to a foot-tall date palm.

What was any of it for? I wished I could remember the old Hall more clearly, to compare, for maybe it would tell me the new Hall’s intention. I like to be sure of my work, even in design.

One day I stopped to investigate a room that appeared to be full of jewels—we smiths have an affinity for stones, working with them often as we do. But it was not what I had thought. The room was full of butterflies. They sat, iridescent wings spread open, on stands and pots of branches that had been set around. Dozens more floated through the air above spaces marked off by velvet rope. The effect for the visitor was of standing at the center of a galaxy, bits of trembling light poised all around, for under the overhead lamps the butterflies’ colors shifted as if they fluttered. But they didn’t. In exhibit Forty-Three the butterflies only seemed to be alive.

A technician fussed with the wire suspending a great lime green moth. He had greeted me when I walked in.

“How did they kill them without breaking them?” I asked, thinking of the paper-fine wings and the powder that colors them.

He winked. “We freeze them. It’s gentle and preserves the beauty of the specimens.”

I left feeling like I had been given a clue, if not an answer. This seemed to be the lone intention that held the exhibits together. Everything within its walls was beautiful.

A week had passed. My work was going well—better. There was always something new and challenging to figure out, to mend, to fabricate from my own invention. I had command of an endless supply of materials and tools. There were stock plates of eighteen-karat gold in the high cabinet behind the door. Working at the Hall I could have anything I needed, or wanted.

But I hadn’t gotten a green jacket. No one told me there was a test in place for the permanent position but I am not dull. Whatever it would be, I would not fail.

Then Mr. Percy summoned me, and that is how everything changed.

I found him at exhibit Twenty-Six as requested, a room of lavish fur pieces—rugs with the roaring heads still on and hides re-formed into human

shapes, coats-like-torsos and caps the size of skulls. I didn't have time to inspect. "Dearest!" he cried when he saw me and pulled a great watch on a chain from his pocket. "Always more to do! Come with me." He ushered us away and into the corridors.

He explained as we walked. "I have an assignment for you. Of high priority." There were four weeks until the Grand Reopening. Without slowing his pace he produced a box from beneath his lapel and handed it to me. It was smooth, stained wood with an ornate latch. Silver, a weak metal for a closure. I flicked it open. Pinned to the silk lining of the box's interior was a necklace. I lifted it out, felt its competing wealthy weight and delicacy. The scrolling links were white gold but stained with yellow from wear. The clasp broken, a part of the mechanism snapped off. By the length I determined it would fit like a collar. A series of blood-colored stones were set along the necklace's span.

"Garnet?" I asked.

"Yes! It has the perfect look, but as you can see—could you repair it?"

I could do more than that. It suffered from design flaws. I saw joints and limbs in the curving structure of the piece that weren't there, but might be. My mind began to trace the lines of the sketch I would make. "I could improve it, actually. Keep the basic design but enhance it. If you would like that."

He clapped. "Splendid!" Then he regarded me. "You are making yourself quite invaluable."

I intended to.

We had stopped, in the doorway of a room I hadn't yet been to. Exhibit One Eighty-Eight. "Here we are!" he said. I hadn't known we had a destination. I followed him in.

The exhibit room was an empty space, and dark. A small group of green-jacketed workers crowded within, the air throbbing with their voices and the clicking of their tools. I didn't see what they were working with, or on. I couldn't see anything else, for three of the walls were just walls but one was inlaid with an enormous pane of glass—a window that revealed a little room raised about three feet higher than the floor we stood on, affording a perfect view inside. And in the little room behind the glass was a woman.

Her hair was the color of fresh copper. Long, it fell in soft tangles like she had just stepped out of a breeze. Her face was fair with the clean lines of a sculpture—a straight nose, clear eyes in an open brow, precise peaks of top lip and a full bottom one. Her chin had a slight dimple at the center as though the careful fingers that had worked the mouth left one final mark: a touch, there.

But she was not sculpted. She blinked, her head turned, her chest rose and fell.

She wore a simple dress, the fabric a buttery almost-white that moved softly around the shapes of her, more fitted around the top and waist and falling just below her knees. I think it would be called a shift but I am not sure. I have never been good with clothes unless they involve buckles and studs.

"Is that the exhibit?" I asked.

“It is one of them,” Mr. Percy said, and then leaning in, “It is my favorite. Our most innovative by far.”

I had meant is that *it*—the entirety of the exhibit? I had meant: is *she* the exhibit?

The more I saw the less I could make sense of what I was seeing. Behind the glass she leaned on the bed post—for there was a bed in the room with her. Against the back wall stood a closet-sized armoire and next to it, a large folding dressing screen. Opposite the bed and tilted outward, toward us, sat a vanity with a large mirror, its tabletop covered in brushes and bottles. A stool for sitting. The walls were covered in paneling and patterned paper. A colorful rug spread over the floor. Two plants in pots, a small vase of roses on the bedside table.

The scene sat trapped in the wall like a painting, a still life of a lady’s bedroom. Only the painting was not still.

Her feet were bare.

The box in my hands suddenly weighed more. “Is the necklace for her?”

“Why yes,” Mr. Percy said. “One of the finishing touches!” Then he sighed as if he had just bitten into something delicious.

The technicians milled about us, distracted by their work. In the little room the woman ignored everyone on the other side of the glass. She moved from the bedpost to the vanity and sat on the stool. Leaned on her elbows and began to finger a lock of hair, watching herself in the mirror. I thought there might be a freckle on her left cheek, just under the eye.

I wondered how she described her part in the exhibit. How she explained herself. What her voice sounded like. “How long does she stay in there each day?”

“All the time of course.”

On the bed the pillows and sheets were twisted and looked well-used. A glass sat on the bedside table with an inch or so of water at its bottom. A faint buzzing had begun in my head. I scanned the walls for a door. A painting hung on the back wall, a bland pretty landscape. Near the ceiling two long vents leered silently. For air. But other than this there were no openings. I turned to Mr. Percy. “But when does she leave?”

He blinked as if I had given him a riddle. “My dear, why would she leave?” he asked. He smiled. A technician approached with a question and Mr. Percy turned away, his hands and voice animated in answer.

That’s when she looked at me. Her eyes suddenly flicked up in the mirror and darted over and past everything else to mine. Our eyes on each others’. I felt the pierce in the back of my neck like a nail, driven.

I left. I found my way out of the Hall. That night I had a dream that I was small enough to swim through a human vein and could not, in that curious way of dreams, tell how I had come to be there, tangled in all that red.

The next day while trying to work I saw every wall as it stood in relation to exhibit One Eighty-Eight—adjacent or opposite or parallel to the wall with the

window. Does she get orders like mine, I wondered, for how she is to do her work for the day? Little slips of paper on her breakfast tray that ask her to braid or wear her hair loose, where she is to sit, what expression she is to keep on her face? Has her work begun even, or is this all just rehearsal? What will she do when the Hall finally opens?

I wanted to ask. I like to be sure of my work.

So that night I went back, late, when everyone else surely had to be gone. If I faced a night guard or another worker I would say that I feared I had left a torch open in my studio, gas, too dangerous to let go until morning.

