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The Spiral Unwinding

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THE SPIRAL UNWINDING

By

Lynne M. Johnson

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
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Graduate Studies Office

2009

SIGNATURE OF APPROVAL FORM

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ABSTRACT

THE SPIRAL UNWINDING

By

Lynne M. Johnson

This collection of short fiction and non-fiction is a gathering of exercises and experiments in form and technique. Few of the stories are long; most reflect an attempt to capture the essence of a moment. Though the content varies, they share the author's exploration of memory, reality, and emotion.

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2009

DEDICATION

To Josh, Zach, and Jacob

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Thanks to all the members of the English Department who helped make this thesis possible, and those supporters whose help was essential:

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My parents, Diane and John Manchester, because if it takes a village to raise a child, my three boys need a small nation—or grandparents with patience, time, and reliable transportation.

Michael, for understanding.

Finally, to Henry Porter, because this thesis is a work of fiction, and in the words of Bob Dylan, the only thing we know for sure about Henry Porter is that his name isn't Henry Porter.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Part I: Darkness and Dreams.....	25
Dancing with the Dead.....	26
Red-handed.....	34
Insomnia.....	38
Tangled.....	47
The Power to Heal.....	51
Part II: Random Thoughts and Errant Questions....	66
While I Washed Dishes.....	67
Cathedral Pigeon.....	71
Listening to Einstein.....	86
Inattention.....	92
Jericho.....	106
Pete's Garden.....	120
Trifocals.....	128
Coyotes.....	138
Moses' Misunderstandings.....	152
Part IV: Some Kind of Real.....	159
Ring True.....	160
Part V: Early Experiments.....	170
Savior.....	171
E-baby.....	189
Notes.....	199
Works Cited.....	201

Introduction

...and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows—a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again.

V. Nabokov *Speak, Memory*

It seems I have more aptitude for thievery than creation, more than once stealing themes and structures from another source. The title of my thesis, *The Spiral Unwinding*, is stolen from Vladimir Nabokov's memoir, *Speak, Memory*, a book that defies linear existence, the limits of time, space, and thought, and the death of love with our physical bodies. Though it is memoir, *Speak, Memory* falls at some subtle point into second person address, not as a point of view that readers should assume, a universal "you," but as an intimate conversation evolving throughout the final chapters as a love letter to his wife. For me the memoir inspires quantum possibilities for creation but also more questions than I can answer. How does thought transcend time? How does love transcend thought? How can language convey the memories, emotions, and infinite realities that exist in a time-space outside of language? This introduction provides an overview of authors whose

exploration of such questions has inspired me and discusses their influence on my fledgling work.

Most recently, Tim O'Brien's story cycle, *The Things They Carried*, has become my focus of attention as a writer. "How to Tell a True War Story" is among favorite in the collection, partly because it contains the lines that above all others in O'Brien's work echo most clearly in my mind: "It wasn't a war story. It was a love story" (85). Funny statement, it would seem, to find embedded within a cycle of stories about the Vietnam War, and in a story about a soldier being killed. But O'Brien, by his own admission, doesn't write about "bombs and bullets and airplanes and strategy and tactics. It is not the politics of Vietnam." His subject is "the human heart and the pressure exerted on it" (Bourne). The last story of the cycle, "The Lives of the Dead," is as much a love story as any: Tim's childhood love dies when they're both nine, and he begins inventing stories to bring her back in his sleep. The adult Tim writes to "save Linda's life. Not her body—her life." Stories can resurrect souls, create miracles, "revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging" (236). Writing, for O'Brien, is an act of love. Perhaps this is why O'Brien's fiction resonates with readers, millions worldwide, more powerfully than historical

representations of the era. The history of politics and conflict are subordinate to the dreams, lives and loves of the people who suffered Vietnam and for whom the war will never fully end.

In a 2003 interview, O'Brien admits his own inability and even disinclination to let go of the war: "It's what I've written about ever since" (Hanna). In 1968, he received a scholarship to Harvard as a graduate student—and a draft notice. Although he'd organized peace vigils and demonstrations as an undergraduate at Macalaster College, he caved to societal pressure, went to war, and spent a year of duty in Vietnam which included guard duty in Mai Lai shortly after U.S. soldiers massacred 504 civilians. His first book war was non-fiction: *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me up and Ship Me Home*, a memoir of his military service during the Vietnam War. *If I Die* contains the seeds of *The Things They Carried*, and though the narratives are well-crafted, they lack the depth of his later works—his fiction.

O'Brien's fiction embraces the difficulty and even impossibility of recreating actual events, and he never treats memory as an avenue to fact. While memory provides one of the basic structures around which he frames his stories, there is always a question of its reliability—

especially under duress—and the understanding that what we remember may not be exactly what “happened.” There may be a scrambling of chronology, dialogue forgotten, details rewritten to one’s satisfaction or horror. In “How to Tell a True War Story,” the word “true” repeats frequently and often in contradictory details. The story shifts between the narrator’s reflections and the stories he retells, only some of which he witnessed, creating a combination of contradictory perspectives which undercut the notion that what we read on the page is true, at least in a “factual” sense.

Just as facts can be manipulated to skew reality (as during the Vietnam and other wars), recreating the war through fiction overcomes some of the limitations of journalism or nonfiction. Dates, body counts, stories of successful offensives and eventual defeats give fragmented pieces of a larger, far more complex and ominous story, one that is difficult to encompass and largely ignores individual human experience. O’Brien would know. At Harvard, he was a doctoral candidate in American foreign policy, and his dissertation was to “examine the political rhetoric surrounding declarations of war in contrast to the real reasons for conflict that lie below the surface of language” (Hanna). About this time, O’Brien wrote *Going*

After Cacciato, a novel about a soldier who leaves the Vietnam War and walks to Paris. After this novel won the 1979 National Book Award, O'Brien decided he would be a better novelist than scholar. Considering that *The Things They Carried* is required reading in many universities and high schools as well as translated worldwide, surely his fiction has significantly more influence than his dissertation, had he finished it.

The understanding of the war that he offers through *Things* is artistic and engaging, aimed toward the readers' affective response, and abandoning the psychic distance an analytical work retains from its readers. O'Brien closes this distance between reader and text in several ways. One primary device O'Brien uses in the story cycle is the fictional counterpart of himself to whom he lends his identity and voice. This Tim O'Brien, a metafictional construct, narrates in a tone as clear and conversational as if he sits in the room next to the reader: "I had a buddy in Vietnam. His name was Bob Kiley, but everybody called him Rat" (67). The voice is colloquial, and the intimacy adds credibility to the narrator's reflections on war within "True." "Listen to Rat: 'Jesus Christ, man, I write this beautiful fuckin' letter, I slave over it, and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back.'" The

sentences are short, imperative, and the diction informal: "If a story seems moral, do not believe it" (68).

Like many of the stories in *Things*, "How to Tell a True War Story" frequently falls into direct address to "you," the reader, who Tim instructs on what to believe. (69). Although O'Brien does not recreate his own experiences in Vietnam through his fictional counterpart, using himself as a character transfers his authenticity and therefore authority as a veteran. The name "Tim O'Brien" gives the stories' narrative commentaries the weight of "truth" they would carry if spoken by the author Tim himself. In many instances they are the author O'Brien's direct reflections. Either way, readers feel closer to a narrator who confides in them, who shares his memories, fears, and loves.

Fiction is also frees O'Brien to create repetitive and simultaneous existences. O'Brien's stories often repeat words, phrases and even entire scenes (not the same as the strategy of telling the same event from different points of view), a technique that emphasizes the persistence of memory, especially of traumatic events. The men and women who served in Vietnam (and other wars) share the realization that they will always cohabit two planes of reality—their present existence and their memories of the

war. This reality echoes the contemplations of an earlier novel of war and love, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Through lovers Tomas and Teresa, Kundera tells the story of Czechoslovakia's invasion and occupation by Russia:

If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of the eternal return the heaviest of burdens... But in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man's body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become. 5

Tomas's wife Teresa is his burden, and her weight of this burden increases through repetition. Their first meeting recurs several times and the phrase which describes the origin of Tomas's attachment to Teresa and prophesies his destruction reappears throughout the entire novel: "She was a child whom he had taken from a bulrush basket that had

been daubed with pitch and sent to the riverside of his bed" (7).

The most significant recurring scene is the moment of Tomas and Teresa's deaths: they are crushed beneath a truck when its brakes fail. The moment appears at least three times, the first time on page 122, less than half way through the novel. The effect is considerable. When Tomas's lover Sabina receives the letter from Tomas's son saying that he and Teresa have died, Sabina must go on with her life, and the reader must continue through the novel to find that the scene of their death returns again on page 272 and yet again on page 276. In this way, their death is "inserted into history and into the theme of the 'eternal return'" (Brink 285).

O'Brien also uses repetition to full effect, and for his subject, this makes sense. Trauma is easily remembered and too often what haunts our dreams. The heaviest burden that O'Brien's characters carry is memory, most significantly of love and death, and those are the images O'Brien repeats. Often the same character's death repeats in several stories and through the perspectives of different narrators, each re-telling more detailed, more real, than the last.

In the "The Things They Carried," Ted Lavender's death repeats on nearly every page; it is what the men talk about, what they can't forget. Curt Lemon's death repeats in "How to Tell a True War Story." "This one wakes me upⁱ" (82) the narrator says, just before he recounts, for the fourth of five times, the moment when Curt Lemon steps on the rigged 105 round that blows him into a tree. Interspersed between recurring images of Curt Lemon stepping into the sunlight explosion of a booby-trapped 105 round are stories both mundane and fantastical. The scenes echo through the stories the way memories resurface in a veteran's mind: a little foggy, confused, out of chronology, but impossible to forget. O'Brien also embeds stories within stories—third and fourth told stories that in each retelling take on the importance and the significance of mythology while subverting official or political representations. In "True," Mitchell Sanders tells of a six-man patrol on a mission to go into the mountains to listen for enemy movement, a setting where "everything's all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can't see jack, you can't find your own pecker to piss with" (72). They hear "chimes and xylophones" (73) and the mountain talking... "the fog, too, and the grass and the goddamn mongooses...God's truth" (74). Mitchell's

fabrications create the terrible truth of Vietnam: that Americans don't listen, and if they did, they could not handle the truth of the war. It takes silence, being out of the reach of politics, rhetoric, and propaganda that allows the men to hear what Vietnam is telling them.

While memories of death repeat throughout O'Brien's stories, his treatment of memory acknowledges its ephemeral connection to a particular event and time. Memory confuses itself. Memory, after time, begins to remember memories of an event rather than the event itself. Memory also rearranges the chronology of events. The result is an unfocused, confused sense of what happened. For the hazy confusion that surrounded the Vietnam War, this means of memory makes full sense because the events remembered are less important than the impression they leave. In some ways, O'Brien's stories resemble Impressionist art. Some are little longer than a page, no beginning, no end, just a fragmented moment that may seem unconnected until the reader steps back and views it as part of a greater whole. As a whole, they create a paradox, a horror and beauty combined and interdependent that comes across most clearly in "How to Tell a True War Story":

At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells

the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life. After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass, the soil—everything. All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble[...]At the hour of dusk you sit at your foxhole and look out on a wide river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond, and although in the morning you must cross the river and go into the mountains and do terrible things and maybe die, even so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and should be, but now is not. 81-2

O'Brien also describes Vietnam as "an essential metaphor or a life given metaphor that, for me, is inescapable" (Hanna). As setting, Vietnam provides "an instant sort of pressure" (Bourne), a location in which the inherent tension and peril add resonance and depth to the most mundane event. A sense of mortality is inescapable.

My own stories have no unifying physical setting like O'Brien's. Yet they've all turned, in one way or another, into love stories, and trace the pressures on the heart

that stem from our human interconnections: a moment of pain, a moment of disconnection, grief, everything coming from the human heart and its capacity for suffering. Though I've learned so much more from O'Brien, this would be enough.

Another source that resurfaces in my fiction, some readers might say irreverently, is the Christian Bible. The stories I've written around the Bible attempt to resurrect its paradoxes through the perspective of narrators who are in some way on the periphery of life—those who are overlooked, overrun, or condemned: my Eve lives in a garden unlike Eden, and my Jericho falls again but without Joshua's help. Like O'Brien's stories question the nature of reality or "truth." Theme and meaning become slippery and difficult to locate, and particles shift the moment they're observed. In "Jericho," the narrator Hannah holds only contempt for the Bible as literal truth, but after meeting a group of Palestinian friends in college, she begins to understand that there is a far more frightening level of truth to the Biblical stories on which she was raised: violence and genocide which permeates Old Testament stories reverberates century after century. Like other of my characters, Hannah does not want to face reality, until she's forced to face a truth she has denied.

She sees the Bible as a work of fiction until she realizes that the historical truths—genocide in particular—continue to reverberate.

In "The Power to Heal," Nikki wishes for the healing touch but keeps her own pain imminent, unable to admit that she needs healing as much as anyone else. As its name suggests, "The Power to Heal" is a story of love and healing that I originally wrote as a response to Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies." In Atwood's "Fantasies," the narrator strikes a conversational tone as she tells the lunch hour fantasies of a group of women, a series of scenarios that have nearly nothing to do with rape. Nikki, who narrates "The Power to Heal," describes her conversation with two other women as they imagine what they would wish for if they could have anything. Nikki would wish for the power to heal, and the rest of the story is a contemplation of the scenarios she might encounter. One way in which the story differs from Atwood's is that throughout, Nikki also addresses her husband Terry, the "you" of the story, as if talking to him in her mind. I also tried to copy Atwood's characteristic technique of weaving a narrative around a single credible voice, yet revealing in the last pages that the narrator is not nearly as reliable as she seems. Atwood's novel, *The Blind*

Assassin, is one example, a series of stories within stories that intertwine decades and narrators. The last page left me questioning the reliability of the narrator I'd trusted for the previous 300 and wondering whose story I'd just read.

"Blood on my Hands" is my first attempt at flash fiction. It's also one of my favorites so far because the story mirrors the form, or at least the definition of the ideal form of flash story that I've tried to write: flash fiction should capture the essence of a single moment. While this is not true for all flash fiction, it is for "Blood." The essential moment is when the mother turns from her daughter to answer back to her husband's accusations—petty actions for both parents that lead to the daughter's fall. The severity of the child's injury is of little relevance. Nor is the story about jealousy or errant affection. The heart of the story is in the mother's guilt, and her realization that a moment of stupid anger led to her daughter's fall.

"Insomnia" also began as an exercise in which I copied the structure of Brett Johnston's "Waterwalkers" which has dual story lines, one moving forward and the other spiraling back, a form I found useful for a character who is working her way back in time through memories.

Insomnia's setting, the narrator's bedroom, is more problematic. While I'm sure there are few adults who haven't stared at the ceiling around 3:00 am thinking painful thoughts, the narrator is confined to her bed, and though she might not be able to sleep, readers will likely nod off. A friend gave me a suggestion that may help. He finds the beginning too hazy and confused and can make little connection to the characters. However, one of the nighttime sections interested him:

Some nights I lay in bed and tried to fit pieces together in my mind, tried to understand why I slept with a stranger, that maybe if I found the missing memories, I'd remember who Paul was when I'd married him. But it was hard as I lay alone in the dark, and sometimes, my mind spun down paths I'd wished I'd never taken.

The friend found that passage "real...grounded...investigatory...and full of want." I'll keep this in mind. I'll also try to follow Ron Carlson's method of creation: "I write from part to whole, staying as specific as I can as I go along in order to create an inventory that might tell me where to go next" (Burroway). "Insomnia" is a story of parts. Its narrator is trying to piece together moments of memory that may or may not lead

her to someone she knows. Either way, she'll come to some revelation. The hard part for me is creating moments of memory that work. If not, I'll let this story rest, give it (along with other experiments included here) the proper burial as it deserves.

"Dancing with the Dead" began as non-fiction after I watched a photo shoot in a local cemetery. That first draft felt sentimental and melodramatically contrived, even though it was "true," and failed to achieve the combination of beauty, grief, and compassion that I want to come through in my fiction. The cemetery works as a setting for me in a way similar to how the Vietnam War works for Tim O'Brien. In both places, a sense of mortality is inescapable, and this lends poignancy to the simplest objects and actions. In "Dancing," the cemetery provides juxtaposition between the living and the dead and the carefree plans of high school kids with humanities only shared fate. Given the material, anonymous omniscience is the logical choice for point of view: the narrator knows what no human may know about the dead or the living, and its anonymity keeps it from drawing attention to itself and away from the characters. I intentionally spread the focus as evenly as possible between most of the characters, hopefully to create the intent that no one is more

important than any other and that, ultimately, death equalizes us all.

Among the revisions I may still consider are adding sufficient elderly residents to make the cemetery credible (though I am always grieved by how many people buried there are children, teenagers, or young adults). I also want to write the story of two of the prom kids, one girl and one boy who are not dating, but are nevertheless going with the same group. Just like the dead, they deserve rescue from the graveyard of stereotype and to have their stories told.

One piece in my thesis stands alone, a narrative for which I've never found the right ending. "Ring True" is the only nonfiction I've included, a collection of anecdotes about rings—mostly wedding rings—that I've recorded over the years. I like to think of the piece as a series of love stories within a love story, each vignette reflecting a set of rings that in turn reflect a relationship. Interspersed between those stories I try to make sense of my own, but I've found it much easier to unwind others' stories of marriage, divorce, and heartbreak than to attempt untangling mine. Except for the names, the stories are all true—mostly—though they've evolved and no longer exist within these "realities." My grandmother and little Duane are still dead, of course, but the legend of

how one stone fell from her ring before he died remains alive in our family. Matt still wears Jesse's ring, but lately he's living with Kristi and talks about her instead. The last time I talked to Dan is far more recent than the "last time" in the story, but I think he's still content—most of the time. So how do I end a true story that is still alive? Again I think of Nabokov's memoir, his chronic habit of revision, and maybe, instead of forcing an end, I'll let the stories continue to unwind.

Part I

darkness and dreams

Would it not be better to forsake reality and lose oneself in dreams?..... A sweet and tender dream enfolds me; a serene and radiant presence leads me on, until all that was dark and joyless is forgotten... But no, these are but dreams. Fate returns to waken us, and we see that life is an alternation of grim reality and fugitive dreams of happiness.

Tchaikovsky, Symphony 4

Don't open that door...the hallway is full of difficult dreams.

"Eyes of a Blue Dog" Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Dancing with the Dead

The girls pull the hems of their prom skirts above their ankles and walk on too-high heels, a crooked tip-toe stumble along the bridge that spans the cemetery pond to the island in its middle. Black, blue, sequined, and organdy, they line up like a rainbow of tipsy flamingoes, laughing while the photographer snaps another series of shots. It's late April, and the last piles of snow are melting in the shade. The weather is warm, high 60s and sunny, no need to line up indoors along the library's balconied staircase or pose in front of the fireplace at the Heritage Inn. The sun is still above the photographer, just right to catch the girls, arm in arm beneath the spruce and oak, to catch the movement and color of ducks in the backdrop. An hour or two later, the sun will drop toward the west and they'll be shadowed by marble pillars or stones. The boys, dressed in blue, black, and one in white, wander while waiting their turn, push each other between rows of markers. They split ranks at a flat,

sunken stone tilted slightly beneath the grass, *Tim* engraved on the front, no one they knew or would notice, and pass him like a trail of deer through this section of the cemetery, a whole neighborhood beneath their feet.

Tim was nineteen when he died, and he never went to the prom and certainly never dressed for a formal. Rumor went around that he died of AIDS, young though he was, but in 1988 doctors could offer only a few drugs that people like Tim couldn't afford anyway. Given that he grew up with his mom and baby sister in the apartment above White's Grocery—if you could call two rooms with no hot running water or kitchen an apartment— he was lucky he made it that long. Most evenings, at least on the weekends, his mom left them watching TV while she partied down at the corner of the ball field with the local teenagers. But not always. Sometimes she'd sit at the table with the teenagers who'd pull bills from their pockets and cajole, *c'mon, just buy us a six-pack, a pint*. Then they'd share with her, a few shots, a joint, maybe even a line.

Things weren't that bad all the time. Tim kept two memories close to him, especially after he was too weak to walk, and re-ran them through his mind until he remembered little else. When he was ten, or maybe nine, his mom came home with a kite and took them to a field, an abandoned

field way back in the woods, and they flew the kite for hours until he let it snag at the top of a pine. He nearly cried, but his mom hugged him, wiped his nose with her sleeve, and laughed. The second memory happened more than once, but not as often as Tim wished. Some nights they'd sit their bed, Tim next to his mom, his sister on her lap, pillows propped behind their backs as they watched TV. Some nights his mom would lean over, kiss the top of his head and whisper *Baby, I love you.*

Bernadette lay three plots over and one row to the east. She made it 53 years, two months, and fifteen days, but on that fifteenth day at 4:08 in the afternoon, a trucker ran a red and her last thought was *who will feed the dogs?* Turns out her daughter does. She took them with her when she moved into her own place, and just like her mother, she thinks about them first. Bernadette's husband picked out the stone, one with an angel who looks down over both of them when he comes to talk. Three years later, he still wakes up some nights and wanders into the kitchen before he realizes that he didn't want a glass of water or a bagel, and when he can, he goes back to sleep before he remembers what he was looking for. When he can't, he sits on the couch and peels an orange. Sometimes he eats it.

Keith's stone stands in the next plot over from his parents', though they're still alive. They bought the plots and markers after Keith's pick-up slid broadside into oncoming lane on an icy bridge. Their stone is a double, engraved with birthdates and names like a standing invitation. Keith's is a single, though he'd married twice. His first wife didn't die—just left him—with two little girls. Kristi had just started kindergarten, and Dawn was a year older but as quiet as her dad. Keith's second wife signed on a few years later, vowed to help him raise the girls, but she used the back of her hand. After Keith died, his girls found their own ways out. Kristi left for Colorado with a boyfriend and a baby on the way, and Dawn, so like her dad, slid her car sideways on an icy road and never came back.