I didn't even know if I could get in. The front doors of the Hall stretched tall in the dark. The well-kept grounds surrounding the building were silent, and the trees and hills far off were murky and chimed with distant nighttime sounds. I skimmed the eaves for cameras, kept my ears tuned for footsteps, took a breath. I knew it was not likely but I tried my studio key in the elaborate knob of the front door. Brass, a serious knob. The key slipped in but wouldn't turn.

A thing about smiths: we make keys because the rest of the world needs them, not because we do.

I picked the lock.

It was silent as a held breath inside the Hall. The corridor lamps were still lit. I crossed paths with no one.

When she saw me she jumped off her bed and came to the glass like it was so natural that I should be there. The overhead lights in her little room had been

turned off so the only illumination came from the lamp at her bedside. I approached the glass, stood as close as I could without touching anything.

She was raised on her platform and so she knelt—that way we were face to face. We hesitated in the circle of lamplight together.

She did have a freckle on her right cheek, under her eye, on the bone.

“Why are you in there?” I asked. Perhaps I should have started with something more polite—her name or how she was feeling. But I am not indirect.

She didn’t answer. She leaned toward the glass. I had no way of knowing how thick it was. I am not an expert in windows.

I tried again, raising my voice as loud as I dared in the utter hush of the Hall. “Can you hear me?”

She took a breath, her lips parting, but I heard nothing. I didn’t know if she made a sound or only sighed.

Her eyes were the color of amber.

I stayed an hour. To be quiet with her. When I left I carefully re-locked the front door of the Hall so I wouldn’t leave a trace of my visit. So I could keep everything precious within the Hall safe.

In the day I worked. I fixed a knife whose blade had snapped at the tip; I didn’t know whether it was part of an exhibit or some technician’s tool. I plated light fixtures in a room that held, among other objects, a hive of bees that had been petrified mid-action and bisected for display, no doubt frozen in the same manner as the butterflies; if you looked close enough you could see pollen on the

legs of the motionless bees. One morning making my way down a dark corridor, I heard an uncanny shrieking, and the day after spotted its source: a fantastic blood-red parrot being wheeled in a great cage across the lobby, its tail long as a sabre. Soon after, I received an order to fashion eight decorative perches. The ironwork gave me a chance to break in my studio's forge.

At night I went to her. I looked and looked at her like swallowing water, and she looked back. Because that is all we could do: look.

We made an elaborate task of looking. The way she was built fascinated me. The bevel edges of her lids that held her eyes. The movable joints of wrist in arm and shoulder in back. I found a spot on her throat where I could see her pulse when she was still. I became an expert on the fine filigree curve of her lip.

And she had a way of staring back at me, her eyes intense as if she were saying a million things in a rush, or else the one most important thing very carefully. I felt pulled in and knocked back by her look like trying to stand in the sea. Sometimes it was overwhelming. Sometimes I brought her other things to look at. I tore pictures out of magazines and welded tiny sculptures of scrap metal to make her smile when I held them to the glass. To watch her eyes change, to see what they would say in their language of light and movement.

On a night near the beginning I had taken my eyes from her face long enough to scan the walls behind her. Only paneling and paint. Maybe in the ceiling? Under the rug on her floor? I pantomimed opening a door for her and

pointed into her little room, and she simply looked back as if taking in the view, then turned and stared at me the way she would, as if her face were speaking a thousand words I stumbled to learn.

The next day I met a crew of Hall workers pushing wheeled carts stocked with containers. We greeted each other and I stepped against the wall to let them pass. The containers held an impressive variety of reptiles, green and brown and fluorescent. The creatures watched me, blinking their sticky lids over black orb eyes. Their claws tapping and scratching against the glass. A couple of containers gave off percussive sounds as frogs popped futilely at the sides. The final cart bore only one large container, holding a massive boa constrictor. It flicked its tongue at me as it passed.

I remembered the reptiles from my childhood visit to the Hall. I thought I would have to go see them, when they were installed, or put into their tanks—whatever you would call that. Could you install a living thing like hanging a piece of art?

That night I watched her differently. I wondered what she did all day. There were lotions for her to put on. She changed her shifts and some nights wore socks. But she had no diversions. She had to get food in some way. How did it get it in to her little room?

The bed, the ever-refilling glass of water on the nightstand—only the most basic of her physical needs had been met, an entire contained world of that which was necessary to her.

I was not looking at a live painting. The window in the wall of exhibit One Eighty-Eight looked in on something else entirely.

I murmured the word aloud. "Habitat."

She put both her hands to the glass. Her veins branched blue through her pale palms. I reached out a finger. Her eyes were bright and pulled and pushed me. She watched my hand move toward hers. The glass beneath my fingertip was cold and smooth.

It takes a certain kind of patience to work metals. The material has its own desires. As you bend and hammer it, it hardens and you have to heat it just enough to persuade it to move under your hands again. If you quench it too soon after heating it will shatter like glass upon the surface of the water. So you wait. You improvise.

I worked on the necklace whenever I had a chance. I was careful, attentive, more intensely precise than usual, and I am usually precise. Every link and joint I wanted to be perfect. I wanted Mr. Percy to be impressed, to know I was devoted to the Hall.

But I also improvised. I damaged the Halls so I would have more work to do. Scratched the metal frames of display cases with files I hid in my cuffs. Cut the links in the velvet ropes that would guide the lines of guests, when they arrived. Applied a calcium mixture to the elaborate faucets of the drinking fountains and pointed out the chalky mess. I know just the trick to clean them, I explained. But it means I will have to stay late tonight. Again. I don't mind.

I would work through the day and into the evening. Wait until the Hall had gone quiet of voices, pack up. Walk the dark corridors.

I learned the edge of her bottom set of teeth when her mouth was open. Once she had a hangnail on her left thumb. Her bottom lip chapped and a small crack opened at its center. The natural part in her hair was crooked.

I had to take the garnets out of the necklace so I could solder the new pieces to it and not damage the stones with the torch. I would re-set them later. I watched the metal light and bloom red as I fired it, for it would tell me when it was a moment away from melting. Under fire metal comes to life. It moves. When you apply a flame to solder it will flow wherever there is an opening, even coursing upward, against gravity. You call this capillary action—like blood, like the beating of your heart.

We touched the glass. I feared the smudges at first—I've spent hours buffing my own fingerprints from surfaces of copper and silver. But she would put her palms to the window and I couldn't stop myself from laying mine over them. Our hands were the same size.

She frowned whenever she saw that I had cut myself. I wondered if she were close, would she smell the metallic scent of my skin, my fingers stained as they always were with my work. What would she say?

I used my sleeves on the glass. I rubbed away the traces of my hands. No one at the Hall said anything. When I worked with other technicians or passed them in the corridors they smiled and nodded and we commented on the progress

of the restoration, and that was all. I had not seen Mr. Percy again. So it seemed she and I were safe.

There were back ways into other exhibit rooms. I had been through them. So each day as I wound my way through the Hall I tried new, closed doors as discreetly as possible. Most didn't open but I didn't dare to take the time to pick the lock, not when I could get caught with no definite reward on the other side. A few times a knob did yield and a technician, dazed with concentration, would look up from their stitching or typesetting or line of glue at me and I would apologize and say, "Wrong door." Not a total lie.

None opened into a way to her.

I wasn't altogether sure what I wanted with a door. All I knew of her was through the glass and when I tried to picture more than that, I couldn't. As much as I wanted an answer, maybe I also trusted things the way they were.

We played a game. We would hold the glass between our hands, and it would warm with the heat of our two touches. We would break away. She would lean down and breathe on the spot and if we had warmed the glass enough it wouldn't fog. That was how we won.

Then one night she laid her cheek against the glass instead and I held that. Then she turned and used one shoulder, barely covered by the thin strap of her shift. I put my palm over her there, too. In the nights after we used her arms, the

flats of her feet, the plains of the sides of her thighs. I had no idea what she felt like but I knew how my hand looked against the backdrop of so much of her body.

My position at the Hall would end. I wanted to ask her a hundred questions about what would happen next. I wanted her to speak, to tell me that whatever else would change, she would always be where I could find her.

But she couldn't, or didn't. She laid the smooth back of her neck to the glass and I held it, warm.

Ten days before the Grand Reopening, an order, handwritten in the most refined curls, appeared at my studio.

Could you please have the necklace for exhibit One-Eight-Eight finished in three days' time? It is of dire importance. Thank you so much.

It was signed by Mr. Percy.

Twice that day, I hammered my own thumb, and sliced into my hand with the tiny teeth of my jeweler's saw. Was Mr. Percy displeased with me? Had I failed?

That night she and I lost at our game, the only time. She lifted up the front of her shift so I could hold her by the belly. On her abdomen was a small knot, sunken in like a rosebud grown backward. When I saw it I realized that within the shade and beauty of the Hall, within our long hours together, I had forgotten that she was so real. I couldn't bring myself to touch her there, through the glass, to put my hand over the wound of her navel.

I worked all through the next day and so late into the night that by the time I got to her she had fallen asleep on the floor at the glass, looking like a flower someone had dropped. But I had finished the necklace, a day earlier than Mr. Percy had asked for it.

Then I gave the necklace to him and everything changed again.

Eight days to the Grand Reopening. When I handed it to him Mr. Percy gathered the necklace from its box—I had cleaned and sealed the box’s silver latch as well—and held it to the light. The metal flared as he turned it, the links slipping like liquid over his fingers.

“Magnificent!” he exclaimed. “You are genius. It will be unsurpassable!”

I felt something I had not anticipated in all my ambition to perfect the necklace for her, to perform my work well for the Hall: the sight of the necklace in Mr. Percy’s hand was unbearable.

I swallowed and it felt like broken glass. “When will she get it?” I asked. I hoped this would tell me the real things I wanted to know. Who would give it to her, and how? But I didn’t dare ask. Was there was a way to get in to where she was? Or had I been tricked deeply, and she could come out?

Mr. Percy snapped closed the lid of the box and it disappeared into his jacket over his heart. “Tomorrow. No! The day after. The technicians will be finishing the exhibit then.”

“Finishing it?”

He had yanked the watch from his pocket and made his sound of surprise at the time. “Yes yes! Most exciting. Do come see it for yourself. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

He began to hurry away but turned back a moment. “And my dear,” he smiled at me. “Your efforts have not gone unnoticed. Thank you for serving us so well.”

When I returned to my studio at the end of day, a bundle of tissue paper sat on my workbench. Folded neatly into the paper was a contract extending my position indefinitely and a green jacket in my size. The embroidery across the breast read: “Metals Technician.”

That night she put her hand against the glass. I traced the veins in her palm, memorizing them like a route I needed to take. She put her arm to the glass and I began to trace that, too.

She sat up. That strange element lit her eyes and she grabbed the bottom of her shift purposefully. There were bees in my chest, my breath was honey and I couldn’t push it in or out of my lungs. She pulled upward on her shift and out she came like being born from her own cotton collar. The skin of her bare body flared behind the glass. She lay herself against it. I pressed my hands to her, trying to lay them everywhere. I did not have enough.

We kissed goodbye through the glass. I left the smudge of my lips on her window and didn’t polish it away.

The next day I didn't go to my studio to find whatever order had been left for me. I went straight to exhibit One Eighty-Eight.

The room hummed with activity, technicians swarming about in the dark. She was there, behind the glass. And in her little room, with her, were two people. Other people were in the room with her.

My knees went liquid. There was always a way in, hidden by the illusions of her habitat and kept locked by one of the Hall's countless keys. All that time there was a door, there was a door, nothing between us but a knob or hinge whose feeble mechanisms I could have crafted myself.

She stood on a small stool between the two technicians, their fingers busy on her. Her hair had been combed so not a tangle remained and pulled half up so her forehead, eyes, her ears and every angle of bone beneath her skin were on full display. Her dress was different—still simple but tighter, longer, and a light blue that set her hair on fire, a trick of the light. Her collarbones spread from its low neckline like wings as if they wanted to escape.

And around her neck was the necklace I had prepared, the metal surely warming on her skin, the garnets glistening in her throat like a fresh bite.

A hand struck my back and I jumped. Mr. Percy. He smiled, his face alight with the glow of her lamps through the window. "Dearest! Here you are! What do you think of your work?"

"What's happening?" Who else could get in there with her? Would? And how?

“We’re finishing the exhibit. Most exciting.”

I might as well have not been able to hear him at all. He couldn’t tell me anything I needed to know because I couldn’t ask. I was afraid of losing any of my ways to her. My mind raced. I made plans in my head, went over every angle and line I could think of. Sketched a route to what I needed to know.

His favorite, he had said, weeks before. Innovative. That was it.

“What are the other exhibits, like this?” I asked. I held my voice steady. Only curiosity on my face.

“Like this? Nothing compares! But there are the woodland animals, and the reptiles—”

I remembered the creatures on their parade through the corridors, the way they stared at me through the glass.

I moved precisely. A certain kind of patience. “Which exhibit are the reptiles? I’ve been wanting to see them.”

“Yes! Please do. They are exquisite. Number seventy-six. No! Ninety-six.”

“I’ll be sure to. But for now I should return to my work. Always more to do, right?” Mr. Percy was looking at me so I didn’t look at her.

“And only a week left! Do come back and see the finished exhibit here. It will be wonderful.”

I smiled at Mr. Percy. “Thank you,” I said. “I will be back.”

I waited in my studio. Studied the map multiple times. The Hall went quiet and still I waited, longer than I usually did. I filed a whole length of copper wire down to powder just to pass the time. To keep steady.

Finally I walked into the familiar, still dark of the empty Hall. I found exhibit Ninety-Six.

The room was full of the otherworldly darkness favored by the Hall. Tanks gleamed in the walls and rose from the floor like islands. Lamps illuminated the creatures who bathed in their heat, for in the privacy of the nighttime they had all come out to lounge in the open. Their skin glittered in the light. Across the room I saw, in a tank taller than the rest, the boa constrictor looped over a branch, watching me come in.