Andrew, Benjamin, and Christopher were born too soon, came and left on the same day in another April, but they get more visitors than anyone else. Last spring Grandma and Grandpa bought them each a stuffed bunny for Easter and propped the rabbits near the edges of the stone so they wouldn't fall over. They fell anyway when it rained and lay like waterlogged road-kill. Auntie Sue and Uncle Ray brought three frogs on sticks that sway and bob with the wind. They also left a card—*We love you and we miss you so*

much—even though they never met their nephews. The boys' mom and dad stop by most weekends in spring. He brushes pine needles and specks of dirt off the stone and then stands with his hands in his pockets looking toward the woods, the sky, or nowhere while his wife arranges toys—three windmills one weekend, three toy cars another. Most of the toys are bigger than the brothers ever were, but that's not how their mother imagines her babies when she finds herself wandering involuntarily through toy aisles. In her mind, they're tripping through the backyard with each other, one pushing a dump truck, one digging holes in the grass with a trowel, and always, always, the warm weight of the third child tucked sleeping against her chest.

Amanda and her brother Levi died on the same day, too, or more accurately, the same night. She was thirteen, and he was eleven. Their parents moved away because they couldn't bear the memory of the fire and how they pulled the kids downstairs from their bedrooms in the loft, but on account of the smoke, it was too late. Their mother swore she smelled smoke at their grave, in her car, and in her dreams. Her husband rented a cabin for awhile to get them both away, but after he woke up one night and found her walking into the lake in all her clothes, *to wash away the*

smell, she'd said, he moved them to Wisconsin. Even there, years later, they wake up sweating and coughing at three a.m.

But Amanda and Levi aren't left alone. Like most of the children, they lie shoulder to shoulder in the middle of grandparents, the Dravlands, Hultgrens, Mainos, and Paines, who silently *shhh* and tell them stories only the dead know and their living grandchildren wouldn't understand anyway.

All except for Earl. He'd moved in earlier that day and still lay dazed from the commotion, half in one world and not in tune with the next. In between the hymn, the sermon, and the final hugs, his great-grandkids ran in jagged rows and jumped the corner of his dirt pile chasing each other. His granddaughter parked her baby in a stroller next to the grave, and it woke up howling and kicking halfway through the funeral, nearly stirring the garden of babies past the next row of trees who slept under hearts, lambs, and tiny rectangular stones. The cemetery workers stood quietly, hands folded across their stomachs, backhoe and pickup lined up a respectful distance behind them, neatly parked side by side pointed toward the grave until the last of the funeral cars left. As they filled and raked, the cars full of prom kids arrived, their

parents leaning against the marble columns of the largest mausoleum while the photographer leveled his tripod and told the girls to line up on the bridge.

Casey's dad visits every week, and today he drives past the pond and the mini-vans in his large red pick-up because sometimes he doesn't know what else to do, and Casey listens as well as his older brother, Jerry. Jerry would be graduating from college this weekend except that he's in rehab for the fifth time. Casey died on his twenty-first birthday, just two years back. He was born over three months early: one pound, ten ounces, three kidney transplants, open heart surgery, and medications for life—anti-rejection drugs for his kidneys, steroids for his lungs, and pain killers, always more pain killers. Casey's friends took him out for his birthday even though they all knew about Casey's meds and what could happen. They brought Casey home drunk, and his dad put him to bed, got up a few hours later to make sure he was all right. He was certified in CPR, the EMT's tried the defibrillator, but none of it mattered. Now what echoes in his dad's mind is everything he should and shouldn't have done: moved Casey from that high school where he met all those kids, begged Casey to stay home that night, taken Casey to the hospital right away. Now that the snow's gone, he pulls a statue of

a dog with a solar powered lantern in its mouth from the bed of his truck and sets it next to Casey's stone. He can't bear his son sleeping alone in the dark anymore.

Cody sits on a marble bench behind Andrew, Benjamin, and Christopher. He's seventeen, and glad that he's going to the prom even though it's not with anyone in particular. He's pissed at his parents because they won't let him take the car, and at himself because he listened to his mom and wore a white suit. He rubs the knee of his pants, but the stain is grass and won't budge. Cody is seventeen, and he doesn't worry about grass stains any more than he reads the names on the stones or hears the whispers that sift up through the grass and curl around his feet. He's anxious to have the pictures done because he's hungry and he wants to go to dinner. The photographer yells at him to hurry up and get back so they can finish the shoot. Cody jumps up, and as he runs by the triplets' stone, he pulls a plastic frog out of the ground to give, as a joke, to the girl in the organdy dress.

It's Saturday night, and the air smells like spring-wet earth and dead leaves.

Red-handed

We sat near the front, only a few rows from the stage where Sarah dodged Scrooge's cane with a mob of other orphans. Sarah scrambled between his legs, dance shoes unlikely beneath a torn skirt, and barely escaped a wallop. The audience laughed. You rolled the program, tapped it on your knee and stared past the stage and children. Scrooge exited stage right, and the kids sang after him *peace on earth, forgiveness for all*. The act was over. I glanced away, over my shoulder, before I nudged your elbow for you to clap. You caught my slip. My ex-lover sat behind us, and you saw me turn my head, caught me red-handed. Twice.

After the play you grabbed my arm, stopped me in the lobby, your breath hot and harsh in my ear, and told me you were sick and tired of it. I was too tired to crack a joke, too weary to laugh it off. Sick of what? I asked, and pulled my arm away. What did it matter anyway? If it weren't him, you'd find another reason to fight.

Sarah swung on the railing at the bottom of the balcony stairs. "Mama," she asked, "can't we go?"

"Just a minute." I was impatient, not with her but it rang through my voice, and when she asked, "Can I go play upstairs?" I said yes because I didn't want her to see who we are when we fight, to hear what we say, to catch the contempt on my face when you said you couldn't believe that after all these years, I still wasn't over him.

Obviously, I said. You aren't either. But all that mattered was that I'd embarrassed you, that I'd made you angry, and at that moment all that mattered for me was that you hurt me again, and I was tired of the pain.

Get away from me, I said. Just leave me alone.

And I will never shake the belief that our fight made Sarah fall. If we'd laughed instead and let go of our ghosts, we'd have taken her hands as we walked out the door, and slid her safely between us down the icy sidewalk, and I'd have buckled her into her booster seat and tucked her coat around her legs instead of holding my palm to her bloody forehead.

You weren't there when it happened. You walked home. It was only two miles, and you were mad enough not to feel the cold. Your anger could have melted the streets. Sarah never screamed. That was me. The children came first when

I called for help, for a cell phone. One of the other parents drove Sarah and me to the hospital.

It must have been her shoes, the slick-bottomed dance shoes like the other girls had and, impractical or not, I'd bought for her, too. In the silence after you left, her laughter echoed like bells from the balcony. I called up to her once, and then again, before she came running down the marble stairs, her mouth in a wide-open smile. Then she slipped.

I didn't recognize the blood at first. I wanted to believe the dark spots on the floor were mud, water, dried drops of paint. Blood ran through her hair, across her cheek. It seeped through my fingers. I lifted my palm and saw the wide-split skin and the white of her skull. Still she didn't cry. "Where's Daddy?" she said. "I want to go home." After the x-rays and stitches it was you who carried Sarah from the hospital while I went to get the car, pulled it up to the emergency room doors where you held her on your chest, her socks falling to her ankles. Sarah's shoes, I asked, did you forget them? You didn't answer, and I knew they were gone.

And tonight I won't sleep whether you do or not. I'll lie here next to Sarah and count the hours until I have to wake her again and make sure she doesn't slip away. You

know how quickly it happens, how easy it is to slip. And I'll retrace little trails of causality in my mind until the moment the sole of her shoe slid over the edge of the stair, and know that if we hadn't fought, she wouldn't have fallen. Oh yes, the doctor said, she'll be just fine. There are nineteen stitches, but most are beneath her hair. Small children are resilient. If we keep her safe, the concussion will heal. Keep an eye on her, he said, and she'll be just fine.

But he wasn't the one who looked back, who told her to go play, who fought with her father out of sheer weariness. So tonight, I won't fight with you, won't even say a word, and tomorrow I'll watch, wary of a glance, an accusation, a fall.

Insomnia

I woke confused, apprehensive, as if I'd slipped out of a bad dream. Or as if something had happened the night before, something I didn't want to remember. The clock said 3:26. The moon and a fresh layer of snow lit the corner of the room where Paul had thrown his keys and left them lying on the floor. My right hand hung over the side of the bed, and I tried to breathe in and out slowly, deeply, as if I were still asleep.

It didn't matter. Paul was awake, had been for a while, and he knew that I was, too. I could tell by his short even breaths, the way he held himself away from me. Sleeping, our bodies knew where they belonged. We'd wake tangled and warm, anger and hurt forgotten—at least until we woke up. I waited for Paul to turn toward me, say something, put his hand on my back, but he pulled the covers over his shoulders and turned over on his side, facing the wall.

It was frigid when we stepped out of the cathedral that afternoon, even for early December. Paul spun the key ring on his middle finger, flipping them over and over into his palm like a cold accusation. He kept his other hand in his pocket. I held my coat around me tightly and walked down the flight of stairs as far away from Paul as I could. A cold gust blew up the street, and I turned my head toward the church.

"I don't see why you even came," he said.

I wanted to slap him, grab his arm and shake him, beat my head against the stone walls. Words caught in the back of my throat, or maybe in the middle of my chest. All I managed was, "I didn't do anything wrong."

"Right," he said. Neither of us spoke the rest of the day.

Paul was one of the bearers, so I'd sat behind his sister Tracey for the funeral Mass. She looked back and smiled, or tried to. She'd spent the last two weeks in and out of the hospital while their dad's organs slowly shut down. Their mom refused to sign any papers, and Paul was too busy to do more than check in on his dad for a few minutes after work. Tracey was left alone with her father when they pulled his support. She called me the morning he died, and we went for a walk by the lake, wrapped ourselves

in the blanket I kept in my car and watched the waves hit. The shore, the rocks, the trees, everything was covered with ice, a kaleidoscope of color in the sun. I hadn't expected Tracey to cry—everyone knew her dad was dying and she'd been through so much worse—but she did. "I can't believe it's over," she told me. I didn't know what to say so I leaned against her shoulder and listened.

Tracey caught my sleeve as soon as Mass was over; Paul and his cousins had carried the coffin and were still outside so I followed her downstairs. The church basement smelled of bazaars and coffee, and the ring of metal chairs on tile hurt my head, but Tracey found us to a table near the wall. I told Paul I'd saved a spot for him, but he waved me off and wandered from one relative to the next with a plate of molded Jello in his hand. He stood with his foot on a chair, his back to us, talking with two of his cousins. Tracey shook her head. "He's so much like Dad," she said. "Sometime it's scary."

Paul and I had been married six years, and I had an inkling of what she meant. I leaned forward on the table and pulled a napkin into strips while I tried to explain what it was like living with Paul, how the longer we were together, the more I looked over my shoulder, the less I spoke, the less I was able to live.

I felt a weight on the back of my chair and looked over my shoulder. Paul leaned over me, his hands on the back of my chair, his hair glowing like a halo under the florescent light. "Let's go," he said. Tracey kept her eyes on her plate, and I tried to tell her good-bye with a look. I didn't dare tell her out loud.

The bed shifted and the blankets slid from my back. Paul sat up, took a drink from his glass on the nightstand, grabbed a book, and shut the door behind him as he left the room. The toilet flushed, and I turned onto my back and stared at the ceiling. It was most often in the quiet of the night that old demons bubbled to the surface of my mind. Things I'd forgotten. Things I tried not to remember. The piano played discordantly, and I heard pages flutter, the slap of a magazine hitting the wall. The cat, still a kitten really, mrowed outside the bedroom door scratching at the carpet. I turned the knob slowly, hoping the door wouldn't creak as I let Scarlett in, but it did. I held her to my chest and crawled back into bed, tucking us both beneath the covers. Scarlett stretched her paws and tangled them into my hair. I couldn't move, and I didn't want to. The clock flipped to 3:42.

I'd brought Scarlett home on a Friday in June. A friend from work had talked about her litter of kittens all week, and I'd stopped by her apartment—just to look. Paul came home and found me sprawled on the carpet throwing balls of paper for a gray kitten. He stood at the edge of the room unbuttoning his shirt, and didn't answer when I said hello. I'd brought Scarlett home on a whim, knowing that Paul didn't like cats but reasoning that if I kept her out of his way, if I kept the litter where he couldn't see it, that he'd get over being mad. I grabbed the kitten with one hand, sat up cross-legged, and let her chew my fingers while trying not to wince. I laughed, a short nervous giggle that died when Paul threw his shirt on the back of the couch and sat down, his head thrown back, his eyes closed.

I set the kitten down and sat next to him, but I didn't touch him. Scarlett wandered over to his lap. He pulled her tail gently and smiled when she batted his fingers. "Get off," he said. He pushed her toward the edge of the couch, but instead of jumping she clung to his leg. I took her with me to the laundry room to rinse the spots of blood from his pants, and when I came back out Paul told me to keep her out of the bedroom, and was gone. It wasn't the kitten, I reasoned. Half the time he'd come

home from work, look in the fridge, and pace the kitchen once or twice he'd be back at the door, saying he needed to talk to someone, pick up parts for his truck, go see his brother. "I'll be right back," he'd say, and once in a while he was.

Some nights I lay in bed and tried to fit pieces together in my mind, tried to understand why I slept with a stranger, that maybe if I found the missing memories, I'd remember who Paul was when I'd married him. But it was hard as I lay alone in the dark, and sometimes, my mind spun down paths I'd wished I'd never taken. And I wondered if all the signs had been there from the beginning, but I'd run past them blind.

The windshield wipers had slapped nearly in time to the rhythm of cracks on the county road. The sun had dropped over the tree line, and I fumbled with my left hand for the headlight switch, and then under the seat for the latch. I pushed the driver's seat another inch forward. It wasn't my car and although I could reach the pedals, my leg was starting to ache. Gary, Paul's best friend, had decided to give him a farewell before our wedding. Gary's girlfriend had driven at first, but since I didn't drink, Gary tossed

me her keys after the third round of beers. Paul lay back in the passenger seat, his eyes closed, one hand sprawled over his head, the other on his stomach beneath his t-shirt. Gary and his girlfriend were huddled together in the back, sleeping, I thought. A CD she'd brought, one she'd ripped herself, played for the fifth time. The car smelled of smoke and pine air-freshener. We were still twenty miles from home, and I turned down the stereo, no response, and flipped to F.M. At the end of the first song, the weather came on, and Gary's girlfriend spoke for the first time in the last ten miles.

"Tell the bitch to put it back on." A foot hit the back of my seat. I kept both hands on the wheel.

Paul hit the CD button and one of the same four songs we'd heard for the last fifty miles came on again.

"I'm going to sue her if she crashes. Tell the bitch I'm going to sue her."

I wished Paul would take my hand, would mock her silently, roll his eyes, make me laugh. A semi passed, its lights cutting through the windshield, across Paul's face. He sat forward in his seat. "Slow down," he said. I was barely driving fifty-five, and I wouldn't have slowed except that we'd come to a four-way stop. Straight would take us to Gary's house where Paul had left his truck. A

left would take me back to my parents' house. I hit the blinker. Paul grabbed the side of the wheel and said, "Don't."

The door opened, and Paul slid into bed, lay next to my back, reached his arm over my side and rubbed Scarlett's cheek with one finger. His breath was warm in my hair, and before I could stop myself, I leaned back into him. And it hurt because I knew that when I woke up the next day I would see Paul, but I wouldn't know who he was, and I knew he wouldn't know the difference.

It was early June, not long after we bought the house and before I had stashed extra house and truck keys in a crack in the siding. We pulled in the driveway after spending the weekend at Paul's parents' house. I slid out the driver's door behind Paul and shut it after me. "Did you grab the keys?" he asked. I already knew that tone and froze. "Watch out," he said and pushed me aside to look in the window. Sure enough, they were in there, and the doors were locked. Paul fumbled through his pockets, checked to see if the passenger window was open. It wasn't. "Shit," he said. "Can't you be more careful?" I remember how we'd circled the house trying to find a way to get in and Paul had settled on the bedroom window. He grabbed a tire iron

from the truck, found the wheelbarrow where I'd left it in the garden and pushed it between the lilacs. I held it steady while Paul stood in the bucket, pried the screen off, and when the window wouldn't budge, jimmied the sash.

The frame heaved and slipped and a triangle of wood fell to the ground. I was going to pick it up and glue it back on, fix the crack, but Paul was already inside, leaning out the window to me. He took both of my hands and I climbed the wall with my tennies until I crouched unsteadily on the outside sill. I balanced with my hands on his shoulders as he lowered me into the bedroom and when he said "The things I put up with," he didn't seem mad anymore. I remember, and this is the truth, that I'd wanted to kiss him and that I forgot about the sill digging into my back, the broken sash, and the sliver of wood still sharp in the grass.

Tangled

You stepped out of your car as I drove past, and though you looked both ways before you crossed to go into the coffee shop, I don't think you saw me. I'm not driving the Ford anymore, but of course, you wouldn't know that. I wouldn't have recognized you except you wore the same shirt that taught Emma to say her first color—green—and the jean jacket I'd bought you that last Christmas. Instead of going in like I'd planned, I drove past and circled the block. Your car was still there. There wasn't much time before work—only thirty minutes after dropping Emma off, to second grade these days, and Jess to daycare. I felt ridiculous, driving and thinking in circles. Why were you back? Why now? And why did it matter? I was over you, and I could walk through those doors and stand next to you in line and say hello as if you didn't mean anything to me at all.

I parked in the lot around the corner, and walked from there. Or tried to. I made it to the edge of the shop

window and stood outside in the early morning dusk while you pulled change from your pocket for the cashier. When the door chimes rang, I leaned my face against the brick wall, sick at the thought of facing you, sick that you might have nothing to say. When I looked up your car was pulling away. I was afraid that you had seen me, afraid you hadn't.

I work full time now, have for the last two years and three months—ever since you left. Social services still, and it's been good for me, thank you for asking. Not that you would. Or have. Or asked about the kids after you'd ducked out without saying good-bye. Would it hurt you to know they're doing fine? Jess quit asking for you after the first couple months and named his stuffed monkey after you instead. *His stupid imaginary friend*, Emma calls it. Sometimes Jess calls Spence "Daddy." You remember him? You always said Spence was a nice guy, and for once you were right. He's living with us now. Sometimes when he's sprawled on the couch laughing to *Scooby Doo* with Emma and Jess, I'm pretty sure I love him. It's been harder on Emma. She hasn't cried since you left. She asked for you once, the morning you filled your last box and left before they woke up. She nodded when I told her but didn't ask

questions. For two months she sat in the gravel next to the drive each evening, watching.

It's been easier for me. My friends at work told me *he's trash, it's all for the best* and taught me that I should *just let him go*. A year after you'd gone, they had a party and brought me balloons, helium balloons that they tied to the porch rail. We drank wine, walked barefoot in the grass, and just before dark they sent me to the porch to untie them. The wind had shifted, tangling the strings, and my fingers fumbled numbly. Instead disappearing into the dusk, the balloons scattered, bobbing over rooftops and into trees. No matter, I thought, you were out of my mind for good.

Then this morning you crossed my path like an unlucky cat, and when I sat down in front of my computer, I couldn't see the screen for visions of you. My hands sat silent on the keyboard until the office was filled with counselors, clients, and as always, the children who smell of diapers and stale dreams.

Spence was home before me, and when I dropped the grocery bag too heavily on the counter, he asked me if something was wrong. Tired, I said. Stomach-ache, too. He believed me, I think. It's been so long since the wrong

he asked about was you, and we had more important things to think about. Supper. Laundry. Taking out the trash.

At one-fifteen I still couldn't sleep so I closed the bedroom door quietly behind me and slipped into the kitchen. Emma's homework was scattered on the table, and I checked her schedule for the next day. It's tacked to the bulletin board with the grocery list, the power bill, and pictures of the kids—Emma in a tree, Jess on Spence's lap, and one of both kids sprawled sleeping across our bed that I took only days before you told me you'd had enough and I'd shot back *fine, then why don't you just leave?* It doesn't matter, I tell myself. Let it go. Let him go. But I wonder if you're still in town, if you'll stop tomorrow.

I put the picture in my purse, just in case.

The Power to Heal

I was leaning against the sunny side of the Parker mausoleum, throwing bread to the squirrels, waiting for your sister and Cathy to show up for our walk. Hoping they wouldn't, actually. You know, Terry, there are times I'd rather talk to you than anyone even if you're off someplace else. Cath, well, she's a mess, and Sarah doesn't share your sense of humor. I tossed another chunk of bread and caught myself laughing out loud, remembering the time you gave her that cork, for her maternal hormones, you'd said, and the look on her face. My cell phone said ten after, and I thought I might get lucky until I heard that low, hoarse cough Cathy tries to stifle. She walked up holding her cigarette off to the side and bumped me with her bony shoulder. "So Nikki," she said, "Out here feeding your friends again?"

I handed her the empty bread bag. She stuffed it in her pocket and looked at me with those gray-green eyes of hers as if she knew what was going on inside my head, took

another drag off her cigarette, and when I didn't answer she flicked it through the metal grate at the base of the mausoleum. A trail of smoke oozed up the wall.

I shivered and pushed myself up off the sandstone. "I thought you'd quit again."

Cathy shrugged and sat on the edge of a row marker. "You believe everything I tell Sarah?" Last week Cathy swore to your sister and me, right after she'd lit the last cigarette in her pack, that she was done, finished, never going to buy another. Then, stupid me, I had to ask how the divorce was going. She spent the rest of the walk telling us how it wasn't.

Cathy sneezed, pulled a wad of Kleenex from her pocket and nodded toward several piles of dirt and a platform draped in satin. "Busy week," she said, and blew her nose.

I didn't comment. A bunch of crows landed in the poplars behind the mausoleum, and called to each other in voices almost human. I could have sworn they were making fun of us.