Not even a cricket sang. I peered into the tanks hoping for a clue.

A sleek salamander posed on his pond stones in a tank next to one that housed a toad big as a fist—so it was reptiles and amphibians. The toad stared at me with calm eyes. He didn't startle away, and I moved closer. He was beautiful, squatting in his perfect toad's pose. He stared at me as I stared at him. He didn't blink. His throat didn't bubble and then flatten out the way a toad's throat does when it breathes.

A multitude of tiny icy fingers danced up my back. The toad was not alive.

The salamander was not alive. The boa constrictor was only a massive, still muscle. Every animal in the room was dead but kept. Like the butterflies. Like the parrots whose cries I had never heard again. They were beautiful and always would be. The Hall had seen to that.

I went to her, running, losing my way in corridor after winding corridor and orienting myself when I passed a room I recognized. Finally, I knew the route. As I got closer to room One Eighty-Eight I could hear that the walls humming, a noise that grew louder as I reached the entranceway.

I should not have waited so long. Behind the glass the vents near the ceiling were pulled open, exhaling insistently. A tide of frost crawled over the window from the edges inward; I wouldn't have enough blood in all of my touch to warm it back up. The air in her habitat was being frozen. A layer of iciness gathered along the edges of the plants, in the folds of the roses on the vanity, all of which remained lush and colorful against the cold. Already preserved.

And there, the way a trapped bird will struggle against a window toward the sky, she had wilted against the glass, lying on it by one cheek, by one hand pressing as if she would push it away if only she weren't so tired. There was no one else in the exhibit room, or in her little room. She was all alone.

I went to her. I put both hands to the glass. It was so cold it burned. My skin stuck and I had to tug it free. She looked at me, but the light in her eyes had gone out. Little ethereal clouds glided out over her bottom lip as it shivered on her teeth, its edge gone blue.

Already I could see the transformation beginning. Her skin had snowed impossibly white, creating the cleanest canvas for her spill of copper hair, the flecks of her long eyelashes, the sparkle of the necklace clutching at her throat. The delicate material and simple lines of her dress took the shape of her body as she wilted into lines effortless as a breath.

Mr. Percy was right, I realized. The Hall in its vision was right. She was perfect, she was better than her original and suspended there. It was unsurpassable beauty, that moment of capture and preservation. I hungered to see her finished and ideal. To keep her. To keep.

It was too much. I turned my back on her. I didn't think about her face, what it must have looked like as she watched me leave.

I ran as fast as I could. I slid on the marble floors whenever I turned a corner. Made up time when I hit carpet. I knew the route well, the rooms blurring into one long, flickering shadow as I passed.

It was only when I got to my studio that I stopped, long enough to unlock the door. Once inside I had to think for a moment. But that is all. I grabbed a hammer and the punch with the smallest tip.

By the time I returned she had fallen still. The vents droned and the exhibit room itself was growing cold. I positioned myself just close enough to the glass and just far enough away. The handle of the hammer was sure in my grip, its iron head solid at my side. I touched the punch to the glass with my other hand, held it firm, and swung the hammer back.

I have good aim.

Upon the strike the glass, the pressurized winter air, all the sound these things contain, burst outward around the punch's tip like a bubble breaking. The frozen air hit me like a solid thing. I dropped the tools just in time to catch her as she fell forward, closing my eyes against the blizzard of glass shards. The shock of her icy body bit into my hands and arms. We tumbled back.

A mechanical scream wailed—an alarm Then human voices shouting. Of course someone had been supervising the process from somewhere in the back, in one of the many rooms within the rooms of the Hall.

I tried to sit up. A pain in my wrist, a piece of glass stuck in. I tugged it out as I turned. She was lying beside me, half in my arms and half on the ground. Her hair had fallen loose and her dress was torn at the waist. Cuts marked her shoulders. A delicate line of blood dripped over the freckle on her cheek. The necklace was gone, lost to the mess of glass.

Her chest started. Her eyes opened, quick as razors on mine. I don't know who followed and who led as we ran from the room.

The night is full of the sounds of dogs. I do not know if they are The Hall's and if they are, where they have been slumbering all this time, waiting to chase. The human voices also followed as we fled and flashlight beams struck the dark like snakes. But we have run far, into the nature that surrounds the building of the Hall. Everything is black: the grass under our feet, the arms of the trees we hurry into.

We stop only when we are under cover, thicket tall around us and rustling softly in the wind. Finally I can turn back. The lights of The Hall of Exhibits are tiny and appear minor now, as much a threat as the stars overhead.

I hear her beside me. I look.

She looks back at me. Her hair soaks up the darkness around her leaving only the white of her forehead flaming like moonlight. It is our only illumination.

The wind pushes on my back like insistent hands, there is somewhere it wants me to go. I do not usually tremble but in the light of her face I am trembling.

The truth is, now that she is beside me I don't know what to do about her. I wish she was back behind glass where I am safe. Her skin and bones are so very white—she is more human than I had counted on. When she breathes I feel it pull on me, me out of myself. We are alone in the dark together. This is a dangerous night.

I do the only thing I can and slip one of my fingers around one of hers. Her skin is so soft against mine it hurts. I can feel it: heat. Already, she is warming herself back to life through processes I can only begin to imagine, happening deeply inside of the mystery of her.

Her lips part and she draws a breath. She is about to speak.

READY, AIM

Jane was five when she swallowed the bullet. She found the small paper box in her mother's bedroom, tucked into a dresser drawer. Box opened, she saw the bullets were golden and with their rounded tips looked like tiny eggs. Jane wondered what might hatch out of them.

She swam her fingers through the bullets, listening to the tinkling sound they made. She sniffed at them—they smelled like summer, the afternoons when the clouds turned black and grumbled. Jane liked storms, the noise as if the sky itself was exploding, the way the rain and the dark made everything smell different. Like metal, like electric.

Jane wanted to know what that tasted like.

She pinched one bullet from the jumble and popped it into her mouth easy as candy. The bullet tasted sharp and lay heavy on her tongue. She rolled it smooth against the roof of her mouth and clacked it against her teeth. The bullet slid back in her mouth. Her throat clenched, her throat made a little gulping sound.

And just like that, the bullet disappeared into Jane, and that was the beginning.

I.

Rose always began the story of Jane's conception by blaming it on the presence of some natural catastrophe or another. "A huge wildfire was eating up the hills. Could anyone have helped themselves with the air so hot?" Or, "There

was that earthquake. Shook us all up so none of us knew who we were for a few days.” Or, “He just looked so good in a tucked-in shirt, and you know what they say about tornadoes.”

The middle of the story stayed the same. “When he walked into the diner I nearly dropped the tray I was carrying. Could have dumped milkshake and patty melt all over the lap of a regular—he would have tipped me anyway. I was that kind of pretty.” Rose was no goody-goody, she would claim, but she didn’t make a habit of following strangers to their hotel rooms and waving goodbye to their Greyhounds the next morning. So it had to be the flash flood they’d just endured, she said, enough to catch a girl in an unnatural tide.