Sarah drove up fifteen minutes late, her usual. She parked next to the sexton's office, pulled out her jacket and aimed backward, looking like a long, blonde warrior as she clicked her remote.

A while back I'd slipped and mentioned taking walks in the cemetery, and you know your sister. She's not about to let her little brother's wife walk here alone, even after I told her I *enjoyed* being alone, that I *liked* throwing bread from the edge of the pond and watching the mallards and the geese float toward me like whole Canadian armadas. I tried to explain how it's impossible, after a bad day at work, to stay cranky when I'm walking under hundred-year-old willows and oaks with trunks bigger round than our kitchen table and imagining how much they've seen. Some must have been a century or two old when the first people under them were planted. But no; all your sister thinks of are tombstones and mausoleums combined with what she calls my morbid mentality.

"At least you could answer me, Nikki." I looked up and there was a muffin staring me in the face-- and Sarah. "Do you want it or not?"

"For god's sake, Sarah," Cathy said, "you might as well throw it to the squirrels. It'll end up there anyway."

Sarah sighed and took a bite, put it in her pocket, and started walking up the path near the fence that separates the cemetery from the city park. The air smelled of wet grass and fallen leaves, but it was warm for April

and laughter drifted up from the playground. Cathy brushed the seat of her pants and mouthed over her shoulder *get going*, so I followed behind, falling in step to the rhythmic squeak of swings and the hum of evening streets until somebody's kid started wailing and the racket wafted up from the playground. Sarah closed her eyes and twisted her shoulders.

"Rough day with the girls?" Cathy asked. Her son was already in second grade and spent plenty of time with his dad. She has no clue what it's like having three girls—all under six years old. Me either, for that matter, and I never want to find out, especially now. Our cat's enough work.

Sarah just shrugged. "The usual," she said. "The girls are coming down with colds and the baby's teething again," Sarah said, "but it's more Greg. He complains when he's on call, but then he gets upset when I say I'm *always* on call with the girls. Then when he has them, he complains that he can't get anything done." Sarah rolled her eyes. "You know," she braided and unbraided the end of her hair, "it's not that I'd ever want to leave them," she said, "but sometimes I wish I had to go away for a couple days just so Greg would know what it's like being home with them all the time." Her smile was a little wistful, but

her eyes kept their dark dreaminess and for a moment, she looked so much like you. Then she laughed. "If only I could have one undisturbed shower before I turn thirty-five."

Cathy kicked a pine cone. "Then divorce him," she said. "He'd have to take the kids at least one day a week and every other weekend." She pointed one finger at Sarah. "You'd get half of everything. Unless he's like Steve and wastes it all on his lawyer just to spite you."

I picked up a stick and started tapping the tops of headstones as we walked past. *Mary Oswald, b. 1857, d. 1917.* It was an old section of the cemetery and an old story with Cathy. I knew better, but I said it anyway. "Instead of griping, Cath, why not raise your face to the sky every morning and shout, 'Yes, the jerk is gone?'"

I skipped the next stone, *Elena Bowers, Our Angel Waiting For Us. d. 1918 4 yrs. 1mo. 8 dys.,* and veered onto a different path. Anything to take us out of the Spanish flu zone and its flock of lamb-shaped stones. *Karl Thorson, a flag bearing veteran, Born 1894, Died 1916,* lay to my left. "Or, put it this way," I gave Karl a slight bow and a sympathetic tap. He'd be used to Taps—or mortars. "Maybe you ought to drop to your knees every

morning and thank god or good karma that you busted Steve in bed with that woman."

"Nikki..." Sarah fidgeted with her zipper and gave me her don't-say-things-like-that look.

I pretended not to notice and nudged Cathy's arm. "Besides," I told her, "your boyfriend's one hell of an upgrade."

Cathy raised one eyebrow, nodded, and pulled her Chapstick out of her pocket. "Yeah, but I still wish Steve would get AIDS and die a slow, painful death." Cathy is always on the edge of rough: chapped lips, chapped hands, hair hacked short, well above her eyes. At least she had a clear view of Sarah's pained expression. "Shit," said Cathy. "Just slap me and tell me when to shut up."

I threw my stick into the brush and laughed. "Like you would. But anyway, there would go your alimony and child support, right into meds, hospital bills, and burying the sap when he dies." Cathy only saw the obvious if it pertained to someone else—or if I pointed it out. "Don't you think, Cath, that maybe it'd be easier to just get over Steve?"

Cathy turned toward me, lips curled and scowling. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Sarah broke the end off a willow branch and started humming to herself, some Disney tune, I suppose, and snapped pieces off as if to the rhythm of loves me, loves me not. "And I'd wish for a maid, and live happily ever after," she said. "What would you wish for, Nikki?"

It came out before I could think. "The power to heal."

Sarah's smile froze. Cathy muttered something I couldn't hear and pulled out another cigarette.

I knew what they were thinking, but they were wrong. It had been my secret wish since I was seven and found a red squirrel lying on the side of the road by my house. Except for its blown guts, it looked alive enough to run back up a tree. I poked the intestines back in with a stick and wished for a needle and thread, as if sewing the appearance of normality across its belly would somehow bring it back. But even at seven I'd passed the age where faith could move mountains or raise dead rodents. I buried it near the edge of the woods behind my house.

"Of course," Cathy said, "Steve's no Terry,"

The comparison was an insult, but I nodded and thought of the way your hair curled behind your ears and the weird little quirks we shared. How we'd wake up at the exact same time, even if you were in Milwaukee and I was home.

How you could slip quietly into a room, even a crowded hall, and without seeing you, I'd know you were there, and I would turn and see you watching me.

"But anyway, Nikki," said Cathy, always the skeptic, "you mean you want to, like, touch people, say hallelujah, and make them walk for the first time in twenty years?" She looked at me like I was candidate for a padded room.

"Something like that," I said, "but without the Jesus thing going on, you know, being humiliated, tortured, and condemned to eternal adulation by fanatics. I just wish I could heal people."

Then I tried to explain to them my fear that the gift's limitations might materialize as fast as the miracles. How at first I'd imagined walking into hospitals, sneaking in to pediatric wards to touch children with leukemia, or visiting diabetics during dialysis and saying hello with a handshake. Yet I could as easily imagine the empty beds, the shaken parents, their looks of despair and blame, what they'd think—*why couldn't you have come sooner*—and my guilt. I could never get to all of them in time. Would their lives depend on who I was nearest or who had enough money to pay my airfare? Would I have to charge for healing so I could keep my own private jet to take me from hospital to hospital?

Sarah's answer was predictable. "If it were me, I'd fly straight to St. Jude's for children," she said, "after I healed everyone here, of course."

The wind blew up, and I had to pull the hair from my mouth before I could tell her, "You don't get it, Sarah."

I walked backwards in front of her, talking straight to her eyes, trying to make her understand. "So what if I'm off at St. Jude's and one of your girls gets hurt. Gets hit by a car or something. What if she dies before I can get back?"

Sarah's face turned as pale as her hair. "Don't say that, Nikki." Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Well," I said, "say I can heal with a thought? What if I don't know someone's been hurt and they die before I could think them well? Would I get some kind of instant messaging? An emergency screen that pops up flashing inside my head? Would I be able to go back in time? Raise the dead?"

Sarah shook her head but didn't answer.

Cathy took a last drag of her cigarette; she doesn't like when Sarah and I get going, get too serious. "Shit, Nikki, don't get all messianic on us now. Not to mention," she glanced at Sarah before she crushed it with the toe of her shoe, "if you could heal everyone, no matter what, we'd

be buried past our belly buttons in gray-haired grannies and squirrels."

Sarah glanced at the mangled butt before she spoke up. "So Nikki shouldn't cure the lung cancer you're going to get?"

Cathy gave a choking laugh. "She could cure worse. Imagine if someone calls from the White House and says the president's been shot. You know, like maybe he and the vice were out hunting quail and the vice spins and *boom*, blasts the prez right on his back in the middle of the sage. What's she supposed to say? 'Sorry, but I'm right in the middle of scrubbing the tub and you know how if you don't finish and rinse the cleanser right away, you have a devil of a time getting it off?'"

Sarah held the back of her hand to her mouth, but she couldn't hide her smile. "Maybe she could cure you of smoking."

"Maybe I want to smoke."

I scuffed my heels on the path and listened, and though I didn't admit it, I knew Cathy was right. What if I cured someone of a pain that they didn't want healed, one in their mind or in their heart, a pain they wanted safely inside them? Would I level all humanity to a state of mediocre bliss, never too happy because they are never too

sad? Would I save their lives or deprive them of some infinitesimal joy that most people never achieve?

We were nearly back to the parking lot, rounding the last wooded hill. A squirrel sat on a tree-shaped marker, looking as if it was carved into the top, its shadow twitching across our path. We turned out of the sun and as we headed toward the parking lot. I was wearing your fleece jacket, but the wind blew right through the sleeves. I pulled the cuffs over my hands and held them tightly in my fists, wishing I'd grabbed one of your sweaters as well. My eyes burned, and rubbing them only made it worse.

Sarah pulled open my pocket, stuffed the rest of the muffin in and told Cath, "Make sure she eats it." Then she broke off toward her van, waving back at us and saying something about Gary getting tense if she was late getting home. Cathy shouted bye and kicked the back of my shoe until I smiled and waved. Then she took my arm and led me across the grass, away from the lot and Sarah, back toward the relative shelter of the mausoleum. We leaned back against the stones, and Cathy shook another cigarette into her hand, and crumpled the pack.

"You okay, Nikki?" she said.

I nodded and picked pieces of fuzz off your jacket sleeves instead of looking up.

"Rough day at work?"

"Not really."

"Is it Terry?"

"It's not that." I felt in my pockets for Kleenex and ended up wiping my nose on the back of my hand. "It isn't him at all."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Allergies. PMS. My head hurts like hell."

"Want some ibuprofen?" Cathy pulled her keys out of her pocket. "I've got some in the car."

"No," I said, "I don't need it."

"You know I'd help if I could."

The knot in my chest tightened, and I realized I'd been holding my breath. I breathed out and uncurled my fingers before I turned and looked at her. "I'm perfectly fine," I said, as if saying it would make it true.

Cathy only shook her head and zipped her jacket to her chin. "Let's get going," she said, "before we freeze to death."

It was nearly dark when I pulled in the drive, and D.C. circled my legs meowing like I'd been gone a week and barely let me kick off my shoes. I opened the fridge, stared into the shelves, and closed it again before I remembered that I was looking for the opened can of cat

food. I fed D.C. and pulled open the bread drawer, but I'd forgotten to go to the grocery store again. I wasn't hungry anyway, so I started filling the sink with hot soapy water to soak the few dishes from morning. The Damn Cat jumped on the counter; he likes to help these days, bored I guess, so instead of shoving him down, I rubbed his shoulders and told him he was a fat old pain in the ass and he'd lose one of his few remaining lives if he woke me up at five a.m. again. It seemed to make him happy because he mreowed and purred, butting his head against my arm and then against a glass.

It must have hit a plate or mug, because it shattered when it fell into the sink. D.C. sat remorselessly flicking his tail, staring at the bubbles until I shoved him off the counter. I thought I'd been careful and cleared any sharp edges when I reached in to pull the drain; my arm jerked back mostly from reflex. The cut didn't hurt at first, but when I held up my hand, a line of blood ran from a gash in the heel of my palm. I braced my other hand on the counter and stood staring at the cut, suddenly tired, a little dazed, not sure what to do with the mess I'd made of myself, and let the blood drip from my elbow to the floor. All I wanted was to go to sleep for a long, long time, so long that time would shift, curve, and

circle back around. But there was D.C., stretching his paws up my leg; whether he was concerned or wanted out I do not know, but I pulled a towel out of the drawer and knotted it around my hand and wrist, pulling it tight with my teeth until the pain throbbed red behind my eyes.

And I cried. Because I was tired. Because I despised myself for being weak. Because I still had to do the dishes and take a shower and clean up broken glass and wipe up the blood and I didn't feel strong enough to do anything. I slid to the floor next to the sink, ran a finger through the wet, red drops and drew your name on the linoleum. And I called for you, asked you to please, please, please come help.

I felt the draft when you opened the door, and I was surprised, though I wasn't sure why. You walked into the kitchen, snow in your hair and on the shoulders of your jacket even though we hadn't had any for weeks. You crouched next to me, smiled, and asked if I had a good walk. I said yes, and held your palm to my cheek, but it felt like ice. I was scared, but you took both of my hands, told me not to worry about a thing, and pulled me up from the floor.

If it hadn't been for D.C. howling, I might have slept until morning. I woke shivering, aching, confused because

sI couldn't feel you next to me anymore and I wanted to tell you *God, Terry, I had another strange, strange dream* and I wanted you to wrap yourself around me until we were both warm and sleeping again. But when I reached over and tried to lay my arm across your chest, my hand hit the cold, empty floor.

I had no other choice than to open my eyes.

Part II

Random Thoughts and Errant Questions

While I Wash Dishes

The eagle, barely fledged, tilts its head toward my son Ian as he takes another rock bass off his line. For the last half hour, the bird has perched on the high rocky outcrop down shore from our dock. Maybe it's waiting for its parents—no sign—or maybe it's simply hungry. The bird spreads its wings and whistles again, this time with what seems a note of impatience. I drop the dishcloth, lift my younger son and push the screen door open with my hip. "Watch this, Connor." I point toward the bird.

"Ian," I yell from the doorway. "Throw it the fish."

Ian shrugs and tosses it in a long lazy arch, tail over fin, into the water at the base of the cliff. The bird hops and unfolds its wings in an unsynchronized flap before it lifts off the rock edge and dives, not talons first like its parents would but drops head first like a pelican about to scoop a fish with its beak. The eagle hits the water in a tangle of feathers, flipping before it comes to float on its breast with outstretched wings. Ian,

blond and sun-brown, kneels next to the dog, his hand around the beagle's muzzle. Her bark comes out a muffled huff.

The eagle lies with its beak open. It whistles, partly lifts its wings, but can't clear their tips from the water.

Ian drops his pole on the dock, pulls off his shirt, and unties the canoe.

Connor asks, "Will it drown, Mama?" He understands. I tell him all the time—*you could fall, you could drown—I don't say you could die.*

I shake my head no and call to Ian, "Take the net," but I don't move to help him. He handles the canoe at least as well as I do.

Instead, Ian looks at the rope in his hand, and I know what he's thinking before he even drops the rope and runs back off the dock, past the canoe, and begins climbing the rocky hill to the eagle's perch with bare hands and feet.

I shift Connor to my hip and let the screen door slam behind me. "Don't even think about it," I yell.

Ian doesn't turn his head, and instead of slowing down, he climbs faster. Connor is too young to keep up, so I break into a clumsy run down to the lake and the bottom of the hill. Even half crawling up the hill I'm

unbalanced and angry, and I slip and scrape my shin.

"Don't you dare." I'm screaming. "It isn't deep enough."

Ian reaches the edge before I crest the top. It's nearly thirty feet to the water from where he stands, hands on tilted hips and looking so much like his father that I blame him, too, wish he were there to catch Ian and stop him or at least to be there and have to watch. Instead of me. I want to be home, hear them laugh as they open the door and walk into the kitchen to tell me that Ian went from the top.

Connor is fussing, pushing against my chest. "Let me down," he says. "Let me go." I set him down when we reach the top, but hold on to the back of his shirt, afraid he'll try to follow, go too close to the edge and fall. I wrap my other arm around a cedar and try to catch my breath.

Ian slides his right foot forward until his toes curl over the edge, leans and looks down at the water.

Connor twists and wriggles closer to the edge and the drop to the water. "Jump, Ian," he yells.

"Quiet." I jerk him back. I have a sudden urge to slap his backside. To pick him up. To cry. Instead I kneel on a clump of grass and wrap my free arm around Connor's chest, and when Ian rocks his body back I want to

scream *no*, to stop time, to grab the edge of the shirt he isn't wearing, to make god promise to keep him alive and keep him my son.

But Ian swings his arms out and up, and as he lifts himself off the edge and into the air, he turns and looks at me.

He's in the air a long time, arms spread, leaned slightly back, one foot leading, the opposite knee slightly cocked. His hair spirals upward like white flames, and before he pins his hands to his sides and pierces the surface, I let go of the tree, point toward the water and say, "Watch this, Connor."

Cathedral Pigeon

The pigeon wasn't the first bird that Francine brought to Dan. The first had been a gull. He was in his office at the back of the DNR visitor's station when he heard the main door open, quick footsteps across the tile floor, and Betty, the receptionist, start to coo and tsk, but he didn't pay attention until she popped her head around the corner and said that she needed his help up front. And there was the young woman that he later knew to be Francine. And the gull.

The bird lay atop a pale blue jacket on the counter, and as Dan leaned over the counter to get a closer look, its beak opened and closed in two slow, reflexive gasps and fell limp. That was the first time Dan saw Francine's particular gesture, how she raised the back of her hand to her mouth and looked directly into his eyes as if he could raise the bird from the dead.

"I'm sorry," he said, though he wasn't. For him it meant one less flying rat, but he never knew what else to say to do-gooders like her. He fumbled under the counter for a bag while Betty handed the girl a tissue from the box on her desk.

"At least you tried," Betty said as she rolled the girl's feather-ridden jacket and put it in a plastic bag. "It was kind of you to bring it in,"

Dan stashed the gull behind the dumpster near the back door, and would have gone back into his office except that Francine was still with Betty, her head tilted to one side while Betty pointed at a stuffed owl mounted high on the wall. Later Dan realized that he hadn't wanted her to leave so quickly, though he wasn't sure why. She was just another girl like so many others, a little skinny, long straight hair that was neither brown nor blond. He walked into the lobby, leaned on the edge of a display table and asked her where she'd found the bird. Pine Street? Her apartment was right across from the park? Yes, he knew the area well. Sometimes he took Sammer, his golden retriever, to run in the park, away from the roads, down where the trails circled the city pond. Funny that he never noticed her before.

It was a few weeks before Dan saw Francine again. She'd drifted so far back in his memory that if it hadn't been for Sammer and the worms, he might have eventually forgotten her. The rain that had drenched Dan during his field observations had lightened to a warm drizzle by the time he drove home, and when Sammer shoved his nose through the screen as Dan pulled into his drive instead of waiting for Dan to open the door, he decided to walk the dog the mile or so to the coffee shop to get a sandwich for supper. A few blocks from the shop, they rounded a corner and saw a girl squatting on the backs of her tennies, the fringes of her jeans wet from the pavement, picking something off the pavement and throwing it into the grass. She lifted her backpack off the cement and began to walk away from them, her open windbreaker flapping silently in the light breeze, only to crouch again. When she held her hair back with her left hand and threw what Dan now identified as a worm into the grass, he recognized Francine. On impulse, he unhooked Sammer's leash, and the dog was the first to run into, and over, Francine.

Dan ran to catch Sammer, and after he grabbed the dog's collar, he held his hand, palm up, toward Francine as she pushed herself up to her knees. She kept her face turned away from him.

"At least you didn't bring me a worm."

She cocked her head to one side and turned toward him, her eyes and shoulders softening, but she didn't smile. He reached for her hand to help her up, and her fingers felt cold and hollow.

On their first *real* date, a hike up to Hemlock Basin with Sammer as chaperone, Dan figured that Francine's initial attraction to him was based on her apparent confusion between biologists and veterinarians. Or maybe it was his height and his beard, well-trimmed though it was. That afternoon, Francine told him that he reminded her of something woodsy and wild, that maybe in a past life he'd been a moose.

Dan disagreed. He wasn't territorial. He rarely lost his temper, and he couldn't remember ever trampling anyone to a bloody pulp. They were walking next to each other on the trail, and Francine turned her head, looked up at him and smiled. "No, you wouldn't, would you?" she said after a moment. She didn't mean it as a question.

Francine's apartment was on the second story of an old Victorian style house. A narrow staircase ended at two doors; hers was on the right, and although Dan didn't have to duck as he went in, he always had the urge. Her two

cats treated him like friendly furniture, sat on his lap and his belly, and after a brief betrothal (between Dan and the cats) they accepted him as family, demanded he feed them and let them in and out their "kitty door," a window that opened to the roof of the back porch.

The first day Dan saw Francine perched on the roof with the cats, a light breeze blew her hair, and straight and fine, it lifted like feathers around her face. She was playing her flute, which she taught along with piano, at the music store several streets across town, and the music that drew Dan through the gate, into the backyard, and to the edge of the porch beneath where Francine sat. She leaned toward the edge and called for him to come up. He refused to move from the side of the porch until she climbed back through the window, afraid that she would fall if he left, afraid that if he stayed, he might not catch her anyway.

Dan's house was about a mile across town, and although he owned it, it wasn't as private as Francine's little apartment. Before Francine, he hadn't had a girlfriend for a while. He'd had girls, and he'd had friends, and two of the latter, Adam and Barry, had taken to spending most of their free time around Dan's place. Dan rated Barry

similar Sammer only not quite as smart and somewhat more annoying, but if Dan ignored his more obtuse comments, Barry made easy company. Adam was unlike either of them. He was barely taller than Francine, and his voice was softer than most girls'. Even though he was older, Francine treated him like a little brother.

A month after he met Francine, Dan stood in his kitchen with Barry while Adam described a girl he'd picked up the night before. Adam had one hand cupped in description and was biting his lower lip trying to find the right words when the front door opened. But when Francine came into the kitchen Adam was leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets, eyes half mast. Francine lay her fingertips lightly on his shoulder and asked if he was tired. Was he feeling okay? Adam gave a half a smile and nodded, his head still resting back against the wall. Barry coughed into his sleeve and turned away. Dan didn't smile or speak or move. He leaned back, and tapping one finger against the counter, he made a mental note not to have Adam stay take care of Sammer or look in on Francine the next time he had to go out of town.

That night Dan lay back in Francine's bed, rubbing her palm with his thumb and listened to Sammer snore and

Francine chat about her students, what they would do that weekend, and how Adam seemed like a nice guy.

"So it would appear." The answer was truthful and tactful. Adam changed girls more often than Barry changed socks—details that never bothered Dan before, but he as Francine compared Adam to her students, new, uneasy thoughts circled Dan's mind.

"Francine."

She stopped mid-sentence and turned toward Dan, leaning her elbow on his pillow.

"Why don't I just stay here tonight?"

Francine didn't answer. She slid further under the covers and draped one arm over his chest.

Dan reached up to turn off the lamp and lay in the dark, his eyes open, his breath uneven. Yet it wasn't the image of Francine with Adam that tightened Dan's chest. It was the thought of her as easy prey, and of how hard she could fall.

Dan liked dogs, especially dogs like his Sammer whose joys were simple: eat; sleep; play; obey your buddy Dan.

Francine, he learned, had an affinity for all animals, but especially for those that flew and those that were fragile, animals like the bat that crawled out of Dan's fireplace

one night. It was a Monday night, and since there was nothing much to do on Monday evenings, especially with Adam and Barry hanging around, they decided to watch a movie.

Dan was sitting on the couch with Francine tucked comfortably under one arm when the bat turned its face from the bricks and arched itself into random flight beneath the living room ceiling. Dan tried to ignore the bat, Adam's comments to Francine ("It wants to bite your neck"), and Francine's giggling. Sammer woke up barking.

"Quiet, Sammer," Dan told him. The bat landed on the bricks where the chimney met the ceiling.

Barry pulled his feet from the coffee table, and pushed himself out of his chair. "I'll get rid of the damn thing already."

"Leave it." Dan used the same command he gave Sammer when he wanted the dog to drop whatever he was carrying, but Barry didn't listen as well as Sammer. He picked up the fireplace tongs, and stood on the hearth reaching toward the bat.

"Dan said to leave it." Adam sat in a low wide chair across from the fireplace, his legs stretched in front of him, his arms on the wide, soft sides of the chair.

Barry grabbed the bat by one wing and carried it out of the room as it flapped on the end of the tongs.

Francine pushed Dan's arm away. "You're going to hurt it," and started to crawl his lap toward Barry.

Dan lifted her back to the couch, and said he'd make sure Barry let it go. He flipped the porch light on as he went out the front door, and he knew right away there was going to be trouble. Barry stood near the bottom of the porch steps. The bat was crawled in circles on the cement sidewalk.

The screen door slammed, and Francine slid past Dan and running barefoot down to the sidewalk where she crouched over the bat. "It's broken." She looked up at Barry. "You broke its wing."

Barry babbled about rabies shots and no way was he going to let some bat bite him and make him have to get those shots.

When Francine stood up Dan figured he'd get to find out what Francine angry looked like first hand.

"Don't you ever *think*?" Francine walked toward Barry, her feet white beneath her jeans. "Don't you ever think what it must *feel* like to have a broken wing? So are you proud of yourself?" Her voice was low, cold. She pulled the tongs out of Barry's hand.

Dan, surprisingly to himself, pitied him.

"I know I'm not as strong as you." Francine spoke quietly, her speech slow and brutally clear. "But I could take a crowbar, or these tongs maybe," she swung them close enough to Barry to make him flinch, "and smash your arm. Then maybe you'd have an idea of what you did to an animal smaller than your thumb." She took a step toward the house before she paused and turned back toward Barry. "But you know what, Barry?" She faced him silently for a moment, and then sent the tongs spiraling past him. "I would never stoop as low as you."

The screen door slammed behind Francine, and Dan let his breath go. Barry grabbed his shoes off the porch and headed toward his car. "Your girlfriend is fucking nuts, man." Dan shrugged and let him go.

Francine's voice drifted from the living room, and Dan thought it safe to get rid of the bat. The bat had stopped crawling, but its wings still twitched. Dan figured it would feel less pain than Barry.

They were in the garage the day Francine brought Dan the pigeon. Dan's truck had started missing on the way home from work, and he had the hood open trying to find the problem. Barry leaned over the fender looking under the hood even though he didn't have a clue. Adam, who may have

had a clue, sat on a stool next to the open door because it was Friday and he was going out later and wasn't about to get full of grease.

Dan hadn't had any luck finding the problem when Adam gave a low whistle. "Frannie's here, and she's pissed about something."

Barry gave his standard Francine joke since the bat incident: "I'm hiding the crowbar."

Dan picked a rag off the fender and wiped his hands. "If Francine hears that, you'll have to hide more than the crowbar."

Francine didn't say hello. She paced next to the truck pulling at the cuffs of her coat sleeves. "What is *wrong* with people? I mean, maybe the first car was too close to stop." She pushed the hair out of her eyes with the heel of her hand; her palms were dirty, something Dan knew was an evil omen. Francine hated having dirty hands. "But I couldn't *believe* it when the bird got up and tried to walk off the road and the *second* car didn't even slow down."

Barry leaned over to Dan and whispered, "She doesn't keep a crowbar in her trunk, does she?"

Dan kept his lips together and turned to hide his smile, glad that Francine wasn't holding anything that she

could throw. But what could he say? There was his girlfriend pacing in front of them, telling them how she'd chased the second car down, cut through the cathedral parking lot and pulled out in the middle of the next street, making the other driver swerve into the oncoming lane while she stood next to her open car door pretended to write his license number down on her notepad and make a call on her cell phone. Dan envisioned her pulling the phone off her hip like a six-shooter.

Adam crossed his arms on the bench and buried his head in them, his shoulders shaking. Barry laughed so hard he had to wipe spit off his mouth before he could speak. "So I suppose you think the cops are going to go arrest the guy."

Dan cringed. Francine stopped, threw her head back and gave Barry her most withering look. "What an idiot."

Adam sat up holding his side, wiped a tear from his cheek and asked the question that Dan was avoiding. "So what about the pigeon?"

"Well, what was I supposed to do? Leave it huddled next to the cathedral?" But she wasn't answering Adam. She held the back of her hand to her mouth, and looked steadily at Dan.

Dan threw the rag on the fender of the truck and sighed. "Let's take a look at it." Between his truck and Francine, he'd have no peace that night anyway. He circled his arm around her shoulders and led her out of the garage.

The pigeon lay on the passenger seat wrapped in an old blanket Francine kept in the trunk of her car. The scenario Dan hoped for hadn't come true. On the way to the car he'd mentally rehearsed his speech...it would be in so much pain...never would be able to fly again...he'd make sure it didn't feel a thing... But when he opened the door and took a look, the pigeon cocked its head to one side and looked right back at him. Francine leaned over and spoke to the bird and it turned its head toward her. Just like a dog.

Dan called the pigeon Lucky but mostly because he hadn't been that night. The cars' tires had missed the pigeon instead of flattening it on the pavement. Francine found a vet who specialized in avian wildlife, and she came back from the vet's later that night with the pigeon wearing two splints, one on its wing, the other on its leg. Lucky breaks, the vet told her.

At midnight, she was still sitting cross-legged on the floor dropper feeding the bird medicine-laced water instead

of sleeping curled next to Dan the way she usually did. Dan gave up waiting and turned over on his stomach to sleep. Francine woke him the next morning, stretched her arms over her head and yawned as she said she'd have to leave the pigeon with him when she went to work—after she went home to feed the cats, of course. Dan leaned over her and sure enough, the damn thing was still alive, settled in its box on the floor. "If you take the thing to your place, you could kill two birds with one stone," he said, "or feed two cats with one pigeon."

"Lucky had better be alive when I get off work at one," she said, and pulled the covers off them both.

Dan later had to admit that the pigeon was uniquely entertaining. How many guys have a garage pigeon? Adam had conversations with it. He'd perch the pigeon on a stool and ask it to testify on its own behalf: "Okay, Lucky, try to remember. Were the tires Firestone or Uniroyal?" Barry, not nearly as inventive, said the same thing every time he walked in: "What some guys won't do for a piece of ass."

Sammer was confused at first and tried to retrieve Lucky from his perch, but soon let Dan set the bird on his back. The bird, surprisingly, seemed to like Sammer rides.

Dan had never looked closely at a pigeon before. Lucky's feathers were greenish black and iridescent, its eyes as red as a loon's, and when Francine said the pigeon was a pretty bird, he surprised himself and agreed. Mostly, though, Dan kept imagining a god he didn't think he believed in somewhere above him counting sparrows.

Listening to Einstein

When Rachel takes the lit cigarette her friend offers and catches my eye before taking a drag, I know she is really mad. She hasn't smoked since before we married and left town, over six years ago now, and she knows it will piss me off to see her light up just two days after we move back. She leans against the pool table and turns her head, looking through me as she takes another drag, her eyes glowing black and defiant behind the rising smoke. She isn't tall, but when she throws her shoulders and head back like that, I know better than to mess with her. I turn back to the bar and order two beers, one for me and the other for Bert.

"Thanks," he says. "You always was a good friend."

You couldn't say Bert was a friend of mine. He was never really anyone's friend. So maybe Rachel was right and I had ignored him when he walked up to the bar, but Carl had

stopped in and I was asking him about a house I'd heard was for sale. Rachel told me she was bored, and when she asked Bert what he'd been doing the past few years, I was glad they both had something to keep them busy. I didn't know what the hell was going on when Rachel gave me that look a little while later and whispered *asshole* in my ear before she walked to the other end of the bar. Carl shrugged his shoulders and told me it looked like I had more important things to deal with than finding a place to stay. I didn't say anything.

Hardly anyone paid any attention to Bert back in school, and I'd ignored him just like the rest of the kids we hung out with at the old railroad grade behind the high school. Out of the six kids in his family, Bert was the reject. His brother Ray was stupid, but Ray's was an average stupidity-like flunking general math and always saying the wrong thing at exactly the worst time. But Bert was different. Even after they let him graduate from high school when he was twenty, he could still barely read. It was Mrs. Jones, the fifth grade teacher, who gave him the name Bert. She said "Welcome back, Mr. Einstein," when he came back to her class for the second year—he'd flunked even though he was the oldest kid in his class. Everyone hated Mrs. Jones, even the parents, and when word of her

latest tyranny got out that day at recess the other guys and I strutted around the playground pretending we had her torpedo boobs, and we hid behind the dumpster near her office window and shouted *Oh Alberta, Alberta Frankenstein* and ran before she could figure out which one of us to paddle. But Albert Einstein stuck, was later shortened to Bert, and when everyone, even the other teachers, used his new nickname the next year at school, no one considered the name an insult anymore. Not even him.

I want Rachel to know that I'm pissed off, too, so I turn my back to her, rest one foot on the rail, and for the first time in my life, I listen to Bert.

"Rachel was telling me about how you got a really good job and everything, and that you're checking out Scarecrow's forty to buy."

I nod, but wonder what else I'd missed while he and Rachel were talking. I wonder what else I'd missed.

"You know he don't have a job no more," he said.

I hadn't known.

"He got laid off, you know, and he and Becky's got two now. Yeah, another girl last winter, but she was born too soon, and Scarecrow could hold her in his hand, Becky said, she was so little." Leaning against the bar like he was,

Bert barely came up to my shoulder, and for a man, I'm not all that tall.

Rachel had told me what she'd heard when she was still in elementary school, that Bert had been born prematurely and had almost died, an explanation that was as feasible as the other rumor, the one that he was a retard because his parents were alcoholics. But their mom didn't drink, and their dad spent less time in the bar than the father of the guy who'd said out loud that Bert was fucked-up because his parents were drunks. He took it back after Ray laid him out bleeding in the dirt parking lot by the ball-field and it took three of us to pull Ray off him. But it was the girls, Rachel among them, who had circled Bert, and told him to ignore the jerk. They'd reminded me of does, the way they stood between Bert and the kid who'd hurt him, so wary and silent, and even though Bert was older and his teeth were so crooked in his mouth that it hurt just seeing them. He looked vulnerable as a fawn when they led him away.

I watch Rachel's reflection in the mirror behind the bar while Bert tells me about his job that he got at the little grocery store down the road. He unloads produce and

sweeps the floors and sometimes, Bert tells me, he helps at the front counter. Rachel is talking to her friend and her hands fly and she stomps her foot and laughs. I wonder what she is saying. Bert says he had his own apartment now, only a five minute walk from work. It's small, only two rooms upstairs in an old two story, but the couple who own the house and live downstairs are so nice—they keep the heat on even when it starts to get warm in April. Bert tells me that he babysits their two cats and takes care of both places when they go to visit their grandkids.

I nod as I listen, and when Bert stops talking, I turn away from the mirror. He's been watching Rachel too, his eyes magnified in his glasses. He's only a couple of years older than me, but his hair is thin and patchy and his jeans pool over the back of his boots. He's barely touched his beer; it isn't why he came here tonight. I can't think of anything else to say, so I remind him of how we all used to hang out at the tracks, about the time we picked up Carl's Dodge Colt and set it bumper to bumper between two pines. Bert laughs, and I tell him another. I ask him if he remembers when someone stole my Toyota, and I found out later that Rachel had taken it while I was checking out Terry's new ride. She'd parked it off in the woods and walked home alone—with my keys.

"Yeah," Bert smiles and rubs his nose with the back of his hand. "Ray said you was so stupid to let your old lady get over on you. But it mostly wasn't like that."

I don't know what to say.

"You know. Rachel and the other girls, they'd always just be there." Bert doesn't look at me. But a lot of the guys wouldn't pay no attention to them, kind of took advantage of them cause they knew they could."

I look at Bert, but I see him as he appears in the corner of my memory. Standing with no one in particular. Awkward and duck-footed in a t-shirt and ripped jeans, shoulders stooped and his hands in his pockets. Laughing at jokes that were never spoken directly to him.

Inattention

The other first grade teacher stopped Grace in the hall after the third day of school and asked if she had time to talk about a student.

"Isaac is bright and not a major problem," Hayley said, "but he always seems to be somewhere else, and since you have so much experience with this kind of student, I think he'd be better off with you." Haley smiled, and Grace waited for the rest. "I know both our classes are large, but with you he'd be less likely to slip through some pedagogical crack."

Grace looked at Hayley's unlined face and tailored dress, and in the scent of new crayons and stagnant careers, she understood. Hayley didn't need the bother. Isaac might make her look bad. He might be a problem for the substitutes when Hayley went to one of her conferences. But instead of telling the younger teacher to go slip

through a crack herself, Grace said she'd be happy to take Isaac as long as Judy, their new principal, agreed.

"Oh, don't worry," Hayley said as she turned to walk to her classroom. "She already did."

That Friday, they met with Judy, the principal who'd been recruited to straighten out the school (although Grace wasn't sure how the school board defined straightened or what they considered out of whack), and Isaac's mother, a woman not much older than Hayley, stood at the doorway with a baby on her hip and looked from eyes that wouldn't sit still. They sat around her desk, and Judy explained the situation to Isaac's mother and described Mrs. Grace Newton as a teacher with many, many, years of experience. Grace stiffened, but continued to smile. The young mother alternately nodded, rattled keys for the baby, and agreed with their assessment. The matter was finalized in ten minutes. Isaac's mother thanked them, picked up her diaper bag, faded red jacket, and left to find the rest of her kids on the playground. The rest? Judy lifted one eyebrow and smiled as she repeated the phrase. Hayley shook her head and laughed. Grace didn't see the humor and rose to leave, but instead of following her, Hayley leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs, and dismissed Grace with a wish for luck. As Grace walked back to her classroom

through the empty hall, she wondered if the boy would be more trouble than she'd expected.

Isaac gave her two good days before things began to unravel. On his third day in her class, he disappeared. Before Grace could do more than search the reading corner, the play area, and ask two girls if they'd seen him leave, he wandered back in, his t-shirt half tucked and his indigo eyes wide. Grace reiterated, "Ask if you need to use the boy's room," and he said he was sorry. He just forgot the rule, and he'd try not to do it again, really he would. Grace's small irritation dissolved. She fluffed his uncombed brown curls, sighed, and guided him, her soft hand on his bony six-year-old shoulder, back to his seat by the window. She'd been upset, but not angry. After all, it was only the second week of first grade, and for much of September the children still came to school half-asleep and argued over whose turn it was to feed the parakeet. And some were so spacey, Isaac more than the others. He'd chew on his pencil and stare out the window humming, a faintly euphonic vibration that reminded Grace of a hard drive, though quietly melodic. Every time Grace lectured for more than five minutes, his head veered toward the window, and his eyes glazed.

Two weeks and several disappearances later, Grace looked up from the book she was reading to her first-graders and didn't even bother to do a cursory head count class. Instead, she pulled her glasses down her nose and focused over the lenses directly on the carpeted spot where Isaac usually sat humming and staring out the window at reading time. He was gone—again. Silence in a classroom full of first graders, even when reasonably well behaved, was usually a bad sign, and she'd learned to recognize the particular vacuum of silence that arose when Isaac slipped out of the room. Grace marked her page, pushed herself up from her low chair in the reading corner, and maneuvered a path through the sprawled children over to the window where she leaned forward and looked over the top rim of her glasses. Sure enough, Isaac lay on his belly in the grass next to a lilac bush at the edge of the playground, slowly twirling a leaf in front of his face, one of the few that had fallen prematurely from the hundred-year maples that lined the street behind the school. A quiver of fidgets and giggles brought her back to the class, and she rapped sharply on the window with one knuckle. Isaac looked up and scanned the school with a wrinkled brow. When his too-wide eyes found Grace, his forehead unfurled, and he smiled. He jumped up, and without brushing the dirt and

grass from his jeans, he ran toward the back door of the school and down the hall into Grace's classroom, waving his leaf like an offering.

After Isaac was safely deposited in a spot next to her chair, his leaf tucked in her breast pocket like a corsage, Grace continued to read. Every fall she read *A Wrinkle in Time* to each new set of first graders in spite of what Hayley, with her current pedagogical research, had said about six-year-olds—that they were too young to understand about a five-year-old that adults were too old to understand. Grace read it anyway, and the children accepted fourth and fifth dimensions as easily as spelling rules. Some accepted them easier. She hadn't said much to Isaac about his behavior, not in front of the rest of the class, but as she read the book, her mind drifted back to the problem. Although the child wasn't willfully disobedient, more likely a game of escape-and-seek to get her attention, it was the third week of school and he needed to follow the rules. Wandering out of the building was a safety issue, and his disappearances distracted the entire class. When she finished the chapter, Grace realized that she'd let her mind wander away from the child himself, but to her relief, he was still sitting next to

her on the carpet, his head leaning against the stuffed arm of her chair.

That afternoon, after the children were loaded with backpacks and delivered to their busses, sidewalks, or mini-vans, Grace walked back into the school to find Judy. She was sure the new principal (or "administrator" as she called herself) would have some law governing Isaac's behavior.

Grace stopped at the doors, wiped her flat rubber-soled shoes even though it wasn't raining or muddy, and pretended to watch students on the playground while she waited for Judy to finish talking to one of the fathers. Judy tapped the toe of one sharply-heeled shoe and smiled while the father spoke. She straightened the hem of her unwrinkled business jacket, switched a clean manila folder (which Grace was sure she carried for effect) to her left hand and shook hands with the father, Grace turned toward her. She smoothed her wrinkled dress over her likewise wrinkled backside and walked up to the principal before she lost her nerve.

"Judy."

The principal stopped and turned halfway. "What do you need, Grace?"

"I'm having some trouble with Isaac, and I'd like to know your policy on his behavior." She refused to say she needed it.

"He's become a discipline problem—already?" Judy crossed her arms, the folder between her and Grace.

"No, not really. Isaac's a decent little boy, except that he's been wandering out of the classroom."

Judy raised an eyebrow.

"I've moved him away from the door, and I position myself near it as much as I can." Grace defended herself involuntarily, even though she hated to. "I have him sitting at a table near the window, but today he wandered out onto the playground again."

"Have you called his parents?" Judy looked at her watch.

"No."

"You know Grace, I really don't have time for this right now," she said, looking first over Grace's shoulder and then at her watch. "I have parents coming for a conference in five minutes. Just keep a closer eye on him, okay?" She turned away from Grace toward the sound of an opening door and told the couple who entered that she'd be right with them, but before she walked away, she turned

back to Grace. "By the way, Grace, don't bother the boy's parents right now. It wouldn't look good."

Grace's evening was no improvement.

She called Isaac's mom, just to see how he was doing, first grade being such a transition for the little ones. The boy's mother was all gratitude and devotion, Isaac having told her that Mrs. Newton was the nicest teacher he ever had, and he thought her glasses were pretty. No, Isaac wasn't there right now. He was in the woods behind the house looking for something. Grace had a hard time hearing the mother. In the background, a toddler whined, a baby started crying, the mother said "No, honey, don't grab that." Something crashed, the mother apologized, and the line went dead.

Grace's husband came home in a bad mood, again. At supper, he told her he wasn't about to listen to her griping after he'd listened to his boss's gripes all day. Grace hadn't thought she was griping. Her husband sat in front of the computer from supper until bed working on some project that he didn't have time to explain to her, and he certainly didn't need to hear about some dizzy little kid while he was so busy, now did he?

Her son's advice was simple. "Just crack on him, Mom," he said as he rummaged first through the refrigerator and then through her purse. "You know, like you used to crack on us," he said as he fished Grace's car keys out of her purse and walked out the side door. Grace couldn't remember ever cracking on anybody.

Grace's daughter had been in a fight with her boyfriend at school, and sat on the couch watching TV after dinner. She didn't answer when Grace asked her to load the dishwasher, and when Grace stood between her daughter and the TV, the girl shifted her head to one side and focused the single eye visible beneath her bangs on a spot somewhere beyond Grace, as if her mother weren't there. Grace went to bed early, and except for a migraine, she went to bed alone.

Grace's headache, barely dulled by sleep and Tylenol, followed her to school the next day. Just before the children came in off their busses, she prayed that Isaac had caught a cold and had to stay home. But from the doorway of her classroom where she greeted the children every morning, she watched Isaac walk down the hall. He held a jar in his hand, and he smiled when he caught her eyes.