But Rose never told it as if the baby herself was a disaster. By Rose’s witness, Jane was the new green growth that sprouts from the clean of ashes, the calm after her mother’s storm.

Until. When Rose found the disturbed box of bullets she questioned the obvious suspect. Jane began to hiccup on tears as she confessed to having swallowed one that very morning.

Rose called her friend the Doctor. Doc had been Jane’s physician since she was no bigger than a jellybean. He was to be her physician now in her hour of uncertainty.

“Of course I keep a gun in the house,” Rose pleaded into the phone. “I’m a woman living alone with a small child! It’s only safe. I never keep it loaded.”

“Oh, children swallow things all the time,” Doc’s voice said. “They poop out quarters and throw up marbles. Little gumball machines, their bodies. Quite

extraordinary. Just check anything that comes out of her for the next couple of days. But Rose,” he added. Did he sound suddenly ominous? “If you don’t find the bullet, bring her to my office.”

For two days Rose did the dutiful work of combing through her daughter’s child-sized deposits. She felt along her throat for lumps. Nothing. The bullet seemed to be staying in Jane.

Doc ran an ad the size of a Tarot card in the phone book. “Guaranteed to greet you with an open mind,” the copy read. “Bring me your medical mysteries and unbelievable cases. I’m curious!”

Rose had found the ad when she was an unmarried twenty years old and pregnant. Four other physicians had one-by-one dared to chastise her—she walked from their offices with her hands on her belly and her nose in the air. She would not be treated so. What was her crime?

But when Rose told Doc her situation, he smiled and flipped open the exam table’s clanking metal stirrups. “Well pony up then, milady, and let’s see how it’s cooking!” Against the music of her crinkling paper gown he had serenaded her about the devil-quick speeds of conception. A man can ejaculate at thirty miles per hour. The ovary fires the egg like a cannon from its wall. Make the noise with your mouth. “Ptchoo!” Amazing isn’t it? And all of it without our bidding, natural as anything.

If Doc’s ad had been a personal, it would have read: **SMALL TIME
GENERAL PRACTITIONER’S OFFICE SEEKS PATIENTS. ME: PRIVATE**

MD WITH RESPECTABLE AND CERTIFIED EDUCATION, LAUGHED OUT OF MEDICAL CONFERENCES FOR TELLING TALL TALES ABOUT THE BODY, BELIEVES SEEING IS BELIEVING BECAUSE I'VE SEEN IT ALL. YOU: GROWING A FOUR-LEAF CLOVER FROM THE DIRT IN YOUR EAR. OR: ATHIEST WHO SUDDENLY SPEAKS IN TONGUES. OR: UNWED MOTHER WHO ASSUMES THAT IF THE WORLD ACTS LIKE YOU SHOULDN'T BE PREGNANT, IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE A WALKING MIRACLE. INTERESTED?

Doc pressed his fingers into Jane's belly, her back, and under her armpits while she squealed as though it were a tickling game gone on too long. He tested her reflexes and shined a light into her throat. Finally he sent her with a nurse to be x-rayed and led Rose to his office. Poured her a cup of tea. Left to view the x-rays. Returned.

Rose wanted an answer. "Well?"

"It's as I thought," Doc said. "Since she hasn't passed it in the normal way already, I don't believe she will. Now, the bullet is simply there."

"*There?* So it will just stay in her body?"

"It could. Anything's possible. But I don't think so." Doc wheeled close. "Do you know what happens when someone is stuck by a piece of fiberglass, Rosie? The glass stays in the body for years, hibernates in the tissues and bloodstreams, drifting. Then, one day, it emerges when it's good and ready. Most marvelously, there's no telling *where* it will come out. The original site of entry

may have been the hand or foot, and lo, the glass piece will pop out of the tongue. Somewhere the tissue is soft, you see. I once had a patient who feared she was crying diamonds, but it was only glass issuing from her tear ducts. Turns out she used to play in the insulation in her grandmother's attic. It had been years!"

"Sweet Jesus. Did she go blind?"

"Not at all! The body accepts. Makes a choice to take in. The patient is fine."

Rose eyed Doc. "So this will blow over, just like that."

Doc glanced dramatically into the hallway. There were the murmuring voices of nurses and the distant squeaks of Jane playing with the receptionist. He got up to close the door and drew the shade over the window, lighting the room like a campfire circle. Doc put on a campfire voice. "I want to tell you a story, Rose."

Rose sat forward to listen.

"Jane is not my first swallowed bullet. I had heard of others, collected accounts—enthraling subject—and then years ago, I got my own case. The patient was horsing around with friends on a hunting trip and took a dare. Swallowed a bullet like a pill. It was fine for years and then, one day, he sneezed."

"What happened?"

"The bullet had been resting in his soft palate, and the force of the sneeze fired it."

"*Fired* it?"

“Like a shot, Rosie. Have I told you about the speeds of the human body?”

“Yes.”

“Well a synapse races its signal at 225 miles per hour. The record distance for spitting a watermelon seed is sixty-eight feet. A sneeze comes out at over 150 miles per hour. That’s hurricane speed! Imagine the spasm required.”

Rose saw everything she loved most in the world blown to smithereens.

“What happened to the patient?”

Doc placed a hand over hers. “He was fine—the body accepts—but. His brother was standing close by, and the bullet hit *him* in the shoulder, maiming him for life. Pure luck that it missed a major organ. Who knows how the story may have ended then?”

“And this will happen with Jane.” Rose said it like a guilty verdict.

Doc squinted across the room and into the future. “Most likely as she grows, so will the risk. Her muscles will develop and become adept at the type of mechanics needed to launch the bullet. It would be fascinating to see what could cause the ejection, don’t you think?”

“Doc! This is my daughter.”

“But we won’t try for it, of course. She can live a perfectly normal life, so long as she’s careful. Use common sense. What could cause her to go off? It will just take some care. We’ll proceed the way we always do, really—make it up as we go along.”

“I see,” said Rose. What she saw: a lifetime of stifling for her daughter, of suppressing sneezes, coughs, belly laughs, sports, tight clothes, her own heartbeat—for who would want to love a walking weapon?

Rose kept Jane away from spicy and gas-inducing foods. She measured out perfectly tepid baths for her, not too hot, not too cold (didn't icicles launch like projectiles from their frozen eaves?). On Halloween a grease-painted, tiara-sporting Jane could not go through the neighbors' garage haunted houses—she couldn't chance a startle. On the Fourth of July, Rose and Jane watched the fireworks from a great distance, where the noise and chance of renegade sparks were less and Rose the only potential victim. She couldn't ask other people to risk themselves, but more than other people, she worried about Jane: innocent Jane with blood on her hands. At night she had dreams about seeing her daughter's tooth-missing smile on a “Wanted” ad, a reward over her head and a description of her remarkable crime below her chin. One such night, tortured by these visions, Rose woke at the sound of a loud crack that tore through the quiet house. She flew up in her bed. Past the blood pounding in her ears she heard a rumble. Thunder tapering off. It was only a storm.