Grace managed to keep him in view for the entire morning, but in one unguarded moment just after lunch when she leaned over a child's desk to explain directions, Isaac disappeared. Grace asked the two girls who sat next to if they saw him leave or knew where he'd gone.

"I *told* him he better listen to you," said Taylor, "but he disappeared anyway."

"He's outside," Megan said. "I watched him. He just left."

Grace looked outside, and sure enough, Isaac was walking beneath the line of maples next to the playground fence, running his hand over the bark of each tree as he neared the back door of the school. She pushed her glasses up. That was it. She'd let him go to art—the kids only went once a week—but he'd have to miss gym. Gym was their last subject on Fridays, and she wasn't going to let Isaac escape for the weekend without having a little talk.

Grace sat across from Isaac at the work table next to the window, the baby food jar he'd brought that morning and its bouquet of leaves between them. Isaac's art project was carefully rolled and held with a thick rubber band. He fiddled with his pencil, first chewing the middle, then chewing the remains of its eraser while Grace considered

what to say. "Isaac, we need to talk about this." Grace pulled the pencil out of his fingers. "Isaac."

His eyes reddened and swelled, but they didn't leave the window.

"Isaac." This time he turned toward her.

"I didn't mean to do it the first time," he said while he chewed his dirty thumbnail.

"I know," she said. "You didn't know the rules then, but now you do, and you have to follow them."

"I keep forgetting." Isaac picked up the rolled drawing and picked at the rubber band with a dirty finger. "Girls are better at rules. They always remember them."

"I'm sure you could remember if you try."

"I know."

"Then why don't you try?"

"I don't want to anymore."

"Why not?"

"If I know the rules, then I'll forget how to."

"How to what?"

"How to get away."

"How could you forget how to get away?"

"By the rules. If I have to think about the rules, I can't think myself away."

Grace smiled. One of the few perks of teaching first grade was hearing a young child's theory of relative reality. Instead of interrupting, she leaned both elbows on the table, rested her chin in her hands, and for the first time, she really listened to Isaac.

He was like the rubber band, he told her as he pulled it off his poster with grubby fingers. He held it up in front of her face with both hands as if he were going to shoot it, and explained that if he let his mind wander all the way over there, (he stretched his right hand toward the window until Grace winced) that if he forget everything else, the rest of him would suddenly follow like this—Isaac let go with his left hand. The rubber band snapped his right fingers and he dropped it on the floor.

"Except it doesn't hurt," he said, shaking his right hand and pressing it between his knees. They both laughed, and Grace picked up his unrolled paper. It was a watercolor of a small hill, the lines and colors unfocused and distant.

"This is lovely, Isaac." Grace slipped out of her teacher-voice.

"That's where I want to go," Isaac said and pointed to a hill a mile or so outside the window. "It's just over there."

He was right, Grace thought, after looking at his picture again. It was the same hill: no houses, roads, or fences, but with a recognizable group of pines at the top.

"I'd love to go visit a hill like this, too," Grace said, and not only to answer Isaac. "Well, Isaac, if enough parents can drive, we could take a field trip."

"I don't want everybody."

"But it's just down the road. We could plan a lunch."

"Please, Mrs. Newton? Can't you just look at it with me? He gave her a tentative smile. But you can't listen to anything, and I know you always get mad when I don't listen, but you got to forget everything else."

Grace agreed, meditation sounding like a cure. The rest of the class still had fifteen minutes of gym, and she would let her mind wander out the window with Isaac's, but just until then. Grace settled in her chair and looked out the window at Isaac's hill. She couldn't focus her mind on the hill at first, her attention drawn by unfinished lesson plans and the stacks of papers that she had to sort and file every Friday afternoon, but Isaac was adept at dazing off. He slouched in his chair chewing his pencil, his eyes glazing in seconds, and when he began to hum, the files and lessons faded from Grace's mind.

The clock ticked and counted the minutes until the class's return. A stack of math papers waited on the edge of the table for comments and stickers, and yellow chips of pencil paint vibrated on the corners of Isaac's lip. Grace wasn't sure when his pencil slipped or when the metallic tick froze and faded. She didn't feel the walls recede or hear the window shiver as the classroom slipped her mind. The window blurred and vanished, the hill came into focus, trees defined themselves, lines converged. The classroom unglued, dissipating beneath a snap, a flutter, a breeze, and Isaac's ephemeral voice.

"Hold my hand."

Without moving, she reached toward him, and disappeared.

Jericho

Hamid leans back on his chair, his arm resting behind Shadi as she pulls out her passport and explains the situation to me. Mehrdad is unusually silent. Instead of talking he folds a straw between his fingers, tying it in knots while Shadi tells me that she can fly home and still return to the university—or at least it's safer for her than it is for them. "It is less dangerous for women to cross the border," she says, "not as difficult for us to get out again." No one explains what might happen to the men if they try to go back. We sit for a moment. The ring of the cash register and laughter from another table bleed into the silence at ours.

I take Shadi's passport and open it. When we'd met last semester in biology lab, she'd told me that her name means "happy." But the picture doesn't match my friend or her name. It's almost like a picture of a stranger, someone from a different place or even a different time. In the photo, her eyes are the same brown, but she isn't

smiling, and her hair and neck are invisible beneath a black hijab. Shadi is small and thin, hardly bigger than my little brother. Even dressed in her usual gray sweatshirt and jeans, Shadi is the most beautiful person I know, except maybe for her boyfriend Hamid. They remind me of exiled royalty.

"I'd better get going," I tell them. "I have to go to the library before I get Joshua." I stand up and grab my tray and books. Sometimes I resent having to pick up my brother after his school gets out, but today I'm relieved to have a reason to go.

Joshua is ten, and since his school doesn't have busing and it's on the way home from the university, Mom and Dad made it my job to drive him back and forth. After we get home, I drop my chemistry text on the coffee table and lie back on the couch with the cat, but as soon as I pull a blanket over Polly and me, Joshua calls to me from the kitchen table. He is frustrated with his religion homework—it figures since he can't explain to me what his actual assignment is except that it has something to do with religious history. As usual he can't remember for sure, but he tells me he might have to write "a bunch of facts or something like that."

"Exactly what did Mrs. Anderson tell you to do?" I ask him from beneath the blanket.

"She just said 'Ask Hannah.'"

I'd gone to the same parochial school, and his assignment is vaguely familiar. It's been over six years since I graduated from the same parochial school, but his assignment is vaguely familiar. I slide Polly off my belly figuring that the sooner I help him scam his way through this, the sooner I can get back to my couch and the cat. I pull his religion book across the kitchen table and flip through the first chapter and then the second, but I don't find any concepts more interesting than *liturgical year* and *Eucharist*. I feel like swearing, but I don't. The best I can tell Joshua is to start with what he remembers from Genesis and to work his way toward Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. In our parents' bedroom, I pull the heavy family Bible off the bookshelf, the one with footnotes covering the bottom of each page, and sit on their bed scanning the table of contents for something that isn't morbidly dull.

When I get back to the kitchen table, Joshua is finishing his third "fact," a little story I'd told him earlier this year about Jacob from the Old Testament and how he'd ended up with four wives—Josh's religion book only mentioned one. How convenient, I'd thought, that the

school book mentioned Rachel but forgot about her sister Leah, the two servant girls, and their competition to see who could have the most kids. Now that he's almost eleven, Joshua thinks that's funny.

I drop the Bible on the kitchen table and open it to the section I hope will keep my brother busy, The Book of Joshua.

"Check it out," I tell him. "You're in your own action and adventure story, way better than that religion book trash." I flip through the chapters until I find a story I vaguely remember—the siege of Jericho. A typical melodrama, a PG-13 movie with enough swords and screams to cover for the lack of plot. For seven days, seven priests blew horns and carried the Ark of the Covenant once around the walls of Jericho.

"So anyway," I slide the Bible toward Josh, "after they march around the city and blow their horns on the seventh day, Joshua supposedly tells everybody to shout, and the walls fall down."

"Cool." Josh leans his chair back against the counter and doodles on Mom's grocery list, but at least he's listening. "I'll have the guys start marching around the school tomorrow."

I tip his chair back to the floor. "Write it down, brat," I tell him. "It was probably an earthquake, but who cares as long as you get an A."

I continue reading the story, this time straight out of the book: *They observed the ban by putting to sword all the living creatures in the city: men and women, young and old, as well as oxen, sheep, and asses. Maybe I'd forgotten. Or maybe I'd never paid attention. Or maybe I'd read the story a different way when I was a kid, with the good guys winning, and the bad guys begging forgiveness. But that's not what it says here. The city itself they burned with all that was in it, except the silver, gold, and articles of bronze and iron, which were placed in the treasury of the house of the Lord.*

"They even killed the animals? That's sick." Joshua leans his chair back again and looks at me as if I'd written the damn story myself. "So you're telling me that Joshua attacked Jericho, like just because it was there and they could steal all the gold?"

"No. I'm telling you that it's just a story." I turn and walk back toward the couch. "It probably never even happened."

"Right." He 's learning sarcasm and likes practicing on me. "Like only an idiot would believe that God told

them to kill everyone, even the little kids." The chair legs hit the floor with a thud, and the book scrapes across the table. "Oh, Hannah," he says, "thanks for naming me Joshua."

I push Polly toward the back of the couch and crawl back under the blanket with her. I don't know what to say. I was nine when Joshua was born, and when Mom and Dad couldn't make up their minds on a name, they let me decide.

The blue glow from the computer monitor is the only light left on in the house.

I sit at my desk, wrapped in the blanket off the couch. It's snowing again, and just the sound of the wind past my window makes me shiver. Everyone else is asleep, and instead of studying for my chemistry quiz, I've Googled Jericho. I know I should get to my real work, but I'm too fascinated by the pictures of stone walls and skeletons and what I'm reading to shut down the screen.

A guy named Garstang excavated the site way back in the 1930's, and he said that the walls did suddenly crash. Proof, he called it. Some German archeologists from an earlier expedition had said that Jericho was already abandoned by Joshua's time, something they admitted even though they were also trying to prove the "truth."

I try another site, and Kathleen Kenyon's name comes up for the fourth time. Her team excavated Jericho in the 1950's. According to Kenyon, the city's walls fell at least seventeen times, and at least seventeen times they were rebuilt. She blames earthquakes and armies, but unlike the other archeologists, she said she couldn't tell if Joshua was one of Jericho's destroyers. According to her, the walls may have been down, the city burned, and its people long gone before he drove his herd of nomads through.

There's one point that all the scientists agree on. Jericho was a spring fed oasis of fertile land near the river Jordan and built along a favorite route into Canaan—the city was a bull's-eye. Everyone with an army would have marched toward Jericho.

It's snowing hard, and I have one hand on the steering wheel as I scan local radio stations with the other hoping to hear a last minute school cancellation. I can barely see through the swirls, and even though I'm only going thirty-five, the Blazer's tires slip.

"You're making me late again, Hannah." Joshua also likes blaming me for his tardy slips, even if he's the one who can't find his homework.

"I suppose you'd rather be dead."

"Might as well be with Mrs. Anderson."

I turn my head slightly toward Joshua. He is leaning forward, and I laugh at the mock horror on his face. But in the second takes me to focus back on the road, I veer too close to the shoulder. The curve is slight, but Blazer's front tire catches the edge of the blacktop and we fall into a slow spin and I brace both arms against the wheel and Joshua grabs the door handle in one hand and the dash with the other as the Blazer's headlights shine on the road and then through the trees and back on the road and we'd be in trouble if there were a car coming or oh, God, a truck with a plow. We hit the bank in a gentle explosion of white. As the snow settles around us, I see that we're facing the opposite direction. For a moment, I can't remember exactly where we are.

When we were lab partners last semester, Shadi was the one who'd asked me if I wanted to walk to the cafeteria and eat lunch with her. Sometimes I help her with her English, or as Mehrdad calls it, American. But she helps me understand what words mean.

At lunch Shadi tells me that she is lucky.

"Yeah," I say, "but I am seriously lucky." She listens as usual, leaning slightly forward, one finger up to her lip, her cheese and lettuce sandwich still on her plate while I tell her about my little accident that morning. How all Joshua had said when we hit the bank was "sweet." How a neighbor recognized us as he drove by on his way to work and stopped to make sure we were ok and to call our dad on his cell. "My dad said he'd be damned if I was going to drive that truck again before spring, and the Blazer wasn't even dented," I tell her as I pull a set of keys out of my pocket, the proof that my dad had given me his four-wheel-drive Subaru for the rest of the winter.

Shadi looks at the keys and shakes her head. "That's not what I mean." Her voice is quiet and she speaks carefully, almost as if I'm the one who doesn't understand the language. "For example, you said once that you were glad you only have one brother."

I nod, and even though I hear no judgment in her voice as she goes on, I feel like a spoiled six-year-old.

Where she comes from, she tells me, her kind of luck is rare. That her father makes enough money to send her out of the country, or even that he has a job. That her mother had been allowed to go to university. That their friends Mehrdad and Bilal were already in America and could help

get her, and later Hamid, out and settled in a foreign country.

Then she tells me a story about another family they knew. Abdul and his friends were throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers as they passed by in their bulletproof jeeps. The rocks bounce off them. "It's a popular thing to do, especially in his neighborhood," she says. "It is their most common game." But over twenty *shahide* had come from their camp, and both boys and girls liked to brag that they want to be martyrs like them. The Israeli soldiers are young, nervous, had reasons to be afraid, and that day, one of the jeeps turned around and circled back toward the boys.

Some of the parents, she explains, try to keep their children awake at night. They make dolls out of old scraps, play games, or read to the children so they'll be too tired to go out during the day. But that is a difficult thing to do.

"My mother and I went to visit after we heard," Shadi says. "Abdul's mother could not stop shaking. She told us the children play with stones. They play Intifada. They don't understand what martyrdom is. Abdul was ten, you know, just a kid."

The part that I can't forget, though, is that he was shot in the legs. The soldiers are allowed to shoot them there, but Abdul was shot fifteen times before he died.

Joshua is old enough to stay home alone, but let him come to class with me the next day when his school has an in-service. He is beginning to notice that little brothers are popular with my friends at college, especially with the girls, and of course, with Mehrdad.

In the cafeteria, Hamid is playing his usual role of benevolent prince. He waves us to our chairs and offers Joshua half of his orange. Shadi is reading ahead in our chemistry text and holds her homemade sandwich in her hand without eating it. Hamid leans toward me over the back of Shadi's chair and nods toward Mehrdad and Joshua. "So," he says in his slow melodic English. "You have brought a playmate for Mehrdad, someone on his level."

Mehrdad sticks his tongue out at Hamid.

"I think I was just insulted," Joshua says. "What grade are you in, Mehrdad, kindergarten?"

Mehrdad has coaxed Joshua into a chair between himself and the aisle. "Watch Professor Mehrdad," he says to Josh. He rolls a spit-ball and adds it to a line of ammunition already at the side of his glass. He shakes the water out

of his straw, loads it, and as Hamid tells me "See? Worse than a child," a cash register drawer bangs shut. As a student walks past our table with a tray in hand, Mehrdad takes aim and bounces a spitball off the back of his head. Joshua slides lower in his chair, and Mehrdad, his cheek twitching, frowns at my brother when the victim turns around in confusion.

It's Friday, and Mom and Dad are out with friends so I stay up late and watch TV with Joshua. Shadi has flown back to see her family. She's been gone for two and a half weeks, and Hamid doesn't expect her back for another. Sometimes I watch the news now, and I don't change the channel when a documentary comes on. On the TV, an elderly Palestinian woman walks near the edge of a dirt road with her grandson. She pushes aside the long grass with her foot and reveals the foundations of the home her family had been forced to leave when she was a girl. Her grandson kicks rocks on the side of the road and screams, "I'll kill them. I'll kill them all." In the next scene, two Israeli boys sit at a desk. One points to a passage in the scroll in front of him and says: "It's written right here that it's our land." The other boy, a little older, shakes his head and explains, with hesitation, that the situation is

complicated. There are no easy answers. The boy with the scroll doesn't reply at first. Then he pushes the heel of one hand into his eye and asks why anyone would murder his best friend.

The last clip shows crumbled houses, bodies lying bloody and mangled in the street, and a gray-faced woman sitting on the ground still cradling her dead child. The reporter holds a handkerchief over her nose and mouth as she asks questions: How does the woman feel knowing she is the only survivor in her family? How will she live with the torture of those memories? The mother of the dead child answers in English that I would have thought surprisingly clear before I met Shadi: "You American women talk constantly of equality. Well, you can take a lesson from us Palestinian women. We die in equal numbers to the men."

"When's Shadi coming home?" Joshua asks. He's curled with Polly on the loveseat.

"In a week." I sit up, toss him my blanket, let him fall asleep without correcting his mistake.

I turn off the TV and lie back down on the couch wishing my parents would come home soon. I need someone to talk to, someone to take my mind off what I'm thinking—that

the story is, after all, true. Images flash through my head like waking nightmares. I can't stop imagining what it was like. Seeing them—especially a girl looking from the window of her home, the kind that was built into the city walls during the time of the first Joshua. She's younger than me, almost grown-up but still at home helping her parents. This is the seventh day she's watched from that window, the last day that Joshua ordered his priests to march the Ark of the Covenant around Jericho. She's holding her brother on one hip, and he leans toward the opening, kicking her with bare, dusty feet as he points to the procession.

"Look," he says. "Look."

And she does. But when she raises her eyes above the gold ark and the priests in their blue and red robes and sees what is in the distance, I feel her chest tighten. Even standing still, she can not catch her breath. On a hill across the wadi, half obscured by the wall of dust rising behind the procession, waits a dark mass of people whose fluid borders may, at any moment, breach and spill downhill toward Jericho.

Pete's Garden

I

Pete was a practical man, and saw no future in taking up cemetery space, not even next to his wife and in-laws. He used space well. He'd built a plain but sturdy two story house on one acre, planted an apple orchard on the east side, built a greenhouse on the west, and tilled a family-sized garden in the back. The garden and orchard blossomed, but in spite of his care and cultivation, his wife didn't thrive. Their harvest was a single son.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to buy some cemetery plot," he told his son Dan four weeks before he died, right after the doctors at the veteran's hospital declared his cancer terminal. "I buried your mother next to your grandparents, and they'll keep her company," he said as he leaned on his shovel pretending to scan the onions for weeds. He avoided his son's eyes, wiped a calloused hand on his blue overalls. "Go tell those boys of yours Grandpa

needs some help in the garden picking supper." He headed toward the rows of carrots. Pete hated wasting money. He saved milk cartons, bread bags, plastic baggies, yogurt containers, and his basement stored two years worth of canned beets, peppers, pickles, and tomatoes. Just in case. He had a Depression Era survivor's thrift and a retired widower's simplicity. His pension left little to save, but he saved what little he could.

"Don't let those funeral home buzzards rob my grandkids," he said to Dan three weeks before he died. "Crooks. You and Tracey need money for my boys. Keep the house. It's bigger than that cracker box you have in town, and the boys'll have room to run." Pete had built the house himself in 1948 for five thousand dollars, two pieces of information he'd tell anyone willing to listen.

In the evening they sat in the living room as usual, Pete in his chair, fingers laced across his belly, and Dan sitting on the davenport.

"How's the contract talk going?" Pete asked Dan. "Are they still talking layoffs?"

Dan nodded as he fingered the doilies on the back of the couch, the doily his mother had crocheted and that Pete still lay across the furniture.

"There, like I told you. Sell your place for what you can and take this house. Now go get my boys. Tell them Grandpa wants a hug before bed," and he leaned back in his chair thinking about everything he had left to do, and how little time he had left to do anything.

Pete gardened religiously and organically. Memorial Day marked spring's last frost. Labor Day marked autumn's first. New Year's was time to order next season's seeds. He started celery on the windowsills by Ash Wednesday, and tomatoes and peppers by Easter. He lived in and from his garden, and almost everything he ate, fresh or canned, came from it. He preached against herbicides, pesticides, carcinogenic chemicals, the companies that developed them, and his neighbors who used them. The cancer didn't know or care. It took him anyway.

"Just till me in," Pete said to Dan two weeks before he died, his sentences shortening with his breath. "I'll make great compost. No chemo in me." But there was morphine in him, and he forgot that the boys were playing on the living room floor not far from his chair. The younger, a three-year-old, stopped rolling his truck and

stared at his grandpa's face. The five-year-old cried as his mother carried him from the room.

Pete didn't bury many friends during World War II. He buried only a few of his friends, and only a few of the enemy. The smell was what he remembered most, the smell of road-killed deer emanating from human bodies and human faces—if the faces were still there. The lucky dead melted into the grass and moss, leaving bones, gear if it wasn't scavenged, and dog tags. They didn't smell nearly as bad as his friends who, a decade and continent later, lay wrapped and stacked, decomposing inside bags while they waited for their ride from Korea back to the states.

"No bags, Danny. No bags," he said from his chair in the living room a week before he died. Dan sat silently next to the chair, his face nearly as gray as his father's in spite of the sun and scent of summer sifting through the kitchen screen door.

"Finish the garden," Pete said before the hospice nurse gave him another dose of morphine, and he forgot everything that he still needed to do.

II

Dan took a Mason jar to the funeral Mass. Civil and canonical law required arrangements other than planting Pete in the backyard, so he was cremated, and a week after died, encased in a decorative oak box supplied for a fee by the funeral home. Not that Pete would get to keep the box, or that he would have wanted to keep it, just that it was supplied, for a fee, so he could look good for his funeral. They'd pour him into an urn later, for a fee, and it wasn't the fee that made Dan bring the jar, but the idea of the fee, and how mad Pete would be if he were stuck inside some tacky, expensive urn. He'd be much more at home in one of his old canning jars on the fireplace mantle. Father Seamus eyed the jar in Dan's hand as they walked out of the church basement after the funeral luncheon, and Dan figured the priest would have disapproved of his plans. But Father didn't ask, so Dan didn't tell. He took the jar to the funeral home, and filled it with his dad's ashes, or more precisely ashes and bones because seeds of bone remained even after the oven and the grinder.

Dan put the house in town up for sale. He knew his dad was right about the house, the family, and the cemetery plot,

so two weeks after Pete died, Dan moved his family. The first night in their new house the boys stopped crying for their grandpa. They argued over him instead. Dan heard his wife gently scolding the boys in the living room. They shouldn't fight over Grandpa now should they? How would Grandpa feel if they dropped his jar and broke it? He certainly wouldn't like being sucked up by the old blue Electrolux now would he? Dan watched from the kitchen doorway as she carefully pulled the jar out of four small hands and settled the boys in their grandpa's chair, the jar safely between them. They rocked a few minutes, fidgeted, and ran past him in the kitchen and out the screen door into their new backyard. Before he went to sleep that night, Dan considered moving the jar to the mantle. But he left it in the chair, the same chair Pete had died in two weeks before, and went upstairs to where his family slept.

Dan woke early the next morning. He would have slept longer except for the distinctive slam of the old wooden screen door that opened the kitchen into the backyard and garden. And that Tracey was still asleep next to him. He jerked awake to look out the bedroom's back window. The boys, still in pajamas but wearing the slip-on rubber boots

their grandpa had bought for them, were playing in their section of the garden, the plot that Pete had left unplanted just for them, with a toy dump truck and the two little trowels their grandpa had also bought for them so they could work in the garden, too. They were dirty, as usual, but safe and pleased with their dirt.

Clothes on and coffee made, Dan took his cup out to the garden to see what the boys were doing. He walked between the peppers and past the tomato plants toward the bare patch of soil where the boys squatted, churning the dirt with their trowels.

"Come see what we're doing, Daddy," said the three-year-old.

"Grampa told us the garden is ours," said the five-year-old. "He told us to keep planting it every year."

That was when Dan saw the smudges of ash on his children's foreheads and fingers, and that was when he saw the jar in the shade of a pumpkin. He picked up the jar, and saw what was surely a worm resting in the powder of gray ash and black dirt, stretched just behind the diagonally climbing letters *B a l l*.

"Grampa told us we could have his jars," said the older boy. "He said he saved everything for us."

"We're planting Grampa's garden, Daddy," said the three year old as he squatting on his heels stirring the ash and bone into the soil.

Just like he'd told them, Dan thought, and emptied the remaining ashes into the soil.

Trifocals

Paul was thirteen before he saw the individual leaves on trees. His eyesight was poor from birth, but his father didn't want to spend money on glasses, and his mother didn't care. Several teachers pressed the issue, but the glasses became a priority only after the latest threatened retention and stated the corresponding reason—Paul could barely see to read. Thirty-five years later, Paul was the teacher rather than the student, the father instead of the child, and more like his mother than he would ever admit. His wife, Emily, saw the family resemblance—among other things. Emily also saw how important it was to Jessica, their only child, to go to a university, high tuition or not, where her father wasn't a professor. So that morning, thirty-five years after Paul saw leaves for the first time while he walked home from school, no one else was home to remind him to make an eye appointment, or to make that appointment for him, or to tell him how late it was

getting, because Emily had taken the week off work and was halfway across the state visiting Jesse at her new university. Paul's current set of glasses was six (or was it seven?) years old, but he refused to admit that he needed a new pair, that is, until he misread the time on the microwave clock in the kitchen and arrived at nine-fifteen for his nine a.m. lecture.

Paul knew he was late when the campus parking lots were full and still. He took one of the last remaining slots which, of course, had to be the farthest away from the building where he taught, and half ran from his car to the lecture hall, his long black coat flying behind him, into an almost empty classroom. The two girls sitting at a table near the blackboard, one in a red sweat-shirt and one in green, turned toward him as he walked in. He dropped his bag on the table closest to the door, looked at the wall clock and then back at the girls.

"Hi," they said. Paul nodded, still catching his breath.

"Everybody figured you must've got in a wreck," said the one in blue. Paul wasn't sure of her name, and he wasn't about to humiliate himself any further by guessing. The girls were two out of the blur of students, and since Paul's Twentieth Century World History class was a lecture

rather than a seminar, he didn't know them well enough to remember their names or recognize their voices. He used a seating chart to call on members of the class.

"Yeah," said the girl in red. "The rest waited until, oh, about ten after. Then they left. We stayed, just in case you showed up, you know, so we could tell you."

Paul leaned on his bag, and trying to hide both anger and humiliation, he thanked them.

"Not a problem," said the girl in blue. "We have a class at ten just down the hall."

Paul promised to see them on Tuesday, on time, and said good-bye.

Paul walked to the adjacent library, borrowed a phone book, flipped through the yellow pages, and dialed numbers until he found an optometrist with the time to see him and a twenty-four-hour-or-you-get-the-glasses-free delivery schedule. Three lectures, one student conference, and twenty-nine hours later, Paul handed a check to the receptionist for a pair of trifocals that would "correct the multitude of visual deficiencies" that the doctor had found during Paul's exam.

Paul waited until he was home to try them on, but after trying to watch the news through three different lenses, his eyes burned and his head ached. His wife

called at ten to gave him the yes-Jesse's-doing-fine report. Paul was too tired to talk, and since Emily was coming home on Friday anyway he told her he needed to go, said "yeah, ditto," to her "Love you." He set the new glasses on the night stand (he'd donated the old pair to a mission through the optometrist's office) and went to bed.

Paul was both pleased and disappointed when he wore the glasses the next morning. He tried the glasses on after his first cup of coffee expecting things to be in focus, and they were. But even after polishing the lenses and drinking a second cup, shadows appeared, shadows that materialized on objects he thought he knew, shadows that nothing but the glasses could explain.

Later that morning, Paul stood in front of the classroom at five minutes to nine and fell thirty-five years back to the day he saw, for the first time, the individual leaves on the trees as he walked home from school. Only now it was the students. He didn't recognize any. A day earlier they'd been a mass of mere annoyances in t-shirts and jeans, some topped with nose rings, others with tattoos, many with both. Their black nail polish and pierced lips irritated him, and when they came to his office for make-up work and unconsciously flicked their tongue studs against their teeth, he could only point to

the syllabus and give cursory explanations of their assignments. But now he looked at his lecture notes, and back up at the class, this time focusing through the bottom lens and then through the middle, and something had changed. He tried all three lenses on a kid in the front row, a freshman twisting his lip ring between finger with nails polished black, and through each lens the kid looked the same, but something had changed about the boy, had shifted like shadows across the hours of a day.

The projector he'd ordered arrived. He thanked the student who brought the cart, wondered if he'd met the kid before, and as he pushed the cart into position, he introduced the DVD he'd brought to show his students.

"Every year I get some student who asks 'Just who started World War I, anyway?'" he paused and pushed his fingers through his hair, "instead of saying 'It's more complicated than that,' I'll let you see for yourselves." He started the DVD, dimmed the lights, and found an empty seat near the center rear of the lecture hall so he could watch the documentary with them, and see who watched the movie and who fell asleep.

While the students slouched and fiddled and gradually settled, Paul pulled out the seating chart and began matching names to bodies. So that was Chris sitting on his

lower right. Paul hadn't thought much of him before. The guy seldom looked up, rarely offered an answer. Even now he looked sullen, his arms crossed, eyes focused somewhere to the right of the screen, and while Paul studied his student, anxiety grew like a blemish on the side of the young man's face. Chris was worried, Paul knew he was. He was worried about his girlfriend, no, his fiancée, and how she was still living with her alcoholic dad and that was what Chris was thinking about when he wasn't paying attention in class because he needed to find an apartment but his job didn't pay enough for tuition and rent but he had to get her out now before...

Paul wasn't sure what he'd seen, or if he'd seen anything. On the projector screen, a mob cheered, the commentator spoke, but Paul barely heard either because he'd accidentally locked his eyes on Brent, and Brent's hangover throbbed visibly in his temples to the music at the party he'd thrown in his dorm room the night before. That explained why he snored in class. Paul tilted his head downward, and through the top set of lenses in his glasses he knew that Amanda, the girl in front of Brent, would begin a liaison with the baboon sitting next to her, and that she would hate him for it in two weeks. And Claire shouldn't smile so much at Jamie who was just

eighteen and couldn't take his eyes off her chest even without the accidental encouragement, and if she only knew what the boy was thinking...

Paul Jerked. No, he hadn't spoken. The students were still looking at the screen, not at him, all except for Ryan who stared at him with violent blue eyes. Paul caught his direct gaze long enough to see himself from the boy's perspective, his graying hair diabolically on end above his thin face (so much for straightening it), the confusion behind his glasses, and his uncanny resemblance to Ryan's father who'd died of cancer just one year earlier. Paul looked back at the boy and gave him half a smile. He understood now. It wasn't anger—it was pain.

On Thursday, Paul came to class exhausted from the previous day's revelations. Not that all of them were depressing. Along with department rivalries and affairs, he learned that his new graduate assistant didn't dislike him after all, but she was so shy that she barely spoke. And when the department head passed Paul in the hall for the fifth time that week without acknowledging him, Paul didn't take it personally. The man was clearly preoccupied with an unexpectedly pregnant wife, a detail he was reluctant to share with either faculty or his own teenage kids.

In spite of his fatigue, Paul entered his nine o'clock class on Thursday armed with a revised seating chart. He had to move Jamie away from Claire. Paul himself found it difficult to focus on her face, and he couldn't lecture with Jamie's thoughts inside his head. Claire, impressively snug in a lavender sweater for such a slight girl, now sat two rows away from Jamie, who didn't need the distraction, and nearer Chris, who did. When Claire swiveled into the chair next to Chris with her books and her spontaneous smile, the anxieties over his job, tuition bills, and his fiancée's safety that clouded half of his face shimmered slightly, and settled less heavily than before. Before Paul started the lecture and discussion, he acknowledged Ryan with his eyes which accepted with a barely perceptible nod. And the insecurity glowing in the front row boy's black nail polish faded when Paul leaned toward him as the clock passed nine and said, "So, Josh, let's try to remember how that war began."

In spite of a better morning, fatigue had resettled on Paul by the time he drove home Friday afternoon. He just wanted to rest, to forget, not to think, and the longer he wore the glasses, the more he saw. He was determined not to notice anything, but as he pulled in to the gas station, immanent divorce shone on the forehead of the woman in the

mini-van who was pulling out. She wouldn't tell her husband until Sunday, but Paul saw him sitting at a kitchen table weeping without shame in front of their two small children. And even though Paul didn't look at the clerk's face when he paid for his gas, petty larceny wrinkled the back of her hand as she took his cash. She hadn't even stolen anything—yet.

At home, Paul pulled off his shoes, left his coat bunched on the bench over his bag, and went directly to the bedroom to lie down. On his back, his eyes, closed, glasses on the nightstand where his old pair used to sit, Paul felt like a coward. He was too weak, too small to contain what he saw. He missed his wife. He missed his daughter. He missed watching them brush their hair in front of the bedroom mirror. He sat up and walked to the dresser. Emily had left the brush for him. A hint, she said. He pulled it across the top of his head. His hair stood up even more. He went back to his glasses, put them on, and ran the brush through his hair again. In the mirror, Emily materialized on the end of the bed, and Jesse, still in preschool, sat behind her mother brushing Emily's long black hair. Time shifted, and Jesse was a teenager brushing her hair in quick, brutal strokes as she

explained how awful her Spanish teacher was. "Why don't you ever listen?" she asked.

Paul looked away from the mirror and turned the brush over in his hands. In a barely perceptible smudge on its handle, he felt Jesse's need to be one her own, and her stronger fear of leaving them. And in one long black strand of hair, he felt Emily's loneliness, an old ache, heavy and malignant. Paul set his glasses on the nightstand and picked up the phone. When Emily answered, he closed his eyes, but he could still see.

Coyotes

Jack stood in the early morning dark holding a lantern above the coyote's body, anger beating in his pulse. He'd finally hit the animal, his aim effective despite the blurred vision in his right eye. This coyote had stood, either stupid or defiant, while Jack had aimed his 30-30 and the dim figures of other coyotes dispersed into the woods. It had fallen about thirty feet behind the chicken coop where the clearing submitted to forest on the north side of his property. Jack leaned closer to the animal but pulled back quickly, turning his head away before he took another breath. The coyote stank. He'd hit the animal full in the face. He couldn't tell exactly where, so little of the skull was left, just slivers and gore that melted into fur, not so different from what he'd seen in France. Using his rifle as a cane, Jack steadied himself and kicked the coyote's hind leg back with the toe of his leather boot. It was a male. The animals that escaped were likely its mate and half-grown cubs, which could

explain why Jack's small flock of chickens had become such a temptation that fall. But it was almost morning, a light frost was crystallizing on the edge of lantern's glare, and no coyote would dare come back before nightfall. He was cold, too cold to deal with the carcass right away. He'd warm himself with some coffee and breakfast and wait for daylight. Jack limped his way back to the cabin.

Jack had bought the cabin and forty acres six years earlier, just after World War II, and five months before his wife took the kids and left. The property was his alone now, a refuge guarded by water on three sides. The cabin faced a lake to the south, a mile long crescent shaped barrier between Jack and the few other cabins that had since sprouted on the opposite shore. A small, swift river fed the lake from the northwest. Until it iced over in December or January, the only crossing was at the logging bridge a couple of miles down the road. At its eastern end, the lake narrowed into a large stream, fell through a series of small rapids, and filled the next lake in the chain, creating the isolated peninsula on which the cabin stood.

He hadn't brought Laura and their children to the cabin until the day the sale was final. The woman who sold

it was young and childless, a veteran's widow who could have been Laura's younger sister except for something missing in her eyes. She'd accepted his offer which was less than many soldiers, back from the war with year's worth of unspent duty pay, would have given her. She'd left everything there for Jack and his family—the dishes, bedding, even the twelve-foot fishing boat with its Waterman outboard. The young widow, wincing at Jack's scarred eye and cane, had waved the cabin away with her hand and avoided his eyes as she explained how the cabin reminded her of her dead husband, something she couldn't bear. After she'd left the cabin, helped into a car by an impatient man she'd only introduced as "my friend, Tom," Jack turned to his wife. Laura stared toward the lake where their daughter and son waded, tall and graceful as cranes, in the cold spring water. He wanted to ask her what she thought, did she like the place he'd found, but something helpless in her expression unsettled him. He walked away irritated, unable to articulate, even to himself, whether her silence had raised in him more pain or anger.

It wasn't until a loon called from the middle of the lake that Jack realized how long he'd sat holding his cup of

coffee in front of the wood stove, and that it daylight had edged across the lake. He set his cup on the table, opened the stove, rearranged the coals with the metal poker, and added a good sized piece of maple. He might be gone for a while. He grabbed his plaid wool jacket from the hook next to the door, a pair of lined work gloves, and his rifle that stood next to it, just in case. He let the screen door slam behind him as he left the cabin to bury the coyote.

The animal's shattered face had solidified in the night, and clumps of blood stuck to its matted fur. Jack peeled the coyote off the frozen weeds by the hind leg. It was lighter than he'd expected, its nails worn, bones evident beneath the beginnings of its winter coat. Jack walked slowly over to his truck, once again using the rifle as a cane, holding the coyote and its stinking fur as far from his body as he could until he flipped into the box. As he opened the door and settled himself on the cold cracked seat, he changed his mind about burying the coyote. He slowly headed up the drive to the woods. He'd dump it off some logging trail at the end of his property. Maybe it would be a warning to the rest of the pack, and he didn't have to worry anymore about who might stumble across

such a mess and come back upset, or if the dog would drag it home.

Five days passed before Jack again heard the yipping laughter of coyotes. They were back, circling the chicken coop behind his cabin. They'd woken him from an uneasy dream, and he sat up in bed, slapped the window twice yelling for the sons-of-bitches to leave before the distinction between sleep and consciousness became clear. He swung his feet to the bare floor, grabbed his twelve-gauge Winchester, annoyed that he'd forgotten the rifle behind the seat of his truck, and limped naked out of his dark bedroom, past the dead woodstove. He reached in the pocket of his jacket, fumbling with one hand for shotgun shells. Only two left. By the time he opened the kitchen door and stood shivering behind the screen as he slipped the shell into the gun, their calls faded, ricocheting between coyote, cliff, lake, and coyote. They escaped to the north again tonight; it was the only direction they could go.

Jack closed the door, shutting out the last of their echoes. He was wide awake and cold. He picked his watch up off the table, walked over to the wood stove, opened it, and turned over the ashes hoping to find a few live coals.

He didn't. Still shivering, he grabbed a handful of dried moss and several slivers of cedar from the kindling box to build a new fire. After he'd struck a match and lit the kindling, he checked the time. It was already 4: 45. He gave up trying to sleep. After he'd dressed and started a pot of coffee on top of the wood stove, Jack went back to his coat, checked his pockets and then rummaged through the kitchen drawers. Two shot gun shells and none for the rifle. He'd have to make a trip to town.

Jack normally drove to Barney's, the gas station-post office-grocery store, only once a month. He'd pick up his veteran's check, cash it, buy butter, flour, kerosene, gas for the truck and generator, and drive back to the cabin. His '34 Model T Joker was eighteen years old, still a serviceable wood hauler but devoid of springs. Holding the gas pedal down for twelve miles down a dirt road and two more miles over blacktop made his right leg ache. And he was uneasy around people. He didn't know what to say to them, especially when they stared or looked at him and turned away.

There were no cars at the store when he pulled up, but through the window, the owner's wife talked and laughed behind the short counter. Jack straightened his hair with his fingers, more than most men pushing fifty had,

straightened his back, and limped a little more heavily than usual up the porch steps. A kid pushed the door open just as Jack reached the top and skittered around him without looking up, and ran down the side of the road, his oversized jacket flapping behind him. The wife turned toward the door, her laughter quietly died as her eyes settled and then veered from Jack's shuffling approach.

The old woman across from her picked up a small package, said good-bye to the wife, and looked up at Jack from beneath her hat.

"Hello, Jack," she lifted her right hand, her fingertips almost touching his woolen jacket sleeve.

Jack nodded.

"Do you have all your wood in yet?"

Jack mumbled, not sure where to look or what to say. The owner's wife wiped her hands on the front of her cotton skirt, picked up a set of keys from a shelf behind the counter, and went in back.

"Would you like some help?" The woman reminded Jack of a bird, a bird too small to hunt or have any real fear of men. "I could send a couple of the grandsons out to help. Instead of hanging around my house wanting something from grandma, they could be helping you instead."

Jack refused to admit that he could have used the help—the thought of someone else's boys at his house tightened his chest. Instead he thanked her and lied, said that his wood was cut and already piled.

The owner, Barney, walked over from where he'd been stacking cans of tomato juice and beans on a low wooden shelf. "What can I get for you, Jack?" he asked.

Jack told him what he needed, two boxes of shells for his 30-30 and one box of #6 twelve gauge shells.

High or low?" Barney reached up to a shelf on the opposite wall.

Jack asked for low brass. They weren't as reliable, but low brass were cheaper, and he only needed them for partridge and rabbit.

"A letter came for you," said Barney's wife.

Jack startled. She was standing next to the glass counter. He hadn't seen her come back.

She held the letter toward him. "It's been here since last week."

Jack hesitated, thanked her, but as he reached out to take the letter, the paper slipped through his fingers and slid away from him across the floor. Before Jack could move, Barney leaned over and grabbed the letter.

"From your son?" he said as he handed the letter to Jack. "Bet you're glad to get this?"

Jack agreed to one statement or maybe to both.

"Well, we'll be thinking about him, won't we?" Barney said. His wife nodded and agreed. Barney went on about war and injustice and how it changes a person forever while the register rang and Jack paid the wife for his shells.

Jack stuffed the two smaller boxes in his pockets, said good-bye, and went out the door toward his truck. He carefully held the metal rail, but before he made his way down the stairs, he leaned against the wall, feeling as if he'd forgotten something important. The door was shut behind Jack, but he caught Barney's voice through a slightly opened window. "...getting shot up in the war like that, pitiless the way she left him..." Jack waited and listened, but only until he heard the owner's wife answer that she wasn't so sure about that.

Thirty minutes of ruts and dust didn't improve Jack's mood. That bitch, he thought, not considering whether he meant Barney's wife or his own. Laura had left him only a year after he was sent back from Europe, half-blind and one leg smashed. Few people had asked him what had happened, and he didn't answer the few who did. When they learned he was France, near the front, most people nodded with silent

respect, as if that explained his seclusion as well as his limp. He let them make their assumptions; it really wasn't his fault anyway. He'd been the one driving—the other guy started the fight. It was that asshole's fault that he'd swerved off the dirt road and into the trees, trees that looked so much like the autumn canopy under which he now drove.

October had been his favorite month, an interlude of color between summer and snow, the month of clear mornings and brilliant nights, the time for cutting firewood and hunting. But now the wary shadow of her face and the blurred reflection of his teenage son and daughter looked back through the rear window, driving away under the orange, yellow, and red fringes. He'd never forgive her for leaving him, taking them, turning them against him. He'd tried to explain what it was like coming back broken, angry, unable to find a job. It would make anyone change. But her answer reverberated, a dull aching memory. "That's the problem," she'd said. "Even after the war, after all you've been through, you still haven't changed."

Jack sat in his chair on the front porch reading the letter from his son, Paul. *The captain said we should be out of here by Christmas.* So the radio was right. Maybe a cease-fire was coming. *Wish it was tomorrow.* Jack

didn't know what to wish. If his son came back, Jack couldn't blame the war for his son being gone. *Leslie sent me a three-pager and some pictures of their baby last week. Ugly kid.* Jack stared at the picture seeing the nondescript faces of his infant son and daughter instead of his grandson. How could they possibly be old enough for infants and wars? He hadn't seen his daughter in years, not even at her wedding only a year before. But it wasn't his daughter who had kept him away. Laura would be there, and she would be happy. He didn't know what he might do or say if she were. *The baby looks like its dad, but maybe it'll take after its favorite uncle when it grows up.* He tried to imagine his son's face, but all he could see was the single blurred image in fatigues that Paul had sent him the previous Christmas. Even the blur reminded him of his wife. The children had her eyes, cautious and guarded. *Maybe I'll come out to your cabin next summer. Maybe? Could it be that much trouble? You could write once in a while.*

Jack sat on the front porch oiling the 30-30, the letter from his son stuffed in the pocket of his red plaid wool jacket, trying to forget the future that the letter had brought back, the future that had somehow slid sideways

into the past. He'd tried not to be so angry with them. If only she'd listened to him, had done what he said. But he still saw her standing between him and the children, her eyes wary and defiant as if he would hit her, or them, and the old anger grew.