But the bad dream had left its fog and Rose needed to look at her child, to sit on the edge of her mattress and touch her little arms as she slept. She padded across the dark hallway to Jane's room where she found nothing on Jane's bed but a dent where her body had been.

Jane was on the back porch wrapped in a blanket, her face turned to the black weeping sky. Her eyes were wide and mirrored a sudden flash of lightning. A moment later, the clap ripped open the air and Rose, in the doorway, jumped. Jane didn't flinch.

“What are you doing, darling?” Rose asked.

Jane's chest puffed and fell beneath her nightgown—could a six year-old sigh with contentment? “This is my favorite thing,” she said.

“Doesn't it scare you? It's so loud.”

Jane turned to look at her mother, her small frame slumping. Face falling. “Oh. Does that mean I have to go inside now?”

Rose felt a seismic shift in her gut. “No, honey. You can do anything you want.” The part she didn't say was, I'll make damn sure of it.

She called Doc in the morning. Didn't he think thunderstorms could unsort a body? Surely electrical fields could change someone's chemistry, the functioning of their muscles or synapses or whatever.

“My my, Rose, someone's been hitting the biology books.”

“I don't need your lip. I need your professional opinion.”

“Sure a storm could interfere with a body. Barometric pressures, that sort of thing. More babies are born during the full moon, did you know that? Pulls them out like they're a tide. Just think of what some electricity in the air can do! I had a patient who was hit by lightning while he was drunk as a skunk. The charge mixed with the alcohol just so. He was fine except for the glowing. You could read by the light of his skin for years! Finally wore off, of course.”

Rose smiled into the telephone. What she needed to protect her daughter was a science. She would begin her own testing. She started a list in her mind:

Things Jane Can Do Without a Hitch

- 1) Stand thunderstorms.

Rose reported her findings to a delighted Doc whenever they had tea. Jane sneezed all the time and nothing happened. Check. She could touch the refrigerator magnets without incident. Check. Laugh until milk squirted out of her nose. She fell off the monkey bars at the playground, and merely scraped a knee. Rose made her daughter's baths hotter. She bought cookbooks and made dinners from places that worshipped peppers—Santa Fe, Mexico, the Bayou. The only side effects were heartburn and a tablecloth stained with ranchero. Check check.

Rose grew more confident by the day. It was time for a real experiment. A carnival came to town and Rose wrapped her daughter in a sweater and took her to it. They went on a roller coaster, through a fun house, on the bumper cars; they ate second and third dinners of corn dogs, popcorn, and fizzy, bubbling soda. Around them the carnival chimed and shrieked and buzzed and roared. Lights flashed, people bumped. Rose watched her daughter not pop or kill anyone. Jane beamed. Her teeth shined and her eyes were hungry. She looked a little dangerous.

“Why are you smiling so big?” Rose asked, swooning at her daughter's face.

“I love the sounds!” Jane shouted, hopping into the air. Rose bought a huge canvas tote bag: they needed something to carry the harvest of sawdust-filled animals Jane collected pitching ping-pong balls into cups and busting balloons with darts. Her aim was impeccable.

Jane turned thirteen, then fourteen. The girl had hair that was golden but always frayed out a little at the ends, as if the strands were split and floating on currents of self-generated static. Her eyes moved slow like a big cat’s and caught too much light. They glittered. When Jane began to wear metal around her neck and looped through her ears and cuffing her wrists, Rose asked why.

“Because I want to smell like lightning,” Jane said, her face church-solemn. Rose filled her next Christmas stocking with silver bangles.

One night Jane went to bed with a boy’s skinny body beneath her pajamas and the next morning emerged in the kitchen with an hourglass waist and an apple-shaped rump tucked into her jeans. Rose saw it and nearly dropped her coffee cup.

She took to shaking her head whenever she looked at her daughter. Jane’s lips got pink. Rose remembered a moment in a diner when her heart snapped like a whip in her chest from one look at a stranger. Jane’s voice stretched, yawned, and decided to stay deeply languid. Rose recalled a night in a darkened hotel room when her own breath had grown so big for her chest, her body so hot for her own skin, she could have killed someone. Jane turned fifteen, then sixteen.

Even after years of study, Rose couldn't be sure of what the trigger would be. But she had a hunch. She wondered who the poor, doomed fool would be.

II.

Whippet was a stunt boy.

He had the scars to prove it: the ridges of old wounds on his hands and forearms, a permanent bump on his head under his permanently messy hair, a chipped tooth that turned his smile rakish as a tilted hat. Howdy ma'am, his tooth seemed to say.

All the boys who worked the show at Bill's had names like Cody and McCoy and Scout. They signed autographs for the kids and tourists after curtain call and couldn't admit to being things like "Tim" or "Richard" or, in Whippet's dreadful case, "Walter." So when he got the stunt job Whippet did as they all did: adopted a name and then found it to be truer than the one his mother had given him, for his mother hadn't intended for him to make his living wearing chaps and falling off plywood buildings. Yet there he was.

To hear Whippet tell it, the stunt boy life was his call from destiny. "I'd known since I was small that I wanted, more than anything, to live the daring life of a cowboy. Couldn't have been more than four years old when I saw my first Western, an old spaghetti deal on television. I was hooked. Wore my toy hat and spurs to kindergarten. I learned to read so I could follow cowboy comics, saved my allowance quarters so I could buy paperbacks and see all the new movies."

The part Whippet didn't always tell because oftentimes it seemed too corny, or like opening his chest to give a look at his beating heart, was the *reason* he wanted to live a cowboy tale. Those stories taught Whippet about the kind of man he wanted to be. The gods of the Old West lived in the constant threat of danger, and it seemed they lived more gloriously for it. The great villains were killed running for their freedom or holding a winning hand of poker; the great heroes died defending honor or the lives of others. All had fingers and noses shot off and took it easy as losing a sock in the laundry. Whippet longed to number in their ranks—at least in fearlessness. He didn't mind keeping his nose where it was.

But the world had tamed. The West had been won and there wasn't much wild left to go around. So Whippet got good at looking for it. He was the neighborhood boy to grab cats out of trees and spelunk dropped wedding rings from storm drains. He taught himself to ride motorbikes and hop trains. He took road trips with friends to jump from fifty-foot rocks into lakes. So when he saw the flyer for Bill's, his skin prickled with premonition.

The flyer read: BUFFALO BILL'S WILD WEST DINNER SHOW
SPECTACULAR! COME HUNGRY! A MOUTHWATERING FIVE COURSE
FEAST STARRING OUR WORLD FAMOUS FRIED CHICKEN. BE
THRILLED AND ENTERTAINED! A CLASSIC ADVENTURE
MELODRAMA PLAYED LIVE AS YOU DINE! MAGNIFICENT STAGE
COMPLETE WITH A TRUE-TO-LIFE WESTERN STREET FRONT. WE'VE
GOT TALENTED PERFORMERS! DEATH DEFYING STUNTS! LIVE

HORSES! DANCE NUMBERS! EVEN A TRUE LOVE TALE WITH A TEAR-JERKING WEDDING. SO GET ALONG YOUR LITTLE DOGIES! COME DOWN TO BUFFALO BILL'S DINNER SHOW SPECTACULAR FOR THE WILDEST NIGHT IN THE WEST!