A howl from the lake re-aimed his thoughts, a different howl than the coyote's, eerie even in daylight, and followed by laughter. The loons were still on the lake eating his fish, three of them now since one chick had survived the summer. Couldn't the idiots tell that it was October? Even the families across the lake with their packs of noisy brats had the sense to leave. He was the only one who stayed, except for his chickens—and the coyotes.

He was ready that night when the coyotes came back. He sat at the table in the unlit kitchen, shotgun across his thighs, window cracked just enough to hear the chickens' alarm. For only the second time, he saw the coyotes before he heard them. The first coyote, he supposed, was the female. She was a little larger than the others, about half the size of the collie his kids used to have. The cubs followed her into the clearing behind the cabin, four of them, smaller than their mother, gangly pups but moving with feral grace. Silently, cautiously, one of

the cubs rounded the garden gate where Jack had covered his last surviving plants from frost. The cub nosed beneath one section of the tarp and gently pulled off one of the last ripe tomatoes. The pup ate delicately, belly on the ground, three paws for balance and one to hold the tomato. Jack almost forgot why he was watching until he heard the screech. Jack shot from the window, completely missing the female as she ran, one of his hens already dangling in her jaws.

He wouldn't have tried to trail the pack, but the moon was orange and high, and a steady wind blew in from the north, enough to cover his footsteps and scent. Jack knew the woods and the trails to the north, and he wasn't going to let her keep taking what belonged to him. For all his age and injury, Jack could move quickly if he wanted, and he'd tracked at night since he was young. The coyotes yipped as they ran, at first giving Jack a clear direction to follow, but the branches closed around him, and the laughter echoed. Not long in the chase, he heard her circle; she was bringing them back to the clearing. He turned just a half mile into the woods. Now they were between him and the cabin. He could get them when they realized they were trapped and tried to head back north.

He didn't see the branch, and he didn't see the stump or where the rifle flew when he tripped. He pulled himself up and sat on the stump, trying to reorient himself. Blindness would have been better than the distorted views created by the semi-darkness and his blurred right eye. A shadow appeared to his right, but disappeared as he turned toward it. An animal ran behind him, but once again it was gone before he could turn to look. More shadows crouched, materializing legs and snouts as they circled closer. One yipped a cub's high laughter. Another answered back. Another raced a few feet from Jack, taunting him—Jack was sure of it. She materialized last. She stood in front of him close enough that he could see her eyes. She woofed once, and the pups fell into formation behind her. Then she raised her nose, howled, and they were gone.

Jack pushed himself up off the stump, left his rifle on the ground, and stumbled after them.

Moses' Misunderstandings

I

In the beginning when Adam was ageless instead of old, before he named the toad and God, the cricket and Eve, and before he threw the first stone, his time with Eve was in its ancient infancy. With the wisdom of newborns, they spoke without words. They didn't need them. Adam woke from an early nap by their favorite pool, eyes still closed and crossed arms still pillowing his head, he knew that his insatiable Eve, his restless child, had wandered again. He let his mind explore the darker, unpathed sections of the garden until her heart beat through his own ribs. Even more the miracle, as he thought back centuries later, was that behind closed lids he felt her turn toward him at the moment of contact, and before long, the grass would rustle, part, and Eve would sit cross-legged next to his side, and through the heat of her palms on his chest he'd feel her begging him to follow.

But Adam's job was creating names, so as he and Eve walked the blue shadowed paths, he dragged the tops of his toes over the soft forest floor and called it *moss*, and slapped his palm on a rough brown trunk and pronounced *cypress*. Eve didn't say anything. She pointed at a grazing dappled gray, and Adam named it *horse*. She looked toward a group of others, and through her eyes Adam saw a whole herd of galloping possibilities, but when he changed the name to *horses*, she only turned her head. All the way back to their pond Adam named the *antelope*, the *jackal*, and the *hyena* while Eve wandered silently ahead of him toward the low canopy of trees.

At the pond, while Eve held the rumble of fur up to her cheek that Adam called *cat*, he assigned her another name—*gardener*.

"Why?"

Adam didn't know what to say except *question*.

"That's not an answer."

Adam puzzled over this *answer* but she had spoken the word into existence, and he had no idea what she meant.

So Eve picked tomatoes for Adam and killed insects with a stone and a grimace while Adam continued naming their world. But the more words he created, the less he

understood, and the less he understood, the more he chose to know.

The first morning that Adam woke alone in the garden and shouted "Eve" to call her back, he knew she wasn't listening, knew she'd wandered out of his reach. He could not see her until she climbed into sight over the large gray rocks at the side of the pool. And he could not define what he saw in the corner of her eye and lip as she smiled and walked toward him beneath the willow by their pond, her hands raised to the thin green leaves that slipped through her fingers.

He could not name the tight unease that grew in his chest after she dropped her hands and head and walked past, and the realization passed between them that everything she was trying to say slipped past him unheard.

Some time later, on that last day, she wandered much farther than ever before, and Adam didn't find her until he left their softly pebbled path in a clearing cramped by stingless nettle and a rocky stream. She stood under a spreading tree, its branches burdened by unpicked fruit and the encircling length of the animal he'd named *snake*. Eve held one hand palm up toward it as if in invitation.

"Eve."

Her eyes acknowledged him without leaving the animal. It lowered its head closer to her hand, flicked its tongue once, but didn't move away as she ran one light finger under its throat.

The stone flew before Adam knew he'd picked it up. It hit the animal before he knew why he hated it, or even that he did. The snake's body convulsed and withdrew in rippling silence, and the trees over-ripe fruit fell like dreams at Eve's feet. She was out of sight before Adam could stop her, a barefoot echo that he chased downstream. Adam caught up just as she paused on the far side of the stream, clothed in a free flow of hair as darkly tangled as his thoughts.

II

Eve didn't remember being born, and what she recalled of the garden ached like a lost limb. The time between the stone thrown and Cain was gone. But Cain was a miracle next to her breast, held close in lambskin, whose infant will beat through her body stronger than memory. She, whom Adam had named the mother of all, named her son because he was her own. And from the time that Cain could walk, he dragged his mother's hoe, and she caressed his face with

calloused hands for every grain he offered to her. Adam followed his flocks through the hills, and when he returned every evening, he ate the bread that Eve baked from the grain that Cain had helped her plant.

And when her next child was born, Eve named him Abel and thought she had two sons. But Abel belonged to Adam. He pushed away when Cain tried to help him walk. He pulled his wrist from Eve's dusty fingers, and ran away in a flurry of laughter and black curls to the hills and the sheep and his father's stories. And while Eve and Cain dragged their hoes across their fields, and dust clung to the sweat on their skin, Abel wandered with his father and chose the best lambs as his own.

The year that the rains did not fall and only the thistles remained green, Cain's crops began to wither, but Adam and Abel drove their flocks to a far stream. When they came back so many days later, they watched Eve and Cain drag skins of water from the well to pour on their crops. And when the spring frosts hit late and hard, Abel brought the newest lambs into his tent. Cain had nothing to cover his crops. The next day Adam walked with his staff across Cain's withered fields and pronounced them a waste before turning his back, and Abel turned to Cain. "If only you'd tried harder," he said. Cain let go. He

picked up a stone the size of his heart, and aimed for Adam. But it was Abel he hit and Abel who died, and when Adam learned, he raged and cried and cursed until Cain stumbled out of sight. Eve rocked her dead son, knew she'd lost both, and wished she'd been the one to die.

III

After Abel died, Eve pulled her scarf over her head, smiled very little, and spoke even less. But even when she was too old to hear, she listened.

She knew what they said, Seth's daughters-in-law.

It's her fault.

But they called her Grandmother when they helped her up every morning pulled her wet robes over her head to wash her with rags and buckets of warm water.

Dirty old thing.

They propped her in pillows, brought her warm tea, some bread, a child to hold.

She's to blame.

They laughed, nursed babies, stroked their round bellies, and bragged of their sons.

Why do we bother with her?

They offered Eve soup, told her she needed to eat, and left a bowl, forgot about her, and jingled away with their soft arms, round cheeks, dark eyes.

But their children came to Eve. She cradled the bare dusty feet of the latest restless child who crawled onto her lap, pretended not to hear what their mothers said about her sin and her shame, how she must have lost her mind with her teeth.

Every evening, when the men came home from the hills and fields, Seth's daughters-in-law dusted Eve off and set her out for display. They spoke around her as if she were dead, a relic, an artifact.

Let's put her over here.

Adam and Seth came every night. They called her Mother.

But when the dust from a group of travelers rose in the distance, the children ran to Eve. Their dirty fingers wrapped her hands and braced both elbows as they helped her stand. They ran ahead and around her as she limped toward the newcomers, her head covered except for two ancient eyes that searched for another lost son behind every beard, and in the reckless feet of every child.

Part III

Some Kind of Real

Ring True

My grandmother, Cecile, wore a single white gold wedding band. When it was new, it had seven small diamonds inlaid in a straight line across the top, but when my mom and then five younger brothers were born and Grandma washed milk cans in cold water instead of playing piano or her Hawaiian guitar, one of the stones fell out. She had six stones left, which would have been one for each child except that she was pregnant with her seventh. But this was the fifties, and they lived on a farm, and when she found Duane, their fifth child, in a coma one morning, there was nothing the doctors could do. He died of meningitis a day later, a month before he turned five. Grandma's stones had proven true—a missing child to match a missing stone. She never quit crying for Duane. I remember her crying over pictures, letters, and the potatoes she peeled every night. No one kept the ring after she died. She's buried next to Duane, and her ring is buried with her.

Michael's original wedding ring, the one blessed by the priest when we were married, went missing shortly before our first anniversary. We were living on the eastern prairie in Colorado, and it disappeared during a going away party we had before we moved to Europe. At first we thought it slipped off his finger when he was goofing off outside with some friends. I was upset, but even though we were young—Mike barely old enough to legally drink and me barely old enough to vote—I understood that some things just happen. I'd almost lost my own while showering in our first apartment just a few months earlier. My rings were too big and nearly slipped off my soapy finger and down the open drain. Mike told me later that he knew someone had stolen his ring off the back of our kitchen sink, the spot where he always dropped it when he washed his hands. Back then we couldn't conceive of this type of person, but we understand so much more now.

In the first decade or so of her marriage, my mother thought taking her wedding rings off would be a bad omen, that as long as the rings never came off her finger, her marriage would stay intact. She believed in marriages staying intact. I was four when my dad punched a hole through the basement door and my mom hustled my brother and me into the car—just for a drive, she told us. When she

stopped crying, I asked her if she could get us a new daddy. She was silent for a while. I remember the profile of her head from the back seat of our Plymouth. She didn't turn toward us when she said that wasn't how things worked. I don't remember if it was twenty minutes or two hours before she drove us home. That was the deal. She always drove us home. Twelve years later when our cat Shadow accidentally clawed the back of her hand, she was years past any lingering superstition. Or idealism. She was grimly pragmatic as she coated her hand with lotion and worked the rings off before they cut off the circulation. When my dad smashed his fingers with a hammer, he dawdled and had to snip his ring off with wire cutters. As usual, he left it to my mother to arrange repairs. She did, but she took her time. My three sons have made them grandparents now, but the scar is still visible in his ring.

Michael's second ring never fit as well as his first. I bought it for him the second Christmas after we were married. He opened the box at my parents' house, said thanks, and put it aside. He rarely wore it, but he'd notice if I didn't wear mine. *What is wrong with you?* he'd ask. It was the question I heard the most, and the one I was never supposed to answer.

On a more recent Christmas my friend Matt and his girlfriend had matching rings custom-made for each other. The twin rings of hammered gold looked like ocean waves circling their fingers. Jessie wore her ring on her left hand while Matt wore his on his right. Maybe the positions of their rings reflected the positions of their hearts. When Matt showed me his new ring, I made what I thought was a logical assumption and congratulated him on their engagement. After all, they'd been living together for a couple of years. But Matt was quick to correct me when I called Jessie his fiancée. She was his *best buddy*, he said, and no, they weren't getting married. I wondered what Jessie would have thought of his correction. Jessie never said much. Now she's Matt's ex-girlfriend—several times removed. It's been over a year and two or three new girlfriends since they broke up, and while Jessie's finger is bare, Matt still wears his ring. And talks about Jessie every time I see him. And asks me why he's unlucky in love.

Don't ask me, is all I tell him. The older I get, the less I'm sure about anything. Take my own rings, for example. I'm not much for jewelry, so I wanted ones like my mother's. Small, simple, white gold with one discreet diamond on the engagement band. The trouble is that after

twenty-two years, the rings have rubbed each other painfully thin. The back of my ring finger is scarred, and if I bump my hand against anything hard, the finger will bleed.

Being left-handed exacerbates the problem, but not for everyone. Jerry is also a lefty, and he wears his ring on his right hand. Since I knew he'd lived in Europe, I asked him one day after a meeting at work if he'd switched hands: Europeans typically wear their wedding rings on the right. He told me no; he wore it on the right so it wouldn't get in the way.

I understand. My rings are usually in the way. When Michael and I lived in Europe, I switched my rings to my right hand—gratefully. It helped hide my stigma as an American in a still occupied nation, and for the first time, my rings were on the hand that I used less. I kept them on my right hand after we moved back to the states until a friend ridiculed me saying that rings on the right hand suggested that I was *available*. I'm not sure if I was more ticked off at her implication or at myself for switching my rings back to my left hand.

I don't wear my rings at home anymore, but I still wear them in public. It seems to me that public display is their only purpose, and that rings are no more than social

symbols we use to tell others that we're married; after all, the two people involved in a marriage know that they are married, even if they're not together.

Any half-blind fool would know that Gina is married, at least if determined by the size of her social symbol. The diamond on her engagement ring rivals the marbles my youngest son launches through the living room with his catapult. And apparently the stones have bred. Her bracelet and watch are encrusted with diamonds, and by the way her feet sparkle, I've wondered if she sprinkles them on her toes while her nail polish is wet. Whether she is happily married or not, I do not know. She laughs loudly in the school parking lot when she picks up her daughter and older son. Her youngest is three, a Down syndrome boy I've rarely seen except for arms and legs waving from a carseat in the back of their SUV. I've never seen Gina's husband with her or their kids. I met him, once, when we co-chaperoned a field-trip to a local stream for a fourth grade class. We irrevocably pissed each other off after a one minute debate on environmental law, and I felt my first pangs of sympathy for Gina. A friend said that Gina and her husband take separate vacations—and don't bring the children. Now when I see Gina laugh and jingle

her way down the school hallways, I wonder if her glitter hides some subtle pain.

Michael and I took our three boys to my parents' lake cottage for two and a half weeks this summer, our longest vacation since we had the kids. Neither of us wore our rings. I unpacked our clothes, dropped the rings in a drawer, and there they stayed. Our older boys, tanned lanky adolescents, made spears out of sticks, twine, and screws. They snorkeled and speared suckers and rock bass while their little brother, fresh from kindergarten, piloted their supply vessel, handing them spare weapons and tossing the fish into the belly of his sea kayak. At night, Mike and I read the journal of Mungo Park, a doctor who traveled Africa in 1796 trying to find Timbuktu. In less than a year he'd learned several languages. After two decades, Michael and I were only beginning to learn each other's. Mungo helped put our lives in perspective. He was robbed of everything but his journals, stripped of all but his hat and left to die. Slaves were embarrassed to be seen with him, but they had pity and shared their food with him. A family of women found him huddled in a thunderstorm beneath a tree. They gave him food and a bed and sang him to tears. When he sailed back to his home in Scotland, he left Africa more grateful than discouraged. Mike and I

were reluctant to leave the cottage when our weeks in the woods were over. Another life waited for us at home. Unanswered mail, unanswered questions, his echoing anger, and my despairing silence. When we left, I stuffed our rings in the suitcase with everything else we might need in the real world.

Cass and Jake don't have to worry about taking their rings on and off. They have theirs tattooed on their fingers. Nothing to lose, get caught on machinery, or rub their fingers raw, and when Cass accidentally stepped on Jake's hand with her heavy hiking boot, there was no metal ring to cut his hand. A while back, after Cass and I'd been discussing men, she joked, wondering if someday she'd feel differently about Jake. She laughed when she told me she imagined chewing the skin off her finger in desperation. But she's only been married a few years. Disillusionment takes a while, I told her. Give it time.

It's been a long time since Daniel wore a green string around his finger. I'd picked the string off the desk in his studio and twisted it in my hands while he explained why our relationship wouldn't work. He slouched in his swivel chair, stared at the ceiling and told me that I was too young, that he had too little to offer. Daniel changed his mind that night and came to see me. He'd woven the

string into a ring around his little finger. He said he loved me and couldn't imagine a life without me, but being an artist, Daniel had a good imagination. He moved to a different state. Now we have three marriages between us, two for him and one for me. Sometimes I see Daniel when he comes back to our hometown on holidays to visit his parents. He still has an artist's fine, strong hands, and I've marveled how his wedding ring doesn't slip even though it appears too big. I've caught myself staring at its intertwined strands and thinking of our lives. Or maybe I was just staring at his hands. The last time I saw Daniel's impromptu ring, it was hanging from a nail on the wall of his studio. Last time I saw Daniel, he said he was halfway content—most of the time.

Last May I accidentally hit my left hand on a door jamb while I was carrying groceries into the house. My rings cut the back of my finger--again. As I rinsed the blood off my hand in the kitchen sink, Michael walked in and asked me what happened. I almost said *nothing*, but he hadn't asked *what is wrong with you now?* I pulled the rings off my finger and handed them to him, explained how they'd become painfully sharp. He ran his finger across their edges and paled when I told him they'd been cutting my finger for years. He'd had no idea that they were

hurting me, he said, and he told me not to wear them
anymore.

Sometimes I still do anyway.

Part IV

Other Early Experiments

Savior

I

Shannon dreamed in motion and color, and on good mornings the alarm might strike as the green bow of his kayak slid between cold gray rocks or maybe as he leaned out of his truck window in the high school parking lot and laughed at his friend's new paint job—purple and yellow flowers on the hood of his car—compliments of a new girlfriend. On bad mornings he woke from dreams both disturbing and surreal, and the first had hit six years earlier, just before his mother died. He and his little brother lay on their bellies at the edge of an old pit so deep that they could not see the bottom. Shannon crawled backwards from the pit and told Connor to come away too, but the edge collapsed and Connor screamed and disappeared. Super Hero Shannon had slid down after him, and in a pile of rocks at the bottom, he found his brother, a little ghost that even felt like a sheet as Shannon grabbed him and dragged him to the

surface where, just like Disney, Connor turned back into a real boy.

But that was so long ago. Just before school had started, Shannon had dreamed of a turtle migration where the road to their house crossed a small creek. Shannon pulled his truck over, and he and Connor ran from one turtle to the next, passing over those with crushed shells and protruding intestines and tossing into the creek those that still crawled. It was like tossing green Frisbees. It was dusk and a car was coming too fast, not slowing. Only the biggest turtle was left. Shannon could only hold Connor back when its tires flipped the ancient turtle and it exploded in red and green.

Exploding turtles was bad, but his latest dream was much worse. Shannon woke with a jolt as if whatever suspended him within the dream had snapped and he'd literally fallen out of it. He didn't open his eyes right away. He lay on his back, his right hand still in a fist across his ribs, and let his lungs catch up to his heart and his chest settle to a slow heave before he rose on one elbow to check the time. 5:23. He could have slept another forty minutes before getting Connor up for school. But there was no sense trying. Shannon fell back on his

pillow, and even with his eyes open the dream replayed itself in the blue glow of his clock.

He'd been following his family across a busy four-lane. His mother carried a still small and round-cheeked Connor her hip. She kept her head turned toward the oncoming traffic, one hand brushing hair out of her eyes. His father pulled seven-year-old Shannon across the street with one hand while the much older Shannon ran behind trying to catch them before they disappeared. The four stopped at the far curb, and the moment Shannon caught up, as soon as he stood safely on the curb, he remembered Connor. He turned back to the street, and Connor, now an adolescent, had fallen behind, had dawdled, was watching his own toes scuff the asphalt, did not notice the delivery truck. Shannon shouted "Connor," but instead of running to the curb, Connor looked up at him and froze. With timeless clarity, the truck hit Connor, and he became a tangle of blond waves, orange jacket, and blue jeans that passed between truck and tire, truck and tire, and in a miracle of horror, he still stood, swayed briefly after the truck passed, his eyes locked on Shannon's, questioning, accusing, before his head dropped back and with a child's high moan, he fell in a twisted sprawl.

Shannon swung his feet to the floor, feeling his way with bare feet and outstretched fingers toward the bathroom. He might as well get ready for school now and have a half hour's silence before Connor got up. He flipped the hall switch, and the light fell into his father's empty room and across Connor's bed. Connor flipped one arm over the side of his face without changing the rhythm of his breath. He was securely atangle in his bed in his usual position, one bare leg hanging over the edge and a dog lying sentinel on either side, their heads raised and their eyes questioning why anyone, human or canine, would be up so long before dawn. Obviously, thought Shannon, the dogs didn't have nightmares like his, and he wished he could trade places—at least for one night.

II

Shannon had shaken the dream for a while in the noise and chaos of high school, but it hit him again as he and Connor drove home in the afternoon. Connor switched radio stations and leaned back with his feet on the dash as always and talked non-stop about what they'd do when their dad came home for the weekend, just as if nothing had

happened the night before. Instead of taking him for a run in the woods, Shannon dumped him as soon as they got home.