Whippet had been at Bill's for two years when the new girl made him miss his entrance. He heard from the other boys, who were jealous and intrigued, that she was to be his prop master. Whippet was playing a robber that particular night and had a black mask tied around his eyes. While getting himself into Great Villain mode, the new girl appeared alongside him in the wings. They stood in the dark but for the stage lights that bathed everything in rock star magenta. Whippet looked and saw her shaggy, fire-hued hair and sparking eyes. Silver flashing in her ears. Whippet turned nervous. The girl was dynamite. If he touched her she would detonate and leave him with a hole for a hand and a stump for a heart.

"What's your name?" he whispered.

"You're on," she whispered back.

"Great, for when?" He thought she meant a date and flashed his tooth at her.

She shoved his bag of gold at him. "No, onstage. You missed your cue."

Soon Whippet learned her name, and that she was twenty-two years old to his twenty-four, and that she could throw darts better than anyone he had ever met. The cast and crew would go out after the show and Jane's aim was the

sharpest in the bar: bull's eye every time. Whenever the dart hit its mark with its solid "thwack" she would blow her bangs out of her eyes like smoke off a barrel—the finishing touch, the duel done. Every time he watched her do it, Whippet could feel his heart drop deeper into his pelvis. Jane made him worry that his pelvis might be bottomless.

He strode up and stood next to her one night as she tossed another bull's eye at the board. He heard the hit, watched her pucker her lips and blow. He shook his head at the dart planted in its mark. "Girl, I'd hate to see what you could do with a gun."

Jane cocked an eyebrow at him. "Depends on who's standing on the other end."

Whippet laughed. Jane's face was serious. He could feel her eyes on his body moving slowly, up and down and up again. "How *do* you feel about guns?" she asked.

He slid his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. Whippet thought of men afraid of nothing, sauntering into the street to stare down evil in a black hat. "Well. Having a gun is like being Zeus, I'd say. Throwing lightning from your hands." He saw Jane's chest fill fast as a bullfrog's throat when it spots a mate. He asked if he could take her out. She said yes.

They met at the cineplex and saw a movie. Though Jane seemed to have a good time, Whippet noticed that when he tried to hold her hand she went white in the face and needed to dig through her purse. On date two, Whippet picked Jane

up at her home and met Rose, who had her daughter's prettiness and way of eyeing him like he held something from her behind his back.

"You be careful with her," Rose called as Whippet escorted Jane out the front door. "I don't want anyone getting hurt."

"Don't worry, ma'am. She'll be safe," Whippet called through the slamming screen. He couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard Rose say, "I meant you, dummy." They went to a music show, and when Whippet tried to slide his arm around Jane's waist he could feel her stiffen. She excused herself to the bar for a glass of water.

On date three, as Jane finished getting ready in her room Whippet had to face Rose again. Alone. They sat on opposite ends of the couch. Rose idly dipped into a bowl and snapped pistachios from their shells with her teeth, regarding Whippet as she chewed the nuts, slowly. He shifted. Shifted again. Finally, Rose spoke. "So this seems to be getting serious."

"I don't know about that ma'am. Truth be told, I'm starting to think she doesn't like me much."

Rose sighed and scooted over on the couch. She took Whippet's hand in her own. Her touch was warmer and softer than he expected. "I'm going to tell you a story. I don't want you to get hurt, but I really don't want her to become attached if you'll just leave her over it. So...."

Whippet took Jane to a diner that night where, snug in a booth over fries and soda, he confessed that he had learned of her bullet.

Jane knitted her brows at him. “What do you think?”

“Well, I’m mostly curious what it’s been like. To be you, I mean.”

“You really want to know? I’ll tell you, things I never told anyone.”

Whippet sat forward to listen.

She was a bit of a late bloomer, Jane told. The first time it happened she was fifteen and its name was Rick Clifton. “We were outside school one afternoon, sitting on a wall waiting for the bus, and he held my hand. It was the first time I had ever felt that kind of touch, when you can feel how hot someone’s hand is and the way their skin slides over and sticks to your own. My heart started rushing like the wind. I loved it, the way I felt right then, the best kind of sick—like my body wasn’t even mine anymore. Like I had no control over it. That’s when I realized, and I had to jerk my hand away. I knew that out of anything, that feeling could be the trigger. I tried to forget about it. Then when I was sixteen, it was my first kiss with Kevin Hough, and the same thing happened. When I was eighteen, it was Terry Watson kissing my neck in the back of his car, and I stopped that too and then—nothing. I don’t want anything to happen so I make sure *nothing* happens.”

“But you don’t know for sure what the trigger’s gonna be?” Whippet asked.

“No one does,” Jane shrugged. “It’s a one-shot deal.” What were the contenders? Stress, surprise, pain, pleasure, force, fluke—anything that could make muscles clench and release in a burst. Who could tell? she turned her slow eyes on him. Even he could be the trigger.

Whippet looked at the girl across the table from him. He felt his stomach make a free-fall from the tallest mock-up building he'd ever stood upon. Jane was marvelous. She was the trick or treat apple with a razor blade in the middle. Take a nice big bite, her body said. See what happens.

Whippet skipped Jane's hands. He leaned across the table and kissed her harder and lovelier than he had ever kissed anyone. She kissed him back. No one got shot.

They spent the next few evenings at work sliding their hands up each other's wrists. They snuck morsels from each other's necks and chins and earlobes every time they chanced to meet in a shadow. Whippet felt his breath lassoed, tied tight and tangled. Jane was too much of a risk not to take. He brought her to his apartment and laid her down on his bachelor's single mattress. He kissed her mouth and blew her bangs out of her eyes. The duel done, the victor decided. He opened his shirt and gave his chest as a target.

They undressed in a quickdraw of belts and zippers and snapping elastics. Whippet trembled over her like a dam about to burst. There was nothing between Jane's bullet and his skin but her skin, which was, he was pretty certain, not interested in saving him. "Are you sure?" Jane asked into his eyebrows as she kissed them. "I have to make sure you're sure. I don't know what can happen."

But all Whippet could think about was the feel of the woman pressed to him with her heart tapping through to his. Whippet reached a hand down between them to touch Jane where she felt like the pelt of a hot peach. He watched her muscles all over begin to tighten. He kept his fingers moving. He could hear her

breath click in her throat. He kept moving. He oiled her so the small of her back broke out in a slick. He cocked her hips into firing position. Whippet looked his death in the face pointblank, and she wore a furrowed brow and a drowning open mouth. When her body bucked as hard as it could and everything in her went off, Whippet just shut his eyes and felt her move like that—if it was the last thing he would ever feel, so be it and he would die a damn happy man.

He woke in the morning, his body in one piece and his heart shattered into many. Jane slept beside him, her body purring like a resting machine.

A year passed. Bill's promoted Jane to stage manager, and Whippet starred in their new commercial, squinting into the camera like a battle-weary hero. He found a bigger apartment and Jane moved in.