"What's that matter with you?" Connor kicked his backpack under the bench a little harder than usual. "Like I can't keep up or anything."

"Just leave be, eh?" Shannon pulled off his t-shirt, he already wore shorts, and grabbed a water bottle. "Do your homework, or something." He whistled for the dogs with teeth and tongue and left Connor standing in the doorway alone.

The early October day was warm and blue, and the mosquitoes and deer flies had died in September's frosts. Only a few leaves had fallen, enough to carpet his run without baring the branches. Autumn was Shannon's favorite season when nights were cool and the leaves were in a thousand shades of green, red, orange, and brown, but now the nightmare replayed itself in the orange smell of autumn decay. Shannon usually fell into stride after his first mile, but today it took twice as long before his legs moved without effort or command and he could see more than just the trail. He whistled twice for the dogs—they'd dropped their heads and disappeared into the woods after some unseen animal—and when they slipped back through the brush, he led them still farther down the trail.

Shannon's mother died when he was exactly old enough to wish her gone yet young enough to blame himself for her cancer, to blame his growing demands for independence. She died when Connor was only six, and Shannon became a parent to his little brother when he was twelve. Sure, his grandparents took turns helping out that first spring when their dad insisted on going back to work. They spent half the summer with their dad's parents in a Florida condo. They took the boys shopping and swimming, but Shannon only remembered that he hated chlorine and the ocean's sticky salt. They spent the second half of the summer with their mother's parents, and Shannon remembered the shouting and swearing and how tiny their grandma looked when their father refused to let them stay for good—Connor was starting first grade, he'd said, and Shannon could baby-sit after school.

The following summer they spent three weeks with Uncle Casey in Oregon. He took them hiking in the Cascades, and in the evenings they watched movies and played video games that their mother never would have allowed. One night Casey opened a bottle of wine and gave Shannon a small glass and a let Connor have a few sips from his own, a toast to the two finest boys, congrats to the sister who'd given him nephews. You did good, he said as he raised his

glass to the ceiling, damn they're great kids. He finished the bottle before the movie and cried in front of the boys, his elbows on his knees, the heels of his hands pressed into his eyes. When Casey's vacation was over, they flew home, and Shannon, now thirteen, took over for good.

A few of the guys at school understood. His friend Rob told Shannon to ignore the assholes who called him an old woman, then flipped off the same assholes before they walked away. But Shannon knew the assholes were right. Other seniors didn't stress when their little brothers took off after school without telling them first. They didn't understand the mortality that burdened Shannon even as he slept, his fear that if he died, no one would take care of Connor.

After four miles the sweat streamed down Shannon's chest and back, and he whistled for the dogs to turn back to the house. He was glad he'd made Connor stay home this time. Most days Connor ran with him and he listened to scenes of middle school, how the girls were getting seriously cranky these days, you know, mood swings and changes, and Dinah had tripped him in band, but the teacher yelled at him, and he got the highest grade on the Europe test, and he was dressing as a mad scientist for Halloween and taking Nick on a leash, no stupid, his friend, not the

dog, as Igor...Shannon could half listen while he thought about other things and know that his kid brother wasn't sighting-in the .22—again—or burning down the house trying to cook supper. But today he'd needed clear his head, to run fast and alone, and Connor would have slowed his pace and interrupted the peace. The last mile was a level curve beneath a red-orange canopy of oak and maple, and Shannon took it fast. The dogs fell in, one on either side of him, and they ran as a pack over the last mile, out of Shannon's reverie and through the field behind their house.

Connor was swinging from the rafters in the screened back porch, his cut-offs drooping beneath his bare abdomen, when the screen door slapped woodenly behind Shannon. Connor dropped to a barefoot crouch, and then with insolent grace he stood, hitched up his shorts, and tossed his hair out of his eyes.

"What'd you do, run to town and back? You were gone long enough."

Shannon saw the shadow-twitch of a feline tail in Connor's stance, the bored restlessness of a half-grown cat trapped indoors. "Has Prince Brat finished his homework, or did he screw around the whole time I was gone?"

"Precisely."

"Precisely what?"

"Precisely whatever. My homework is complete, perfected, which is more than I can say for yours, and put your arms down, you stink."

"Then go feed the dogs." Shannon cuffed the back of Connor's uncombed hair a little harder than usual and shoved him toward the door. "I'll find us something to eat." He turned to say more, but the screen door whined and slapped, and Connor had already leapt over the porch rails and was calling the dogs.

The refrigerator had nothing more interesting in it than a half gallon of milk, ketchup, and three day old spaghetti that their dad had made before he left for work Sunday night. Shannon found an uncooked chicken in the freezer, but he was too restless to cook. He shut the door and wandered into the living room. The wall behind the couch was a gallery of his mother's photographs, some color, some black and white, none of them still life. She hated still life. Life to her was motion. When he was in third grade, she insisted that the school pictures he'd brought home were not *her* kid's and threw them over her shoulder. They landed in the dishwasher. She laughed with one hand over her mouth as she pulled them out of the water and suds. Then she took him outside with her Nikon. And there he was on the wall, framed in dust, third grade, nine

years old, flying off the front porch, his head thrown back in a full laugh, his feet running through the air above the snow.

Twenty minutes and a shower later, Shannon yelled out the back door to Connor to come in. He met him at the door and threw him socks and a clean t-shirt.

"Get your shoes, kid." Shannon grabbed his wallet off the window sill and pulled their jackets off the off the hooks near the door. "Let's get out of here."

Connor ran after Shannon to the truck with shirt, socks, and shoes in hand. "Where're we going, Shan?" He threw his clothes on the dash, pulled himself into the seat, and braced one set of bare toes on the windshield while he pulled a sock over the other.

"Let's get something to eat." Shannon pushed in the clutch and pumped the gas twice before turning the key. "Yeah, then we'll go see who's down at the field." They were out on the road before Connor had finished pulling on his second sock.

III

Shannon didn't need to explain where they were going when he said the field. The sign that had held its full name had been ripped down before Shannon or any of his

friends had been born, and although only a few of the old people in the neighborhood remembered its original name, the kids from the nearby houses still flocked there like so many birds. Only two wooden posts were left at the corner of the grassed over ball field, and the kids who hung around set their pop cans on the top of them. The houses surrounding the field were mostly small, built in a time when there were fewer families, less money, and far more children than the houses could contain. The field absorbed the overflow. Shannon's mother had told him the neighborhood stories. She had even driven him by the first house that she and his father rented after they were married, a tiny gray house just a block from the field that eight-year-old Shannon didn't think was so small. His mother told him that, yes, it was. It was so small that their bedroom was exactly that—just enough room for a bed. Whoever slept next to the wall had to crawl in from the other side. She hadn't mentioned which one of them crawled. The people across the street from them had lived in a converted hunting camp that was built during the Depression. An old couple had lived in the square green house across from the dirt parking lot and raised six kids there even though it had only three bedrooms. They still lived there. His parent's first house was gone. Connor's

best friend lived in the new house that was built where "that shack," as Rob called it, had been. The converted hunting camp was also gone, had been torn down for a vinyl-sided two story. But the field remained.

Sometimes the kids strayed to the field from the school down the road. Although it was not a big school, it grew three stories and held entire families of children, some of whom ran down the same halls and slammed the same lockers that their parents had several decades earlier. Sometimes when Shannon was late picking up Connor from school, he would find that Connor had taken the brushy trail to the west of the school to the field. The trail led into a gully, and the creek at the bottom was small enough for Connor and his friends to jump, but big enough that the littler ones had to balance their way across on the carcass of a fallen ash. Other kids drifted to the field like so many deer, engraving paths though the neighborhood's uncut acres that, without houses or fences, belonged to the kids who wandered them.

V

Sylvia leaned forward and pointed to a shadow on the verge of the headlight's reach. "It's right after those rocks."

'Rocks' did not adequately describe the stone outcrop that both marked and hid the beginning of the drive. The driveway was darkly canopied, a nocturnal version of the trails that ran behind Shannon's house, and instead of leading them straight to the house, it bumped and twisted between spruce, maples, and a single white pine whose girth implied centuries. Connor slipped out of his belt and slid forward to the edge of his seat, wrapping one around each of the front headrests. His mouth opened when the house came in view around the corner. "Cool house."

From the little Shannon could see in the dark, it looked like a log house, not pre-cut, but imperfect, rough. Sylvia pointed and explained, and Shannon pulled the Toyota up next to a door on the side of the house.

Sylvia groped for the door handle. "Thanks," she said as the door opened and she slid on to her feet.

"Not a problem." Shannon said as he shifted into reverse, his feet holding the brake and clutch. Sylvia stopped and leaning on the open door, turned back toward Shannon, her mouth open as if she were thinking of how to say something, when she turned her head toward the road,

raised one arm as a shield just over her eyes, and a light grew in the upturned ends of her hair. One side of her mouth twisted in a half smile. "My mom's home," she said without taking her hand off the door. A set of headlights grew larger in the rear view mirror, and a minivan pulled up and boxed the Toyota next to the house. Shannon shifted into neutral.

Connor twisted to look, then reached forward and slapped the bottom of the rear view mirror toward the ceiling. "That your mom?" He slouched into the back seat. "Is she trying to blind us or what?"

Sylvia's face remained frozen in its half smile. Shannon thought she was mad. A van door opened and slammed. Shannon heard another voice, and then Sylvia laughed. "Yea, just a minute." she yelled before she leaned back into the truck. "Sorry, but I should have gotten out quicker. You might as well turn off the truck."

Shannon shifted back into first gear and cut the engine. There was a tap on his window. He rolled it down to see Sylvia's mother holding a full paper bag.

"Steal my spot, help carry groceries." She tilted her head and leaned toward the window looking into the back seat where Connor still slouched. "Ah, more slave labor. Come in. Grab a bag."

The bright kitchen lights hit Shannon first. The rubber ball hit him second. And then he was hit by the noise. It was familiar. He couldn't place what it sounded like at first. Then he remembered. The kindergarten classrooms were nearest the entrance on the first floor of the school, and he'd passed them every day on his way upstairs to the middle school first floor. He did not remember being that loud, never, not once in his life. What he thought sounded like a thousand kids *its my turn this time find the ball its over there get it I want to throw it* skidded into the kitchen on four small dingy socks, scrambled with a tangle of hands and curls around his legs as if they belonged to a chair or table, and slid back out of the kitchen as soon as one hand captured the ball.

Sylvia set her bag on a counter, and reached for the bag that Shannon still held. "My little brothers," she said as she set the bag on the floor next to the sink, "Demon and Spawn." She grabbed the side of the bag that Connor had set down and slid it next to the counter. Shannon wondered how many more there were. "Hang on a minute, and I'll see if my mom and Connor have the rest."

The rubber ball bounced back toward Shannon after the door shut behind Sylvia, but this time he snagged it with one hand, and this time four sets of socks skidded to a stop in front of him and looked up at him through matching brown eyes as if he'd materialized since their last foray into to the kitchen.

One of the boys leaned his elbow on the other's shoulder in a diminutive gesture of camaraderie, and for the first time since he'd walked in the door, Shannon heard silence.

"Who are you." The first voice was as imperious as it was small. It was not a question.

"Shannon." He leaned back against the counter, the hand holding the ball up underneath the back of his t-shirt. "Who are you?"

Neither answered.

"How old are you?"

"Four."

"and three quarters"

"and we want our ball."

When they giggled and attacked his legs, he threw them the ball.

The living room light was on when Shannon pulled up in front of his house, and as usual, his dad's truck was in the spot where Shannon parked during the week. He pulled up in front of it anyway. His dad could move his truck if he had to go anywhere early. Shannon cut the engine and when he turned off the headlights, the driveway was black except for the glow coming from the living room window. None of the outside lights worked. Shannon had tried new bulbs, but when that didn't solve the problem, Shannon didn't know what to do. He wasn't an electrician. That was his dad's job, and Shannon didn't laughed when Rob joked about the shoemaker's barefoot kids.

His dad's boots were in the middle of the hall just across from the basement door, and between the boots and Connor goofing with the two crouching and wiggling border collies, Shannon tripped twice before he had his jacket off and hung on its hook. His dad called over the low T.V. blur, *Connor, Shan?* Shannon's forehead clamped, and a band closed around his chest. He didn't plan to do it, but when he opened the basement door and it caught on his dad's boots, he kicked them down the stairs.

"Geez, Shannon, what did you do that for?" Connor stood looking at him, his hands still on the dogs, but no longer petting.

Shannon didn't answer.

E-Baby

This time Rachel hemorrhaged at the end of her fifth month. She'd carried the child longer than before, long enough for them to know that it was a girl who'd died, their baby girl rather than the genderless child who'd until then lived in Jay's mind as a faceless possibility. Jay stood near the door listening to the doctor's quiet answer while Rachel slept, white-faced and gaunt, the skin purple beneath her closed eyes, while a needle the size of a small straw (blood is thick, the nurse had explained) drained into her arm. Yes, the doctor told him. Jay and Rachel could try again even though she'd lost their third. But Jay realized that he'd already made up his mind. It hadn't come to him consciously. Had anyone asked he wouldn't have been able to pinpoint the moment that he decided, but Jay knew he would never put her through that again.

Except for the cat curled on the pillow, Rachel's side of the bed was empty again when Jay woke up, even though it

was Saturday. The room was cool but already bright. Jay squinted at his alarm: 6:21. He pulled on the t-shirt and jeans he'd left at the end of the bed and went to find Rachel.

She wasn't in the kitchen, but the coffee was already made and a half a cup sat cool on the countertop. A breeze came from the back of the house, and cup of coffee in hand, Jay walked toward the backyard.

Rachel was sitting on the back steps looking up at the birdfeeder. The sparrows and juncos and chickadees took turns flying from tree to ground to feeder, a large tray on a post covered with a tiny roof that Jay had made, a regular bird sized gazebo holding their breakfast buffet. Jay leaned against the doorjamb, one hand in his pocket. Either Rachel didn't hear him or else she just didn't turn because he could see her in profile and although her face and eyes were turned toward the feeder, her gaze was somewhere far beyond. No, Jay thought, I'll never let it happen again. It was nearly five weeks since the miscarriage, but knowing they'd come closer made the loss more painful than before. The cat wound herself around Jay's leg, stretched her front paws up his jeans and meowed.

"Don't believe her," Rachel said without looking toward Jay. "I already fed her half an hour ago."

"Damn lazy cat." Jay opened the screen and gently nudged the cat outside with one bare foot. "Go catch a few birds before they eat us out of house and retirement fund." Rachel turned and gave him a smile that didn't reach her eyes. They were still purple beneath.

"Coming in now?" Jay held the door half open.

Rachel nodded, and when she stood, she hitched her jeans up her hips and shivered.

The application was over thirty pages to fill out and sign and Jay would have abandoned the process in frustration except that Rachel's eyes lost their unfocused stare and she started waking up. She filled out most of the paperwork herself, but after Jay signed his name at the bottom of the criminal background check, he couldn't resist holding his hands in front of his chest like a praying mantis, crooking one finger and whispering to Rachel: "Come here little girlie. Mr. Jay has something to show you." Rachel slapped him on the shoulder and called him a sicko, but she laughed and even blushed.

Jay knew she'd come around the day he came home from work and asked her how her day had gone, she didn't answer

"Fine" but complained to him instead: "Certified birth certificate, certified marriage certificate, certified health certificate, doctor's report, and you know what I had to do today?"

Jay gave his obligatory "Hmm?" just enough acknowledgement to keep himself out of trouble, and threw his jacket over the back of the bench.

"I had to get our passports out of the safe-deposit box and make color copies of them," Rachel said, waving the top of the teapot in one hand while she turned the faucet on with the other, "even though it's clearly printed on them that it's *illegal* to make color copies of passports and the clerk at Office Max told me that it's *illegal* to make color copies of passports." She dropped the kettle on the burner and swore under her breath when water spilled. "Do you suppose I've just committed some kind of homeland security felony that could show up on the criminal report if I get busted?"

Jay leaned back against the counter and shrugged, and as he acted as if he were still listening to Rachel complain, he was thinking that Rachel was finally starting to recover.

Rachel wandered through the living room, picking up magazines, straightening pillows and kept talking either to

Jay or maybe to herself. "So now I have to find *pictures* of us to send. Makes me wonder if that's how they weed out parents, ditch the ones whose pictures make the kids cry."

When the home study representative asked them if their parents were still living, Jay lost his reserve and asked if grandparents were still another requirement. He'd meant it as a joke.

"Sometimes." She leaned over to where her briefcase leaned next to her chair and pulled several sheets out of a manila folder. "For example," she said as she handed the papers to Jay, "this expectant mother requires at least one full set of grandparents, and neither set may have divorced. We could possibly have trouble placing her child except that tests show it's a healthy male and most likely Caucasian on both sides." She pulled another manila file from her briefcase. "I have another mother here who doesn't mention grandparents but insists that her infant's adoptive parents live in the country and if the baby turns out to be a girl, to buy her a pony when she's old enough. Seems she came from the interior of a large city. But, back to the question about your parents."

Jay admitted that his parents were still alive but divorced just after his little sister started college, all

for the better really considering that his father never shared his mother's passion for downhill skiing and spent Sundays watching football instead, something his mother utterly hated. No, they didn't see his mother much now that she'd moved to Montana, but Dad still lived just an hour away with his new wife, Lillian, who was, by the way, an excellent cook, and since she belonged to the Altar Society and taught catechism and more often than not, cooked Sunday dinner for Monsignor Seamus, was pleased to have her husband preoccupied on Sunday afternoons while she was preoccupied at St. Sebastian's.

The home study rep was still smiling at Jay's description when she asked the next question: "And what about your sister?"

The lines Jay had rehearsed left him, and Rachel had to fill in quickly.

"She's so busy in Utah with her family, she has two little ones and when we adopt, ours will have ready-made cousins, we mostly send letters and sometimes call. They're just so far away, and it's difficult for them to travel with their children.

Especially when there's a new one every 1.7 years, thought Jay, not to mention the family joke, the speculation that his brother-in-law might be "going Old

Testament" and take another wife, or two. Some times Jay wondered if that would have been less trouble than adopting.

They met Joseph and Alicia through the agency. Their daughter, Lucy, had a barely imperceptible Eastern European accent, but her vocabulary for a three and a half year old child was impressive. Her English vocabulary, Jay corrected himself.

"We sent her tape to a specialist," Joseph said.

"For what?" Rachel had left Leslie playing near the couch and walked up to the kitchen table.

"Assessment," Alicia said quietly. "It's best to get one before they turn three, when they can still bond. But it's worth your money to get them assessed anyway, just in case."

"In case there's something wrong. The doctor advised us against the first referral."

Rachel asked what that meant.

"He said the first child they offered us appeared unfavorable, maybe too risky. There may have been something wrong with it."

Later when Alicia was trying to get Lucy to bed, she had to chase her into the kitchen and pull the child's

hands from the rails of the chair while Lucy laughed and said she wanted to play more. Joseph ended up carrying her upstairs to her room. When he came back downstairs, he leaned toward Jay and Rachel over the kitchen table and folded his hands. "Do you think she's hyperactive?" His voice was barely audible.

Jay thought of his own children, dead before they could run or laugh or defy, and answered "no." He wondered why Joseph would care if she was.

Jay's friend had a first period prep on Wednesdays and offered to meet with him then, offered to give him any insight she could even though her own adoption had fallen through—the parents had a last minute reformation which she was afraid wouldn't last. Jay hadn't been in a middle school since he was an "inmate" himself. Some of the kids were nearly as tall as him. He waited outside his friend's room. The bell had already rung, but a boy came out of an eighth grade classroom, opened his locker, and started eating potato chips from a small bag. Some of the chips fell on the floor. The boy glanced at Jay and then looked away without stopping eating. Jay put his hands in his pockets and looked the other way until as his friend walked out of her room and called to him.

As she walked toward Jay, she passed by the student.

"Hungry, hey Nick."

"Yeah." The boy stopped eating as they walked toward him, but didn't shut his locker.

"Just pick up the crumbs on the floor when you're done"

"I will," he said without defense and took several more chips from his bag to eat.

"I'd have been in detention when I was in middle school. Is it really that lax these days?"

His friend laughed. When they were in her room with the door closed she gave Jay the basics of Nick's life: no known father, finally adopted by a foster family, and not the first they'd kept.

"He rides his bike five miles to get here every day."

Jay remembered resenting his four block hike to the bus stop.

It was late, but instead of finishing his work, Jay pulled up the agency's photo-listing again. He scrolled from thirteen year old twin girls to a crew-cut boy from Bulgaria and stopped at the photo of a child who was surely too old and big to be in that playpen. Jay read the child's description. He'd never heard of the child's

condition, but the agency would waive its charge for any adoptive parents willing to take the boy. A bargain-basement kid. Jay wondered who might have that kind of courage.

When the first notes of Rachel's violin invaded his office that night, he pulled out his drawer and pushed papers, printer cartridges, and pens in frustration trying to find his earphones. Rachel played violin, but not very well. It reminded Jay of the wail of ill-tuned cats and he'd imagine throwing a shoe, never at Rachel herself, but at the sound of the howling feline he envisioned just outside his office window—a safer practice than asking Rachel to practice more quietly, or perhaps, while he was still at work. The last time he'd made the suggestion she'd slept with her back to him and the cat cradled next to her belly for two nights in a row. Now Rachel's violin sounded like a thousand crying children, and Jay could not bear hearing them crying of hunger or cold or fever or loneliness and all weeping their inevitable poverty.

Notes

¹ According to the National Institute of Health, Researchers have found why, although most people dream at least two hours per night, some remember more than others. The key is waking. Our memory centers shut down during sleep so we typically only remember the dreams we wake from. People wake up more often from nightmares than common dreams, and therefore remember more nightmares. This also explains why insomniacs (insomnia is one result of post traumatic stress disorder) would remember more dreams than most people—or maybe it's their nightmares that give them insomnia (*Popular Science*).

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