Every time they made love Whippet had no idea what parts of him might get shot off or from where. Going down on her was like playing Russian roulette. Entering her was like feeding himself into a sleeping crocodile.

At work, dodging fire plumes and dropping into water tanks got easy as yawning. It was hard to work up a rush over a twenty-foot fall onto a mattress when your girlfriend could kill you by stubbing her toe. When they argued and Jane got mad enough to yell and stomp, Whippet would turn his back to her and put his arms up in surrender, waiting, making his point. All that he risked for her every day.

“Don't be so damn dramatic,” Jane would shout, “or I'll call your bluff and do it.”

“Oh yeah?” A martyr’s serenity on his face.

“Yeah, and I’ll laugh.”

Another year went by. Whippet trimmed Jane’s bangs when she needed it and she made dinner on the rare nights they were both off, picante so peppery it cleaned Whippet’s nose out up to his ears. He got a tattoo for Jane’s birthday: her name on his trigger finger.

Time was a bomb and Whippet and Jane were wired to it, tick tock. Their bodies aimed at each other and fired their canons. Both sides took a hit with one big casualty. Jane was pregnant.

III.

“What if she hiccups and fires and hits the fetus?” Rose whispered to Doc on the telephone. “Or what if the baby is born with the bullet lodged inside of *it*?”

“A congenital bullet,” Doc murmured in awe, hearing the beginnings of a story.

“Doctor! This is my grandchild!”

“Rosie, my dear, it’s just an adventure. It’s always an adventure.”

Whippet bought a build-a-crib kit and, while assembling it, gave himself a new scar on his wrist. Rogue flip of the screwdriver, he proudly said when he flashed it—the girl’s having a baby, you know, someone’s gonna get hurt. Bill’s hired a temp stage manager and closed one evening to throw their favorite mascot couple a shower. Rose made a visit to the apartment every day, carting in grocery

bags of popcorn and Dr. Pepper and the makings of chili dogs. No surprise to her that her daughter was craving carnival food.

It was summer. Jane watched the horizon for storms.

Her body got hard. The muscles in her back cemented. Her belly was round and tough as nails.

“How do you feel?” Whippet asked as they lay in bed, listening to the snare drum of Jane’s blood coursing through her.

“Like I’m twice of me,” Jane answered. “Like a rain cloud getting fat.” She would run her fingers through her hair, and when she touched Whippet, the contact would snap with a spark.

August. There were still no storms. The sky had dried up and taken the earth with it: every plant from here to the edge of the earth was baked golden as a potato chip. A wildfire busted out. While the evening news worried about containment and acres, Whippet and Jane and her belly spent the nights on their balcony watching the black hills smile a devilish orange.

The smoke reached the neighborhoods. People complained of ash on their windshields and in their coughs. The air was not a kind for heavy breathing. As Jane breathed she got in a prowling mood. She had to walk constantly, which suited Whippet fine. When she was still it seemed like she would burst from the pressure of holding something back. Her breath ticked in her nose, her eyes were alight and pulled up the corners of her mouth like the curls of burning paper. So Whippet walked with Jane everywhere, through the mall and the Arts District, around the block thirty times, all over the farmer’s market that stood stoic even in

the barbequed morning of the wildfire which is where they were, smack in the middle of the radishes and hot peppers, when Jane took a particularly big breath of singed air and screamed, doubling over.

“I think I’ve been hit!” she sobbed, her white faced turned up to Whippet. “It hurts!”

Cooing strangers rushed to hold Jane’s elbows. Whippet checked her body all over; there was no blood, but someone had busted a levee at his love’s feet. He felt a rush like nothing he had ever felt before. “No girl, it’s just time. Let’s go see Doc!”

But someone had called an ambulance and before they knew it, Jane and Whippet had been whisked to an actual hospital. All Whippet could do was hurry one phone call to Rose before he and Jane were gowned and gussied, set up in a bed with pressed sheets between walls covered in pink, flowered paper.

Jane moaned. Whippet kissed the sweat off her forehead, crossed his emblazoned finger.

“This will go very smoothly,” the good-looking and well-groomed doctor said, peeling the gloves from his hands after examining Jane. “You’re young and healthy and that baby seems eager to be out.” He flashed his chewing gum commercial smile and looked at Jane’s chart and paused. He looked at Jane. He looked at the chart again. “And you don’t know where the bullet is now?”

Could be anywhere, the couple recited. Waiting for its trigger.

“Well, I don’t think it’s going to be a problem,” the doctor pronounced. Then he left the room very quickly.

Rose paced the hospital hallway, guarding Jane's door. She stopped every poor soul who dared to pass by in scrubs why they weren't in that room helping her daughter. Even a janitor got an earful. She bought a coffee, downed it, and bought another.

"Just let this one thing go as ordinary as it can," she whispered to the air. "Please. Just this one thing."

Jane snarled like she had the entire delivery room held up. Word of the bullet had spread. Nurses darted over from the walls to administer care as quickly as possible and found reasons to immediately leave the bedside. The doctor approached Jane's tightened, seizing, shuddering body as though he were walking on thin ice: one wrong step and he would hear the fateful crack. Only Whippet stood solidly by, Jane's hand turning his own dead white in its grip.

She whimpered, her back arched, the room held its breath.

The delivery room door burst open and a figure larger than life, shoe heels tapping on the tile, swaggered in. "If you kindly please," Doc said. "This woman is my charge."

No one said a word otherwise.

"Heave ho!" Doc sang, hands steering Jane by her knees. The room watched and wondered. Jane pushed hard enough to buck the teeth from her

mouth—she felt her insides white hot and fast—one last slip and the baby was out.

Jane's body steamed in the already warm air of the hospital room. Nurses down the hall whispered to each other that they could swear they smelled smoke.

Doc swatted the baby's rump, round and purple as a plumb: time for the first breath. The infant took it with a small gasp. Everyone waited to hear the wail, nature's original birth announcement. Instead the baby calmly and silently opened her eyes. She seemed to look at everyone at once, the way very old and revered paintings stare down an admiring crowd. At medical conferences to come, physicians who knew someone who knew someone would contend in low voices that the next thing the baby did was smile.

She unbunched her tiny fist to reveal that she held a perfect golden bullet.

In the County Hospital Record of Live Birth there is a new entry. It reads:
MOTHER: JANE HUDSON. FATHER: TRUE NAME WHIPPET McCALL,
LEGAL NAME WALTER McALLISTER II. NAME OF CHILD: BABY
HASN'T TOLD YET, GRANDMOTHER INSISTS SHE WILL WHEN SHE
DAMN WELL WANTS TO. SEX: FEMALE. EYES: NOT THE USUAL
NEWBORN-BLUE, BUT BROWN OR BLACK OR GRAY DEPENDING ON
HER MOOD. HAIR: GORGEOUS. LENGTH: LOOKS TO BE TALL.
WEIGHT: STRONG. NOTES: INFANT BORN HOLDING AN INTACT
BULLET IN RIGHT HAND, CANNOT BE PERSUADED TO LET IT GO.

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